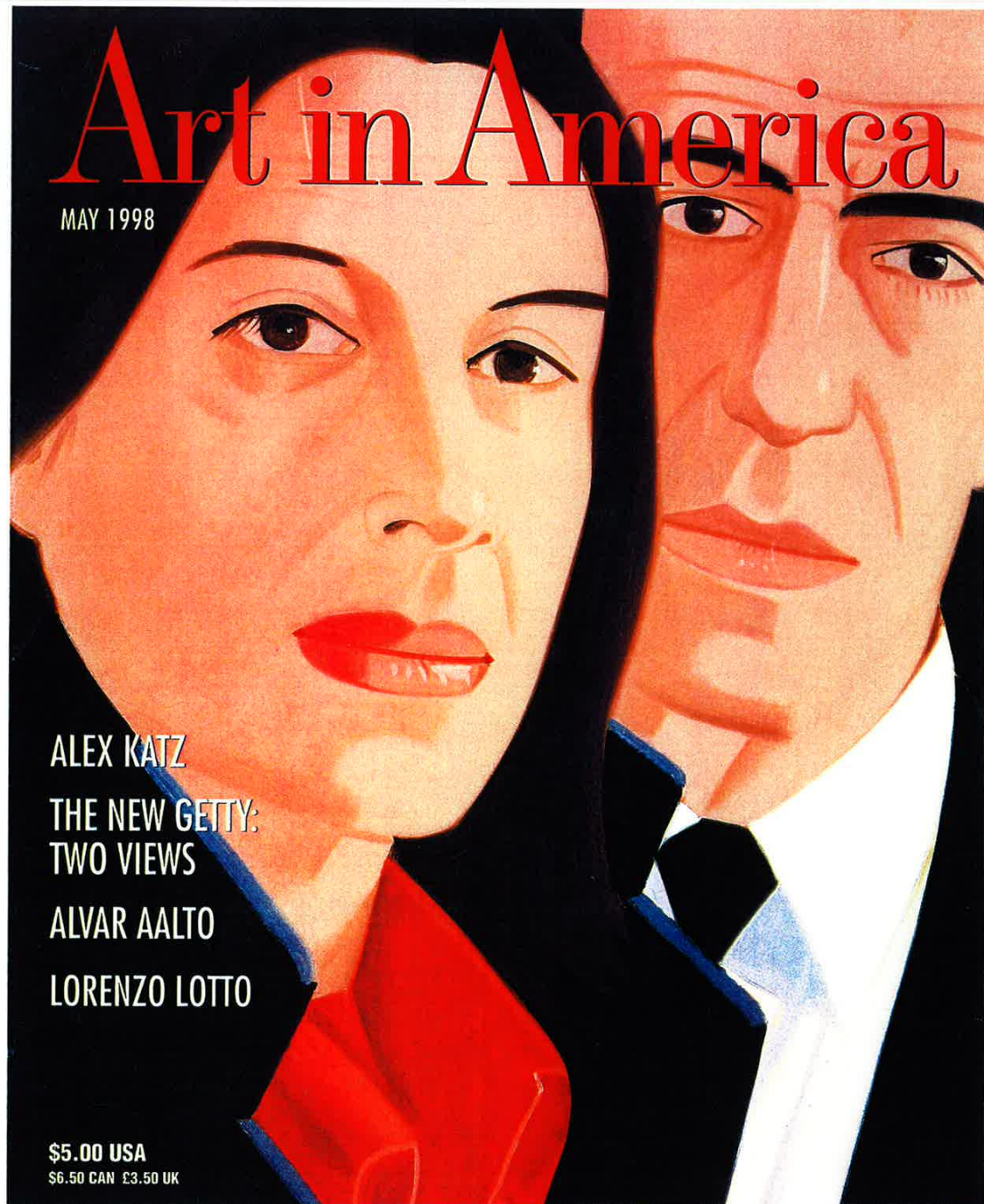


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David Cohen, "A Scaled-Up World," *Art in America*, May, 1998

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A Scaled-Up World

Since the late 1980s, Alex Katz has turned increasingly to making big, formally reductive paintings, some of which are included in P.S. 1's current retrospective of his landscapes. They also figured in a recent 25-year Katz survey mounted by the Saatchi Gallery in London.

BY DAVID COHEN

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Alex Katz: January III, 1992, oil on canvas, 6' by 13' feet. Photo courtesy Saatchi Collection, London.

Long Island City, New York, is giving over two floors of its recently renovated premises to the traveling exhibition it originated, "Alex Katz Under the Stars: American Landscapes 1951-1995."

As well as giving museum-goers a chance to appreciate Katz's handling of scale, the two shows demonstrate that in the last decade Katz has propelled himself into new painterly terrain. In a recently issued volume of memoirs, the artist recounts how his 1986 Whitney Museum retrospective proved a turning point for him. "I realized some painters, after their retrospectives, go on and paint masterpieces a little worse than before, or a little better, it doesn't matter. I wanted to move to a place in art that was unstable and terrifying."¹

The new subject into which he launched himself in the late '80s was virtually a shot in the dark—his night paintings. A departure from his bright palette and typically sunny subject matter, these images of New York at night nonetheless possess typical Katz traits: evenness of tone, areas of near monochrome, and a charged, poetical sense of emptiness. The dark, ethereal pictures pit the black skyline of SoHo against still night skies, with soft-glowing electric lights the only clues as to the buildings' orientation.

In my estimation, *Varick* (1988) is the masterpiece of the series. Almost a frieze at 5 by 12 feet, it consists of a row of half a dozen small lighted windows set against a sheer expanse of black. The composition is severely reductive—the jabs and sweeps of white denoting fluorescent light tubes visible through the windows are economical to the point of sparseness—but it would be a mistake to imagine Katz employing reductivism in pursuit of some conceptual agenda. The picture is electrifying as much for its convincing realism as for the starkness of its means. The tiny, doll's-house details—the black verticals puncturing the drag of white to depict window frames, the change of angle of the last window on the right to describe the corner of the building, the diagonals of the fluorescent tubes "behind" their shimmering light bouncing off the window planes, but actually painted on top—impress the viewer simultaneously as virtuosic and nonchalant.

Flatness and facility, which are hallmarks of Katz's style, are pushed to a new limit here, prompting the question, how are they "unstable and terrifying"? Well, certainly, the night paintings are more minimal than anything else

In the '90s, Alex Katz has clearly taken to painting big. True, painting on a large scale is not a new development in Katz's career. In 1977 he collaborated with a sign painter to produce murals for Times Square which held their own against the neon signs and giant ads, and his flattened, larger-than-life generic figures have long drawn comparisons to billboards. But now Katz, who is in his early 70s, is painting bigger than ever, routinely working in *Guernica*-like dimensions with 20-foot-long landscapes and figure compositions. Intimacy and blankness cohabit his compositions in such unlikely harmony that a big Alex Katz still pulls the viewer up short, however much the art world is used to museum scale.

This season viewers in New York and London have had a chance to see plenty of Katz's large-scale work. In London, a show of two dozen big pictures newly acquired by Charles Saatchi, mostly recent pieces but some dating back to 1972, filled the collector's private museum from Jan. 15 to Apr. 12. This, incidentally, was Katz's first major showing in England and thanks no doubt to the scale of the event and the media lure of Saatchi, it garnered a great deal of press attention and high attendance figures. Lectures by the artist were filled and an international symposium on his work was organized at the Royal College of Art. Until June 2, P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in

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Marine, 1997, oil on canvas, 8 by 6 feet. Photo courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris.

in Katz's oeuvre. They invite the "So what?" response, risking the charge of intentional vacuity. To those who don't click with Katz, his portraits and group compositions, for all the absence of narrative and lack of expression, offer the compensation of human interest. Iconic and generalized though they are, they possess an undeniable "real presence." If nothing else, they hold attention with their insights into the mood of social interaction. The landscapes and cityscapes, however, throw away these lifelines: they work on Katz's own painterly terms or not at all.

Landscape came to dominate his output in the 1990s—not that it hadn't been one of his themes all along, and not that figures vanished from all of his later paintings, but the priority shifted discernibly. After Katz launched into the night paintings he found a new subject in Black Brook, a piece of land adjoining his vacation house in Maine. (He has spent every summer in Maine since 1949, when he attended the summer program at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.) As in the New York City night scenes, darkness is again an issue—Black Brook gets its name from its light-depriving overarching trees. Other paintings of dense woodlands and snowy

winterscapes yielded different opportunities for allover, even-tempered, eventless, unromantic, unexpressive treatments. Indeed, these landscapes seem an ultimate vehicle for the dichotomy that lies at the heart of Katz's enterprise: artifice versus reality.

His art is balanced between abstraction and realism, not because he is on the way to one or the other, but because, more radically and decisively, he has found a space between the two. His vision is too mortgaged to the actual and the observed for abstraction to ever triumph, but at the same time the paintings are too cool, stylish and diffident for the subject to assert an existence apart from the means of its conveyance. Near his abstract limits were some works in his last Marlborough Gallery show in New York (April 1996) which teetered precariously toward a decorative-ness quite divorced from any claim to the real.

Hayfield IV (1995), for instance, a 9-by-12-foot golden-yellow "field" with exquisitely stylized flowers (black-eyed susans,

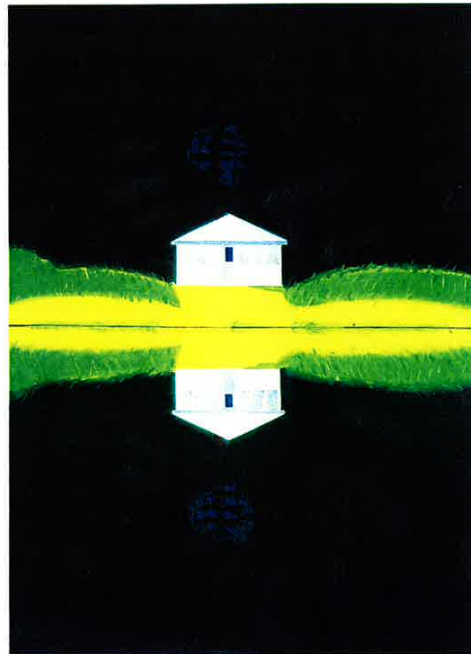
according to the artist) sparsely dotted around, comes close to pure decoration; apart from some minimal intimations of grass and stems there is little to relate the pictorial ground to the actual ground from which such flowers might spring.

Hayfield can reasonably be described both as tight in design and loose in seemingly random, open composition. This tendency to elicit contradictory responses goes back to the pulsating, pared-down little landscapes Katz produced in the 1950s. In *Two Trees* (1955), for instance, a pair of trees on a diagonal horizon bursts with energy that animates the warm complement of golden earth and yellow sky. Such early landscapes and the touching collages of the period defy their size by evoking expansiveness. Katz has claimed that he made small works in the 1950s in reaction to the overheated attitudes of the Abstract Expressionists. Although he was in awe of the "heroic" generation of the New

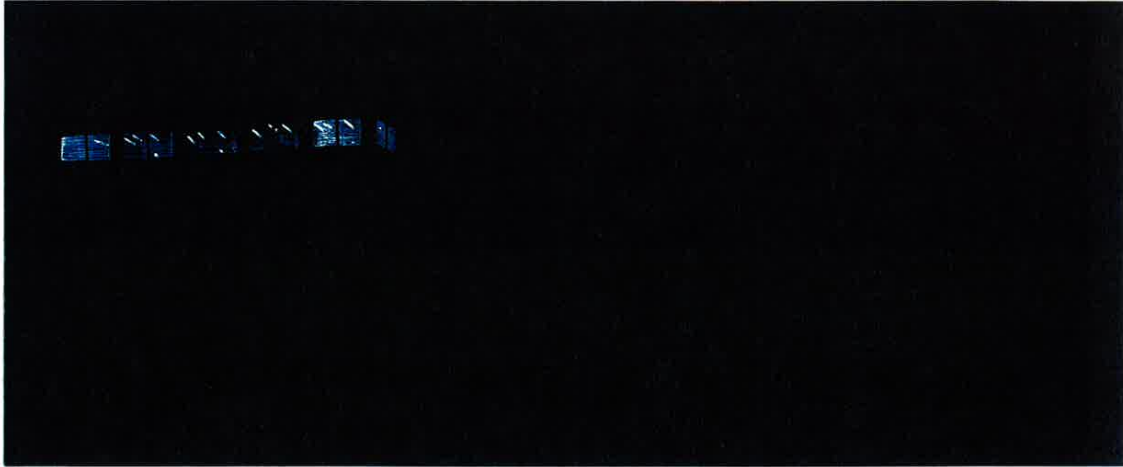
York School, seeking to emulate first Pollock and then de Kooning and striking up a friendship with Kline, whom he also admired, he felt temperamentally ill at ease with the romanticism and bombast of those artists. And yet, when Katz first started to paint big in the 1960s it was partly to stake the claim that realism should be taken as seriously as abstraction. (Georgia O'Keeffe admitted to painting big for a similar reason.) Another impetus to bigness was his infatuation with billboards, which may have culminated in the 1977 Times Square commission but dated back much earlier in his career, even preceeding James Rosenquist's show of billboardlike Pop paintings in 1961, which impressed him deeply.

Whatever inspires Katz to paint big, one of the side effects of enlarging images is to accentuate the artifice of painting as a representational language. The raw elements of painterly depiction—subtleties of modeling or shading and expressive turns of the brush—can be taken for granted on a close-knit, intimate scale, but when they are blown up these devices are stretched and pulled until first credibility and then legibility come

Reflection III, 1992, oil on canvas, 10 1/4 by 8 feet. Photo courtesy Marlborough Gallery, New York.



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Varick, 1988, oil on canvas, 5 by 12 feet. Photo courtesy Saatchi Collection.

under increasing pressure. In traditional painting, where the aim is to avoid all ambiguities, great virtuosity is required in the build-up of scale. Katz's project, however, nestles between the traditional desire to communicate and a radical inclination to probe and challenge the language of painting. His style braves the tightrope between artifice and reality, stiltedness and fluency, awkwardness and accuracy.

A 14-foot-long canvas titled *Woods* (1991), included in both the Saatchi and P.S. 1 exhibitions, offers a clear instance of the effect of scale on the status of Katz's brushmarks. The composition is divided vertically by five poplars in the foreground, while more trees are cursorily denoted to help describe the receding space. The foreground trunks are drastically cropped, sparing the composition the formal complications of roots or branches. Scattered across the picture are what can be taken as leaves, varying light-green and yellow dabs against the increasingly dark verdure of the background. The whole effect is pictorially sumptuous and absorbing, giving an immediate sense of subject and season. But as the eye lingers, individual marks soon peel away (metaphorically speaking) from their depictive function within the painted scheme. Big brush-thick strokes of white that denote light (or white bark) along the sides of the trunks detach themselves from the picture surface. So, too, do the dabs that are the leaves, some of them twisting awkwardly at odd angles to the flow of the design, others smudging their way into the flattened ground.

Areas of dark green, which give such dramatic depth to the composition, also appear, on closer inspection, as rather brushy, gestural shapes, and when so noticed begin to push forward, defying their role as signifiers of depth. But, amazingly, none of this autonomous play of the paint robs the work of its representational cogency. The unraveling of these constituent elements is a sensual game in which they are allowed, at any moment, to snap back to being light on the side of the tree or receding depth in a wood, rather like the toys in Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* which are at once inanimate objects and dancing characters.

For British painter and critic Merlin James, who authored the deft commentaries that accompany the plates of the Saatchi catalogue, *Woods* and related pictures are "witty decodings of New York School painterly abstraction. . . . The units of painterly language—the dab, the stroke and the field—are given as free and expansive a range as in any informal nonfiguration, but they achieve it through describing a motif which is itself random, overall. The motif has been chosen for its abstraction; this is art imitating nature imitating art."²

I wonder whether Katz is actually as deconstructive as James seems to intimate. It's true that he loves to paint what are already painted things in the world, such as made-up faces, painted lips and eyebrows. Studio sitters frequently pose in front of recently completed Alex Katzes, reinforcing the association of his work with stage

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scenery. Often he teases out the conundrum by incorporating decorative motifs into a scene which is itself rendered in a decorative, Katzian manner. In *January III* (1992), a nearly 14-foot-long winterscape interrupted by a spliced-in close-up of a woman, the relationship between the branch-and-flower motif on the woman's collar and the real trees flanking her exemplifies the volatility, in Katz's world, of the exchange rate between the currencies of artifice and reality. In this picture, the way the portrait intrudes spatially and conceptually into the middle of the landscape recalls the work of David Salle (who is an admirer of Katz). The sharp cropping of the portrait's right side, a typical Katz device that owes much to Japanese prints, also recalls cinematic framing, a source with which Salle would identify. But while Salle delights in the conflict of rival layers of imagery, Katz favors a less drastic juxtaposition of pictorial spaces. The attentive viewer will notice that the hand-drawn right edge of

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Luna Park, 1960, oil on canvas, 40 by 30 inches.
Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Fla.
Photo courtesy P.S. 1, Long Island City.

the portrait space, though severe, has a slight bow that rhymes with the bending trees. The purpose and effect of Katz's balancing acts always have more to do with heightening equilibrium than with breaking down the lan-

guage of painting, suggesting a modernist rather than a postmodern sensibility.

The new priority given to landscape, and the increasing tendency to bigness, reconnect Katz with the prevailing esthetic mood at the outset of his career. At that time "open form" was a wild and liberating opportunity, whether encountered in Jackson Pollock's allover lyrical drip abstractions, or the free style of the jazzmen who hypnotized Katz, notably Stan Getz and Miles Davis. After studying at Cooper Union in New York in the late 1940s, Katz attended the summer program at Skowhegan for two years in succession, in 1949 and 1950. There for the first time he was enticed to paint *en plein air*. As he recounts in his memoir, this was like "feeling lust for the first time."⁸ He found he could paint fast, and decided this is where his talent lay. But later in the 1950s Katz's style developed in a direction that took him away from open forms to tightness and closure. He wanted his faces to be specific as well as generalized, he longed to combine the particularity of a given sitter's features and expression while keeping that cool, hieratic iconlike vacuity which is the hallmark of his portraiture. "An Arrow shirt ad translated into the gravity of a Coptic funerary portrait" is the way Bill Berkson has characterized this

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look which called for clean, rigorous graphic precision.⁴

Katz also dispensed with "open" painting at this time for a more technical reason that has to do with his penchant for transparency, for sealing the image within the paint. He didn't like the way Matisse or Mondrian's age. "They had an idea of a painting being immediate and left it as an open surface. I thought a Van Eyck surface looked newer. It was closed and smooth. So I started making fatter grounds, trying to make a closed surface."⁵ Katz's transparency was still relative. Although he likes to talk about paint being behind the image, even in his most sealed images of the 1970s he deploys formal devices such as quirky drawing and mannerisms of perspective to slow down the viewer's gaze. In the last decade, however, there has been a radical renewal of open-form painting. A sense of immediacy has been restored to the paint where previously the material surface might seem lethargic. In his new paintings he has the best of both worlds: the oils are succulent, rich, at times creamy, but there is no submission to impasto or to the inherent unmediated expressivity of the material, which would run counter to his need for control.

Katz has observed how a painting can look open or closed while the experience of making it can be opposite. The poet and critic Frank O'Hara, visiting his studio in 1954, detected an oriental calm in the work. O'Hara's observation about the paintings of that period, says Katz, "was interesting to me, because I thought of them as how I painted them, wild and open."⁶ This temperamental discrepancy between process and result highlights something fundamental in Katz, a playoff between control and improvisation. His infatuation during his formative years with cool jazz, then his growing

Hayfield IV, 1985, oil on canvas, 9 by 12 feet.
Photo courtesy Marlborough Gallery.

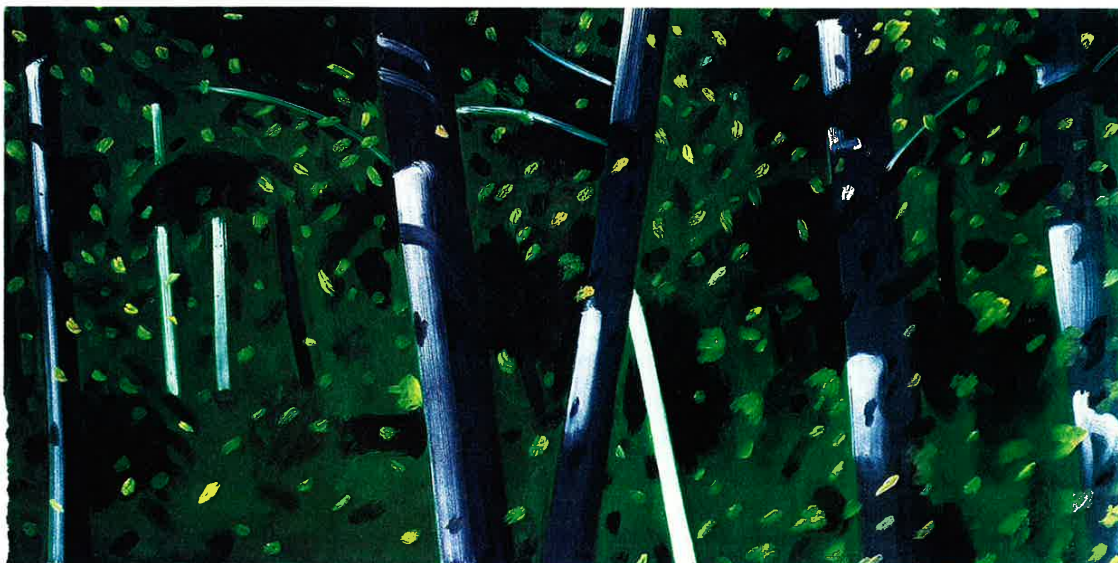


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Summer Triptych, 1965, oil on canvas, three panels: 12 by 19 1/4 feet overall.

Woods, 1991, oil on canvas, 80 by 168 inches. Photos this page courtesy Saatchi Collection.



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Moonlight, 1997, oil on canvas, 40 by 130 inches. Photo courtesy Marlborough Gallery.

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affinity with the New York School poets who appear in so many of his paintings, and later his collaboration with experimental dancers, all point to an interest in tight structures within which fluid expression becomes possible.

His modus operandi in his big pictures reconciles measure and freedom to a degree perfectly suited to his artistic temperament. Say he is painting a Maine landscape. He makes an oil sketch in situ during his summer break. Back in New York—it could be months later—he begins to work up the initial idea to its intended scale. The sketch is reconfigured as a drawing, which is used like a traditional

Renaissance cartoon to transfer outlines to the canvas (soot is pressed through countless perforations). Once the image reemerges on the canvas it is more freely redrawn. Colors are carefully mixed and laid out for the final assault. This will be the second bout of improvisation in the evolution of the image, only where the initial sketch was perceptual the final painting, built upon intervening phases of reduction and analysis, and reenacted in isolation from the motif, is synthetic. The painting is generally executed in one session, which can take from five to eight hours. Like the first sketch, the big painting is still painted “wet into wet,” but the difference in scale intensifies the implications of working this way. With so much paint sliding around under his brush there are countless risks and surprises, just like a live jam session. These virtuoso painterly performances, so bright and cool and effortless at the end of the day, truly emulate the jazzmen Katz lionized in his youth.

Katz is hard to place within the narrative sweep of American modernism, though not because he is some romantic outsider; on

the contrary, his art can seem fashionable to a fault in its awareness of esthetic debates. Katz is a maverick, rather, in the way he has been prepared to synthesize disparate esthetics, to take from, and contribute to, different traditions, and all the time cultivate an original approach. He takes his place in the tradition of American realism: at a certain level his socially acute portraits with their introverted smiles, his groups intermingling with studied casualness at beach parties and barbecues, operate as suave social updates of Hopper—Hoppers for an age of affluence and tranquilizers. But far from rejecting Abstract Expressionism, which stood in fierce opposition to realism in its emerging years, Katz draws upon the newer movement's energy and ambition.

By treating vernacular and contemporary subjects in an avant-garde style, Katz also gets blurred in historic consciousness with Pop, a movement he vaguely anticipated. (Andy Warhol is reported to have said, on finishing his first Marilyn paintings, “Gee, they look like Alex Katzes,” or words to that effect.) Katz's double, triple and multiple portraits of his wife and muse, Ada, could also have served as a

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precedent for Warhol's rows of screenprinted simulacra. Like Warhol and others of his generation, Katz used glamour and fashion in a fine-art context, qualities which were taboo to the puritanical, high-minded modernists. He shared some concerns with Pop, but not others, so to view him as a watered-down Pop artist is a sore injustice. In terms of sensibility, Katz and Warhol are a gulf apart: one is cool where the other is cold. There is a similarly metaphorical difference in temperature between Katz and his contemporary Jasper Johns. Both artists address issues of style and the status of painting and the relation of form and content. While Johns has the more substantial reputation, it seems to me that Katz's approach is more subtle. Johns's work is emphatically art-about-art; Katz hits the same buttons but obliquely, in the process of attending to the making of beautiful paintings which are also images of the real world.

In terms of reputation, Katz may be Aesop's tortoise, for all that he paints with the deft elegance of a hare. He has worked for many years "against the grain" but without recourse to a belligerent traditionalism, content instead to

be (incongruous as it sounds) moderately avant-garde, steering his middle way between realism and abstraction, painterliness and reduction, stylishness and emotional involvement, perception and synthesis. Interestingly, Katz is now a beacon of hope to a diverse group of young artists looking for a way out of painting's malaise. Some of these are people who want to paint poignant images without submitting to the tropes of narrative realism, to be personal without getting lost in solipsism, to paint with "attitude" without tripping into a neo-conceptualist anti-painting kind of painting. For Americans such as Elizabeth Peyton and Ena Swansea, and for James Reilly, Peter Doig, Alessandro Raho, Merlin James, Alex Lowery and others in England, Katz exemplifies knowing innocence. This may sound oxymoronic, but young artists determined to renew figurative painting are supremely conscious of a need to balance stylistic awareness and expressive engagement. To artists who see no contradiction in submerging ego into style and yet, through style, constructing their own vision of the world, Alex Katz is worthy to be called a master. □

1. Alex Katz, *Invented Symbols*, ed. by Vincent Katz, Ostfildern-Ruit, Cantz, 1997, p. 87.
2. David Sylvester, ed., *Alex Katz: Twenty Five Years of Painting from the Saatchi Collection*, London, Saatchi Gallery, 1997, p. 73.
3. Katz, *Invented Symbols*, p. 49.
4. William Berkson, "Alex Katz's Surprise Image," *Arts Magazine*, December 1965, reprinted in *Alex Katz*, Bill Berkson and Irving Sandler, eds. New York, Frederick A. Praeger, 1971, p. 22.
5. Katz, *Invented Symbols*, p. 78.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

"Alex Katz: Twenty Five Years of Painting from the Saatchi Collection" was seen at the Saatchi Gallery, London [Jan. 15 to Apr. 12]. *"Alex Katz Under the Stars: American Landscapes 1951-1995"* is currently on view at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City [Apr. 26-June 2], having previously traveled to the Baltimore Museum of Art [June 12-Sept. 8, 1996], the Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach [Mar. 15-May 8, 1997] and the Portland Museum of Art, Portland, Me. [July 19-Sept. 14, 1997].
A show of Katz's recent work appeared at Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris [Mar. 11-Apr. 15].

Author: David Cohen is an independent art critic based in London. He will moderate a panel discussion about Alex Katz at the New York Studio School on May 13 with Chuck Close, Rackstraw Downes, David Salle and Ena Swansea.