HYPERALLERGIC

MUSEUMS • WEEKEND

The Prince of New York City

by **John Yau** on January 3, 2016

It is easy to forget just how really good a painter Alex Katz can be. This is because he makes everything look so easy and natural. Coming of age during the early 1950s, at the height of Abstract Expressionism, the idea of showing struggle and existential angst became anathema to him. This is what he had in common with his friend and early champion, the poet Frank O'Hara.

In a small show of eight paintings and cut-outs, Alex Katz at the Met, currently at The Metropolitan Museum of Art (October 9, 2015–June 26, 2016), one sees that being good wasn't enough for this artist. Done between 1957 and 2014, and spanning nearly sixty years, the selection highlights the artist's innovative examination of the relationship between the figure and the surrounding space.

Alex Katz, "Philip Pearlstein" (1978), oil on aluminum cutout painted, 48 × 32 1/2 × 8 in. (121.9 × 82.6 × 20.3 cm) (Image © Alex Katz, courtesy The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

In "Ada" (1957), which is the first portrait that Katz made of his wife, he is beginning to define a territory that is neither as coldly impersonal as what Frank Stella would soon stake out, nor as heatedly expressive as Willem de Kooning is in "Woman, I" (1952). The painting, which was done on Masonite, and is modest in scale, seems counterintuitive in that he is generalizing the features of his subject. About the works done during this formative period in Katz's career, Frank O'Hara wrote:

> ***"Katz has found a liaison between the personal and the general, the intriguing dialogue without which one is left with either formalism or expressionism."***

By 1959-60, Katz was depicting figures against flat, monochromatic grounds and making his first cutouts, essentially moving in seemingly opposite directions at the same time. As Barry Schwabsky pointed, writing about Katz's work of this period:

> ***"As the '60s were beginning, Katz was actively opening himself to a great many possibilities, trying to work out where his art would go."***

It is the experimental side of Katz that this exhibition brings to the forefront. Even for those who know Katz's work well, his piece, "John's Loft" (1969), will likely come as a surprise. It is made up of seven individual paintings done on aluminum panels cut to conform to the images. Displayed on a wall, and more-or-less evenly spaced apart, the scale shifts radically. On the far right the viewer sees an extreme closeup of part of a man's face turned to the left, in three-quarter view and sharply cropped just before the edge of his left eye. A smaller figure of a young woman seemingly emerges from behind his head, and farther to the left there are to sets of figures: a young man, who is also facing left, and a couple, with the woman looking toward the viewer and the man turned to the right, presumably toward the young man. The full figure of a boy in a blue shirt and slacks occupies the middle of this row of seven images, his eye fixed on the viewer and his left arm extending slightly away from his body at an odd angle. It is impossible to figure out why he is standing like he is. To his immediate left is a cropped view of a couple looking right, ad. Strangely, a narrow, vertical slice of the face on the far right, with his cropped, pale blue eye transposed to the middle of the tableau. A woman's face and upper torso, reminiscent of classical portraiture, is placed on the far left. If once we could gaze at a subject at our own leisurely pace, this kind of looking has changed, particularly in terms of duration. In a world where the mass media is constantly bombarding the public with images,

surveillance cameras are recording our comings and goings, and Google Earth gives us unprecedented access to visual information, we don't look so much as glimpse or, as the saying goes, channel surf; we skim through the world until something catches our eye.

Alex Katz, "Purple Wind" (1995), oil on linen. 126 x 96″ (320 x 243.8 cm). (Collection of Alex Katz)

In this world of glances, seeing is an act of assessment. We are constantly sizing other people up, checking them out, noticing something about them. Katz recognizes that seeing can be promiscuous, at once purposeless and purposeful. This understanding of seeing makes him a particularly modern artist in touch with his time. In "John's Loft," the two different, cropped views of the same face, as well as the boy being the only complete figure occupying the center of this group, denies any narrative reading. The shifts in scale, as well as the isolating of the figures from their surroundings, are synonymous with our constantly changing focus, the restlessness of seeing that has become a deeply ingrained part of daily life. Urban denizens need to be wary, need to look around. We don't necessarily leave that kind of looking at the door when we go to a party.

Katz may have gotten cues from advertising, photography and movies, but so have we. In some sense, our life and memories have come to resemble the types of seeing we associate with these forms of media. I am also struck by the fact that Katz didn't turn this format into a signature subject, and that I don't know of another work like this in his oeuvre. In each of the other works in the exhibition–from a cutout, "Philip Pearlstein" (1978), who is holding a glass and gesturing, to the view of a building at night, "Purple Wind" (1995), to the recent portrait, "Nicole" (2014), on a panoramic format — Katz is masterful and witty out of necessity. Painted on both sides, the realist painter

"Philip Pearlsten" is talking and gesturing, but we may not be hearing what he has to say — a dilemma faced by all artists, no matter what their medium. In the sharply cropped view of a dark-haired woman in a red hat and "Red Coat" (1982), a row of dabs of white paint on her luscious, bottom red lip resonates against the larger expanse of flat red and flesh tones. This detail activates the entire painting, as well as slows down our looking. There is something incredibly naughty and extremely polite about the white touches of paint "glistening" on her lower lip. Zooming in on her mouth, our looking becomes erotic.

Alex Katz, "Red Coat" (1984)(Alex Katz/VAGA, NY/ Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

The cropped view and the woman's clothing frame this view as an anonymous urban encounter. "Red Coat" updates Edouard Manet's masterpiece, "The Railway" (1873), by eliminating the background, and focusing all attention on the woman's enigmatic presence. However, in contrast to the woman Manet depicts seated on a bench, with her long, unevenly cut hair cascading out from under her black hat, Katz's perfectly coiffed woman is not looking back: she does not notice us. She is self-possessed and confident. Meanwhile, we are discreet and keep our thoughts to ourselves.

Katz's attention to detail, to the cut of the red parka in "Nicole" (2014), and the way it frames the head, flattening it, encourages us to take the painting apart, to see the inherent abstraction of the different parts, the shape of the collar or the curve of the eyebrows. By depicting the figure on the right-hand side of a black, horizontal plane, Katz reminds us how quickly people pass from view, how the city is full of movement, of moments that are both intimate and remote.

In "Purple Wind," Katz applies the paint in four different ways – from the flat purple wall of the building, to the whitish, vertical striations of the five windows, to the black and gray diagonal strokes of the bare tree branches in the foreground to the white daubs laid across the striated windows. His use of the paint is incredibly economical. What we might think of as expressive brushwork has become a matter of purposeful restraint. It is this aspect of Katz that I find so enthralling; it is as if he sees the world in paint and then he paints it. At the same time, there is feeling of anonymity running through the paintings – we are spectators looking at the world we both inhabit and rush through, always somewhat a stranger.

In his foundational essay, "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863), Charles Baudelaire describes the perfect flaneur or passionate spectator:

> ***"To be away from home and yet feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the center of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world–such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito."***

No wonder so many poets have written so eloquently about Katz — from Frank O'Hara, James Schuyler and John Ashbery to Bill Berkson, Carter Ratcliff and Barry Schwabsky.

According to the museum press release:

> ***"This exhibition, mounted in celebration of gifts both donated and promised to the Met, gathers works by Alex Katz…[which were] acquired through the generosity of Glenn Fuhrman, Leonard A. Lauder, and Katz himself."***

I hope that this show marks the beginning of this kind of in-depth acquisition of artists associated with New York.

Alex Katz at the Met continues at The Metropolitan Museum of Art (1000 Fifth Avenue, Upper East Side, Manhattan) until June 26.