

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Peter Schjeldahl, "A Sharpie's Crisis," *The Village Voice*, May 5, 1996



## A SHARPIE'S CRISIS

Byline: Peter Schjeldahl

Alex Katz

Marlborough Gallery

40 West 57th Street

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Separated at birth: Alex Katz and Mario Cuomo, overachievers from Queens. Control freaks with flash. From across the East River, success may appear to be purely a style problem. To win, look like the winner. Competition is a matter of explaining to the other guy that he has already lost. Nine times out of 10, the guy listens a little. Game over. The 10th time, raise a distracting rumpus and hope no one notices that you aren't fighting. Actually to fight is too dumb. You could be killed.

I tend to feel about Katz as I do about Cuomo and often about New York in general: all balled up with unrequited devotion. New York inspires love and then is too distrustful to accept it. Faith in people isn't worth the grief. A lover of New York must be content with invitations to victory parties, which might be fine if New York ever won a big one. New York wins the big ones only by charismatic fluke: FDR and his semisecret wheelchair, Jackson Pollock from Up the Creek, Wherever. Left to its own devices, New York outsmarts itself so predictably, it's touching.

Katz's tremendously beautiful, not so clever current show is my favorite by him in at least 25 years. I can't say it's his best, because his painting is hardly ever less than consummate. He isn't a stylist. He is a Nietzschean hero of the will to style, ruthless in his resolution, by sheer touch and color, of fantastically difficult compositional schemes, not to mention the meaning of life. One responds (until tired of responding) to that will's intensity, as nakedly manipulative as Cuomo's oratory. The idea is that you see it coming a mile away, then it blows your mind.

Classical New York style is about investing lyric yearning with epic authority. Pollock did this big-time, of course. So, for a while, did Jasper Johns and, in a bizarre (yearningless) way, Andy Warhol. A poem by Frank O'Hara has the unbeatable New York title: *In Memory of My Feelings*. Katz monumentalizes fleeting epiphanies, perfect moments like falling in love. If the epically lyrical could yield fully to smarts and chops, he would be a great artist. (Cuomo would also be in the White House.) But a defensively cocksure manner, the character armor of a St. Albans sharpie, has caused resistance that obscures how good he is.

Some resistance attaches, unfairly, to the human subjects of Katz's Realism, an ostensibly Uptownish, upper-middle-classy pageant of the suave, sexy, and adorable. The effect is deemed as obnoxious as a club's velvet rope, broadcasting exclusion. In fact, Katz celebrates folks precisely for being Downtown small-d democrats whose beauty secret is an everyday comfort with their looks (the artist's comfort, if not their own). Snobbery is not in Katz's line. The glamour he projects is that of inclusion in his art, an open-hearted meritocracy. In other words, a fiction. Isn't every artist entitled to a world of his or her dreams come true?

I think that Katz has too successfully observed the style philosopher's first law: Make it look easy. The style philosopher's second imperative, to show how the thing works, seldom kicks in for him, so bulletproof is the illusion of simplicity in his edge-to-edge, drum-tight skins of paint. I know it's an illusion and a real achievement, which I would like to conjure with. I am curious about the stakes of a game in which, for instance, the artist ignores almost everything he knows about someone to crystallize one nuance of the person's charm. But here Katz typically withdraws into prickly professionalism.

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I have felt bad for years, not liking Katz's art as much as I wished I could. He pays me--and everybody, especially in New York--so great a compliment with his efforts to memorialize urbane revelations, crediting me with a normal use for them. I just balk at the presumption that my artistic needs have been sized up and, with a flourish, met. Again it's like Cuomo, who won't bring himself to ask for my vote but will piss away hours telling me why he already has it, meanwhile waxing weirdly eloquent about his masteries of theology and basketball.

Have I changed? I am pretty sure that Katz has. A certain worriedness--about the worth of his perceptions or about their communicability, I can't tell--has crept into his art, just enough to leave me something crucial to do when I look at it. Call it existential vulnerability. A whiff of tragedy, even. The country and city views that are this show's cynosures hit on offbeats of Katzian perfect moments, sounding a sense of time slipping by and away. They need me to wonder about them.

The time of day is mostly late dusk, early evening. Coleman Pond III is an elegiac masterpiece. It is nearly all richly black around water reflecting lividly white sky. A few highlights in the black are splotches of paint, and silhouetted grasses are frankly feathered brushstrokes. The picture hopes that I know what the hour and mood--a quiet fear--are like. Perhaps I do. I want to.

The nocturnal Purple Wind splays tossing black branches against a dark purple wall in which wanly glowing, curtained windows catch blushes of yellow light from somewhere. The Rothko-like improbability of the color event, at an outer limit of my capacity to believe my eyes, is alarming and heartbreaking. It is like an enormous secret that everybody must know immediately, but when you try to tell them, you merely sob.

In these and other fiercely moving paintings--City Landscape, 10 A.M., Dark Reflection, Blizzard--Katz breaks up the skin of his brushwork with candid strokes that build tension between sensuous materiality and stunningly succinct indications of leaves, waves, snowflakes, and fugitive lights and shadows. A 20-foot canvas of apple boughs in bloom puts the tension to sumptuous decorative use. Come to that, all the works have the at-a-glance quality of decoration, only you keep glancing at them again and again with unslaked appetite and growing anxiety.

A few paintings put some of Katz's familiar, tightly rendered, nifty people in his newly melancholy settings, or so it seems at first. I hated the jarring effect until I realized that the pictures must depict studio visitors standing in front of paintings. So the contrast is an elegant conceit, though plenty disturbing. It burdens me with emotions that the people, absorbed in being irresistible, visibly don't register.

Katz's crisis accords with a cultural moment in which gaps between outer and inner truths, the poetry of appearance and the poetry of feeling, are dauntingly immense. He used to bet that if appearance were served well enough, feeling would take care of itself. It sort of worked, but now feeling won't play along. He displays his unease to his friends. They smile and chat. What he does next might surprise them, us, and even himself quite as much as this show, whose departure from past form is brave and exciting.