Robert Enright, “The Years of Figuring Restlessly,” *Border Crossings,* August, 2002

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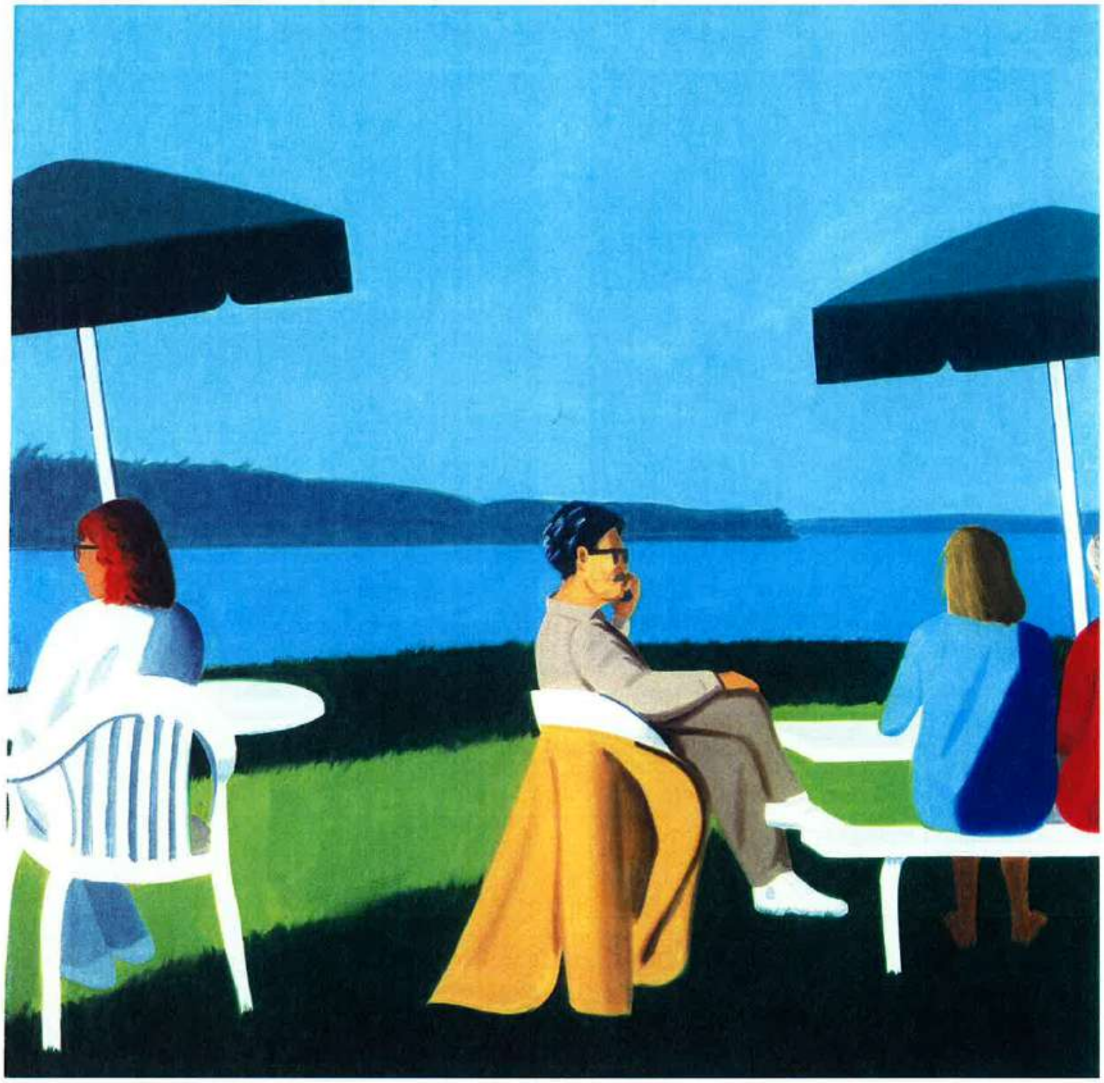
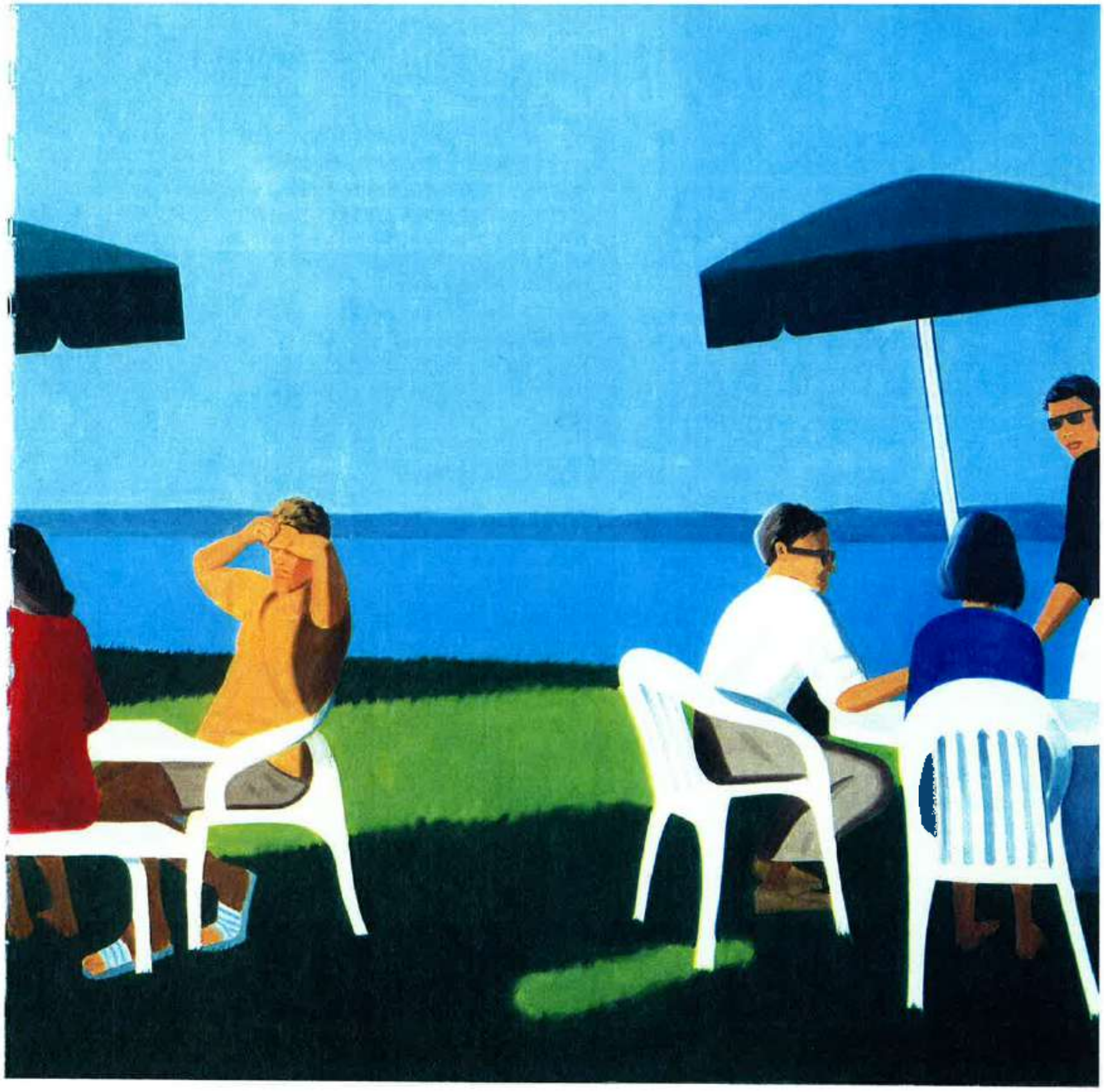


AN INTERVIEW WITH **Alex Katz**

# The Years of Figuring Restlessly



BY ROBERT ENRIGHT

That the following interview with Alex Katz is especially colourful will surprise no one who expects there to be an integral relationship between a painter's art and his personality. As the art has gone, so goes the conversation. But you might be surprised by the intensity with which he remembered an event that happened over 40 years ago. In 1959 Katz showed for the first time at the Tanager Gallery in New York,

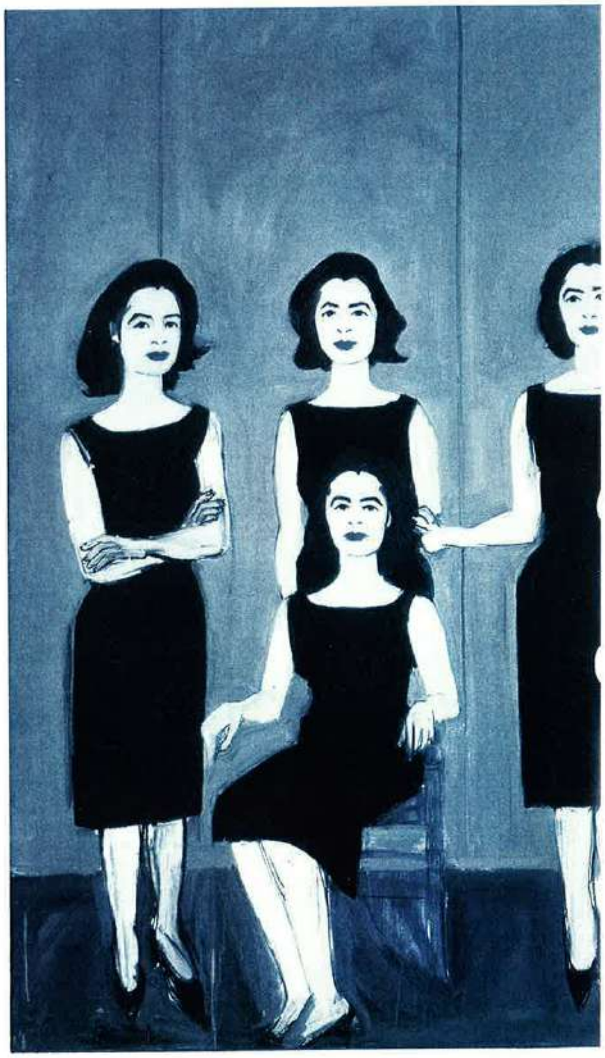
It was the initial exhibition of the figure paintings on single coloured grounds that he had begun working on two years earlier and the show was, by all accounts, including the artist's own, controversial. Included were *Ada in Black Sweater*, 1957, *Red Coat*, 1957, *Ada in White Dress*, 1958, and *Irving and Lucy*, 1958. Today, in their direct and uncompromising clarity, they read as marvellous paintings, but in the late '50s Abstract Expressionism was the official style of American avant-garde art, and the few artists who were painting figuratively (Larry Rivers, Jane Freilicher and Fairfield Porter) were decidedly outside the mainstream. And within this small figurative camp, Katz was the outsider's outsider.

Even so, New York's art-world luminaries showed up at the opening, including Philip Guston, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and, notably, Willem de Kooning. It would be easy to make the assumption that Katz's style of painting would not have been well received by the founding generation of Abstract Expressionists who frequented the Cedar Street Tavern, and that he was viewed as an upstart crow beautifying himself with figurative feathers in a painting culture that was predominantly gestural and abstract. Katz admitted that the reaction to his inaugural exhibition was "very split. I had no idea whether it would work. I knew that the paintings were unconventional, that was all. But de Kooning came over and told me that they were terrific. And he said, 'Don't let them back you out.'" In recalling this brief encounter, Katz's eyes begin to tear and his voice, ever so briefly, falters. Forty-three years after that opening, Alex Katz, the artist who says unequivocally, "I can do more things with painting on a bigger scale than anyone. Period," is still moved as he recollects what was really at stake in "the challenge of living up to the greats."

In 2002 Alex Katz remains passionate about his place in the history of modern painting. And he continues to set himself problems that seem insuperable. Much of the reason Katz is so widely admired, not only by the generation of painters who were his contemporaries, but by subsequent generations as well, is because of his willingness to push his own talent as far as he can. (The most recent example of his generating appeal is a smartly chosen exhibition of 50 paintings from 1951 to 2002 called "In Your Face" at the Kunst-und Ausstellungshalle in Bonn through August 18 of this year.)

One of the things Katz admits he learned from his collaborations with the choreographer Paul Taylor is that "the one person you don't want to bore is yourself," and you can sense in his restlessness a refusal to make work that he already knows everything about. "You've got the

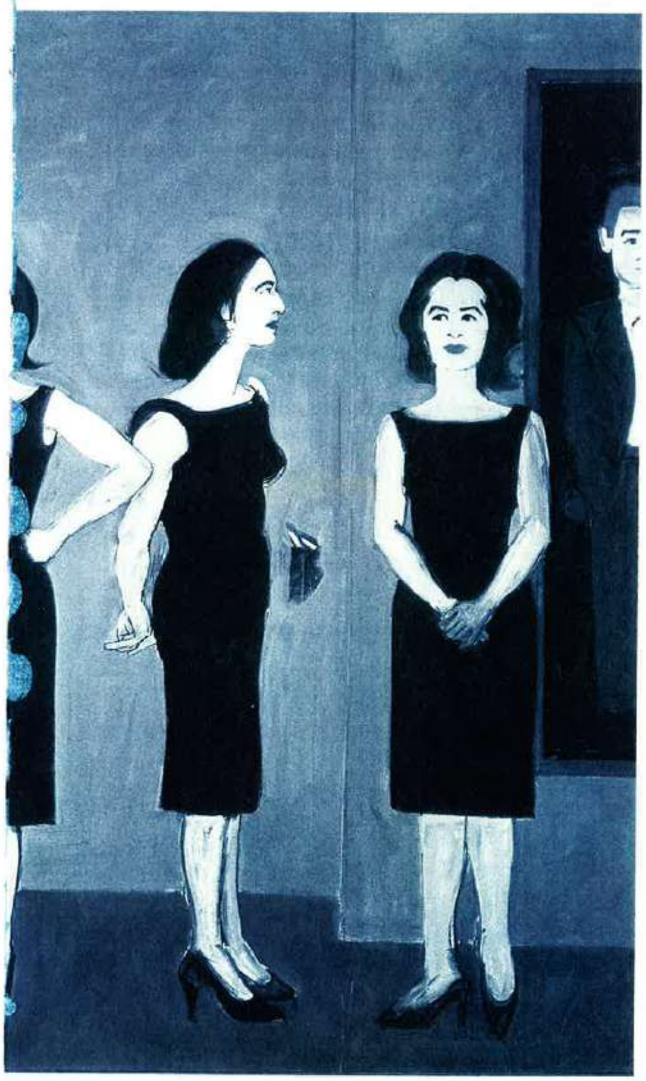
preceding spread, top: *Beach Stop*, 2001, oil on canvas, 96 x 192". Photographs courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/Salzburg



*The Black Dress*, 1960, oil on canvas, 71 1/2 x 83 1/2". Photograph: Sammlung Brandhorst. Courtesy Kunst-und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland

preceding spread, below left: 7:35 PM-5, oil on board, 12 x 16"
below right: 7:30 PM-3, oil on board, 12 x 16"

idea and you want to see what it looks like," he says. "I know the things I can do with paint, but I don't know what that thing is going to look like." Alex Katz has been making clear for almost half a century that what he has been able to do with paint doesn't look like what anyone else has been able to do with it. His fearlessness in handling radically different scales—from small paintings that are only 6 x 12 inches to billboard-sized public murals—is unmatched. Equally impressive is his ability to construct images of surpassing interest, from the innocent wariness of the newly wedded couple in *Irving and Lucy*, 1958, to the stunning elegance of his wife's portrait in *Blue Umbrella # 2*, 1972. It is worth emphasizing the range of the paintings he has made of Ada, his wife of 44 years, whether upside-down in his 1965 big attack re-staging of Courbet, or repeated six times in *The Black Dress*, 1960, as if Muybridge had his eye on beauty and not locomotion. He has painted her countless times over the course of their relationship, and the work that has emerged from his stylish inventory of her myriad selves is among the most sustained body of portraiture in the history of painting. These portraits find their correlatives in the landscapes, the flower paintings, the social paintings and the "Night Paintings": all works of uncompromising rigour, brilliance and style. I know of few contemporary painters who can deliver the aesthetic goods with such apparent ease and grace. One of Alex Katz's most significant achievements is to have made difficult art that seamlessly covers up the predicaments of its making. He is America's best cover-under artist.



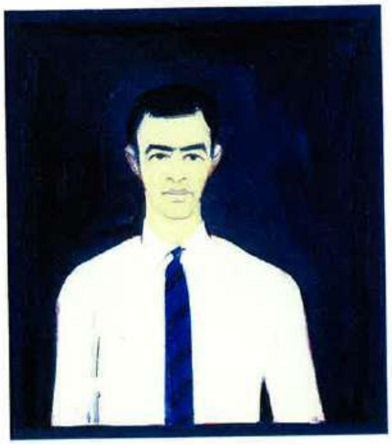
Alex Katz was interviewed in his New York studio in February, 2002, by Robert Enright.

BORDER CROSSINGS: *I want to start by talking about an early oil-on-board painting you did of Bill Berkson and Frank O'Hara in New York in 1961. You've got them dressed as a sailor and a marine.*

ALEX KATZ: The marine and sailor uniforms were very attractive; they were about romance. I was making romantic images. So I used them on different people.

BC: *But you were obviously aware of the charge the uniforms had for gay men*

AK: Yeah. There was another painting called *Rockaway* with George Montgomery, John Button and Maxine Groisky, and when George went out for a pack of cigarettes to Eighth Avenue, John said, "He just wants to cruise." When he got his sailor suit on, he went nuts.



Top: *Self Portrait*, 1963, oil on canvas, 31 1/4 x 26. Courtesy AKA Gallery New York.

Below: *Black Brook #16*, 2011, oil on canvas, 30 x [illegible]. Photograph courtesy Alex Katz. Courtesy Jablonka Galerie, Cologne.

*BC: You often asked your models about their wardrobe. Were you consciously obliging people to dress in certain ways throughout this period?*

AK: No, I usually picked people for their style. You knew what they were going to dress like. They came with the style.

*BC: Since your mother was an actress, do you think there was a sense of theatricality built into your family?*

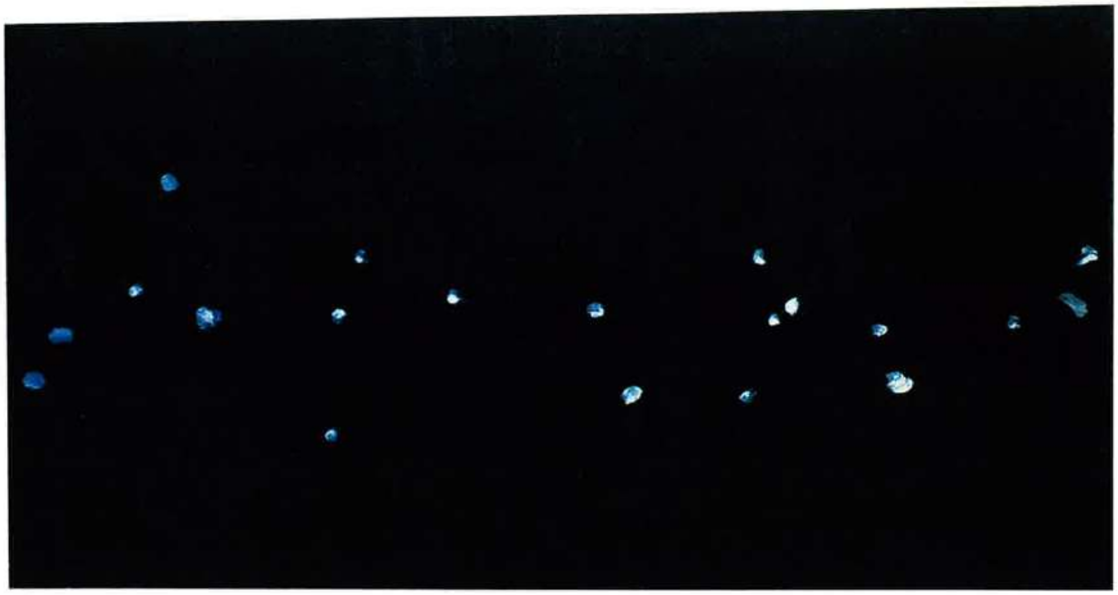
AK: I guess so. My father did amateur stuff with her too. But I never saw my mother on stage. She was in another world. She said she studied with Stanislavsky but she also lied a lot. I do know she studied in Odessa and she was with a troupe that went to Moscow. Then she went to Leningrad to study psychology for a year or two. Apparently they were getting rid of Jews at that point and so her brother sent her some money to come home. On the way she stopped at this small town where my father was stuck because of the war and where he had decided to open an amateur theatre.

*BC: Is that how they met?*

AK: Yeah. He needed a professional and she was a trained actress. When she came here, she was on the Jewish stage for several years. She dumped him in Russia. She thought he was an aristocrat —her definition of an aristocrat was someone who changed his clothes three times a day—"But one day he asked me to marry him and I realized he was nothing but a burgher and so I left him."

*BC: What kind of a relationship did you have with your father?*

AK: He was a terrific guy. But my father did have a



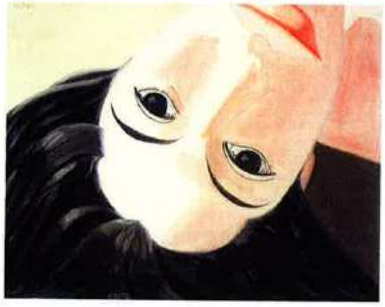
bourgeois morality. My mother was on the nose about that. She came here and he lost everything there. Then he came here and worked in the sweatshops, which he liked because he was very competitive. He used to say, "I'm better and faster than everybody."

BC: *Was your mother a flamboyant personality?*

AK: Yeah. Once she took a car up Seventh Avenue against the traffic at night for seven blocks. Someone must have commented on her driving, which is very peculiar. So she said, I'll show you some driving. Up Seventh Avenue for seven blocks when a cop stopped her. She made a joke and the cop let her go. She was a real embarrassment. I would just shut my eyes and hope I didn't get killed when I went driving with her. She took art students on dirt roads at 90 miles an hour. They were all in a state of shock. Actually, both my parents were pretty wild. My father used to dive off bridges. He was a super he-man type and I always felt really inadequate around him. My brother was totally fearless. He was strong like my father, they were football player types.

BC: *What made you gravitate towards art?*

AK: My parents encouraged it. My father also did watercolours with me.



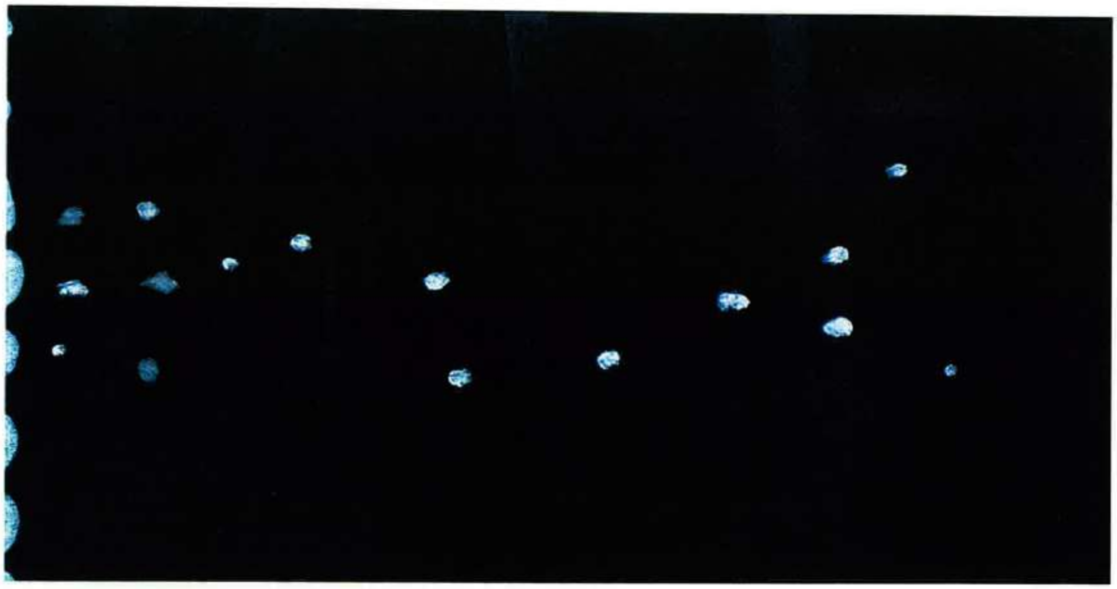
Top: Upside Down Ada, 1965, oil on canvas, [illegible] Collection Vincent Katz. Photograph courtesy [illegible] Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland [illegible]

BC: *Did you realize you were pretty good early on?*

AK: I was very good. I had a prize when I was in the second grade, but my teacher thought it was a fluke. But there were some other guys on the block who were really good.

BC: *You said you went to high school because you really wanted to draw.*

AK: I took the vows right there when I was 13½. I was really serious. I was drawing half a day doing antiques, and those antiques were as good as most people who were 20 to 25. I graduated when I was 13 and went into art school, where I saw the casts I was able to start doing



the next year. They didn't care what you did. I did some posters and lettering and then I was drawing half a day every day on a cast. It would take five days to make a drawing. I learned that system very well but then I felt I couldn't do anything else very well.

*BC: By the time you got to Cooper Union in 1946, you were doing rough drawings that you said were the basis for your invention of "Crudism."*

AK: I went to this blackboard jungle high school to draw casts but I didn't know how to write a paper. I was just awful. Most of the other people were veterans who had been in Cooper before, or they were people who had gone to music and art prep school. So I figured my aptitude must have been very high to get in with my background.

*BC: You were an outsider even then?*

AK: A real outsider. It wasn't until the middle of the second year that I got it. Everyone there was working really hard and I wasn't used to working that hard. The GIs wanted to get on in the real world, which I didn't have a vague idea about.

*BC: So what made you decide to become an artist? Was it the only thing you thought you could do at the time?*

AK: I liked doing it and it kept getting more interesting. Finally I said, I'm not going to be a commercial artist, and I switched to fine art. The brighter kids were usually in architecture, advertising and graphic arts, so when I went into fine arts I remember a guy I knew saying to me, "It's like putting a wolf with sheep." But when you saw how good really good painting was, you just wanted to make something like that.

*BC: By 1955 you were already doing collages and cut-outs?*

AK: It was a curious time. It was like New York was a provincial town with two types of painting: there was regional painting, which seemed like it was from Mars, and then there was modern art. The modern art was being made in Europe mostly, and what you had here was "provincial" modern art. So you studied Matisse and Braque—whom everybody was trying to paint because he was more interesting. And people were into things like psychoanalysis, Freud, Marx and primitivism, and none of that interested me. My head wasn't where the other kids were at that point.

*BC: You were still pretty young. At that point did you realize you were in it for the long haul?*

AK: I think I figured it would take 20 years to really make something.

*BC: You saw a major Bonnard exhibition around this time. What interest did he hold for you?*

AK: The Bonnard show was just fabulous—all that light and colour. Everything here was white and black. When I first put a painting up, some older guy was helping me out and he said figuration is obsolete, colour is black and white and colour is French. It got to be like an Academy really quickly.

*BC: Avant-garde painting academized itself that fast?*

AK: Yeah, because there was a vacuum, there was nothing. Just very weak provincial stuff that was fugitive and regional stuff that was sort of stale.

*BC: Were you resistant to the idea that a power base was already forming around American abstract painting?*

AK: Definitely. I wanted to make something. The way they were painting gave you a chance to work in a big-time environment, but what they were doing was against my instincts and I just followed my instincts. I wanted to make figurative paintings.

*BC: What about Pollock?*

AK: I thought he was terrific and very liberating, but he was involved in a macho, subjective world and neither one of those things interested me.

*BC: You talked about rejecting what you called "soft painting" at the time. What were you referring to?*

AK: Braque and things from him. I think he's a very good painter and I think his collages in the teens were the cornerstones of the new art of the 20th century. But at the time everyone was painting soft. They were very successful but it didn't have the energy I wanted. I wanted a lot of energy and the liveliness of light.

*BC: Where did your idea come from for the little collages? They were only six inches long.*

AK: It was about scale and it was an aggressive attack on large paintings. I was against the big stuff, I wanted to work small and contained. I was making drawings and then trying to work in the past tense in order to figure out what colours would make light plausible to that situation.

BC: *Were you after something like verisimilitude?*

AK: Yeah, colour was light.

BC: *You also said that the work was about memory and that you cut up some of your early pieces.*

AK: The paintings were an attempt to get in the present tense and this was like trying the other side of it. With every idea it's nice to just flop it over and see what happens.

BC: *Are you contrary? Is that your disposition?*

AK: I always flip things around.

BC: *Were you looking at Milton Avery at the time?*

AK: I was very sympathetic but I didn't like the way he painted. It wasn't direct painting. I liked Marsden Hartley. Mrs. Avery told me that Milton influenced Hartley, which I can believe. I guess that might be the connection. I liked the physicality of Hartley.

BC: *In looking at other painters, were you learning from them all the time or was it a question of becoming aware of what you didn't want to do?*

AK: It's not that simple because you take parts from everybody. But the real modern stuff has no baggage. I feel you can take this from here and that from there. A lot of it's unconscious. But I feel it's really open: you can deal with anything you look at. So Matisse was very important and so was a Coke ad. I could use the Coke ad and I could use the Matisse; I could use a Pollock one day and use a Bonnard the next.

BC: *Pretty early on you got associated with Pop art, which doesn't seem a very good fit from today's perspective. Did it seem the right fit at the time?*

AK: No, the stuff was like poison to me. You see, I was there and all of a sudden Pop art comes along and makes what I'm doing look like a compromised Pop art. People were saying I was a follower of Pop art when the sequence is actually reversed. It was something in the air.

BC: *Were you conscious of trying to negotiate a space between abstraction and figuration?*

AK: The idea was to make a new painting, and my premise was, I can make a new figurative painting. There was no other place. Because, for traditional revisionist painters, the work was too modern and the abstract painters thought it was old-fashioned or something. Although they always used to say "he can paint well."

BC: *But you did some all-over painting as a student?*

AK: Yeah, sort of like Pollock. But it was hard to get out of Cubism. Cubism is out of cast drawing. French painting is spatial and so is Cubism; it's the same kind of painting of physical spaces. Once you had done cast drawing, Cubism was easy. I was a whiz at it. I would hear the teachers say, "Don't break up your white harmonies." That's what I was told in high school. The rules were the same, except the figuration was different.

BC: *But you weren't entirely in isolation; there was Fairfield Porter and Larry Rivers.*

AK: And Jane Freilicher was also painting contemporary pictures. Jane and Larry were working more from old paintings, and Fairfield's images were not aggressive as imagery. I think my background was different. I came out of really hard-nosed Cubist painting. It's a different background from abstract painting. Cooper Union was like a Bauhaus school, so it was completely different.

BC: *When Fairfield Porter reviews you early on, he talks about your "abstract" sense of colour.*

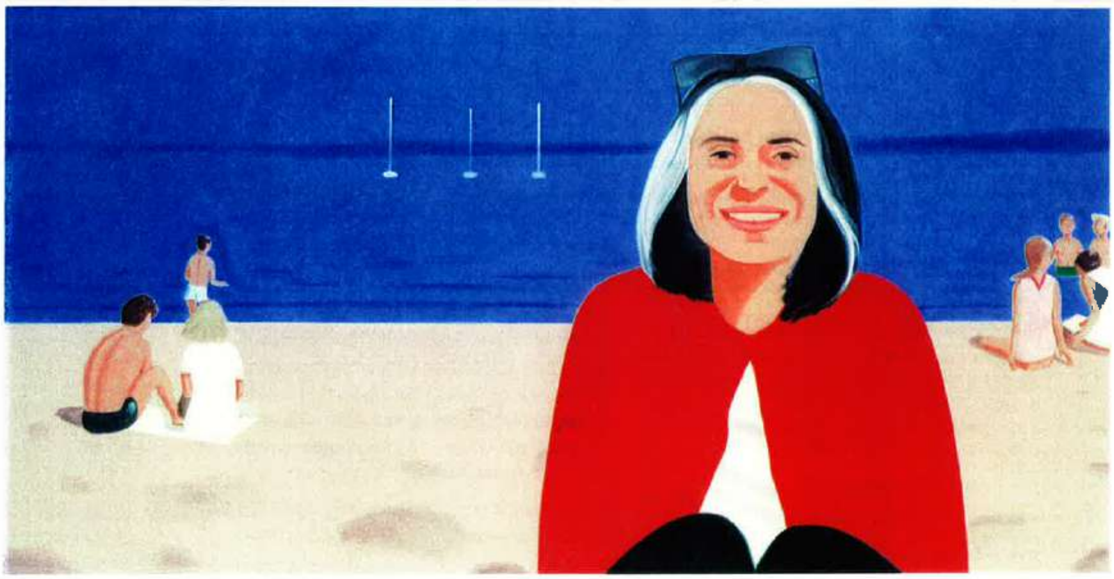
AK: The colour was what he liked about my work. Fairfield was working tonally a lot. I liked his dead tones actually because I never had a dead tone in a picture. I couldn't believe that so many dead tones could make such an interesting picture. He has a refined sense of light. His brushwork can be very nice and he can handle details. He doesn't get stuck on them and he also has a thing like a dumb image. Gerhard Richter's works are really dumb in the way some of Fairfield's images are, and that's what really interested me about them. But when Fairfield first set those paintings up, they looked like a Coke ad. I thought it was really sensational.

BC: *You use the word* sensational. *Are you still thrilled by painting in the same way?*

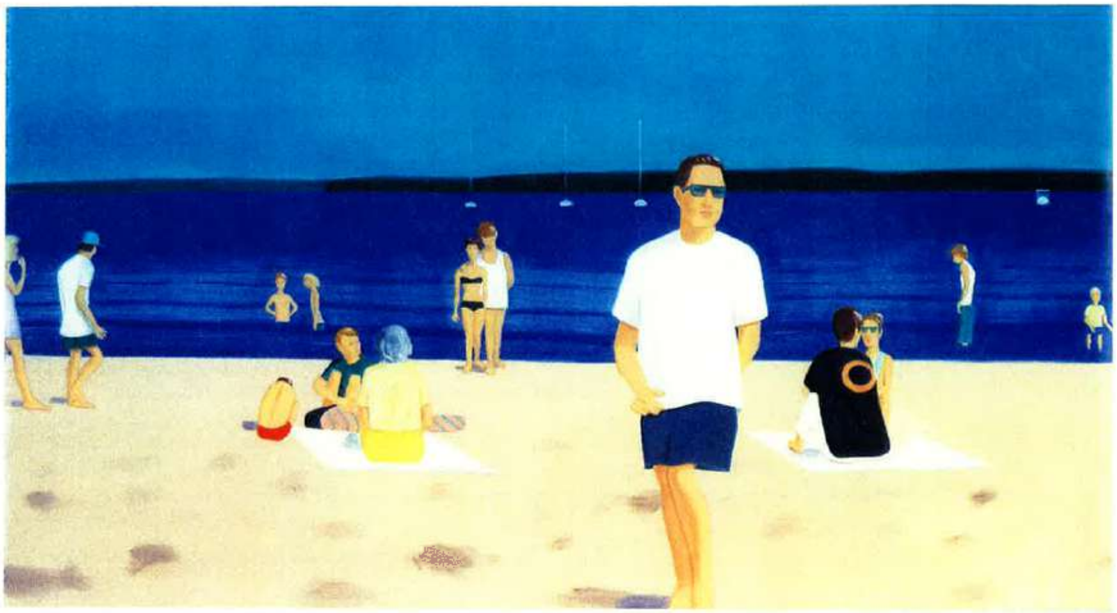
AK: No. I don't get the same kick anymore.

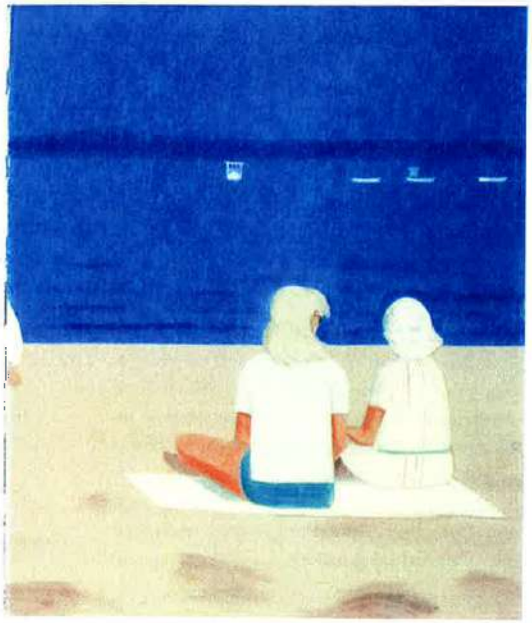
BC: *Is that because you've been at it too long?*

AK: Yeah. I'm also too good. I can paint better than just about anyone around.



I can do more things with painting on a bigger scale than anyone. Period.





BC: *You say that so matter-of-factly that arrogance and ego don't seem to enter into it.*

AK: I can do more things with painting on a bigger scale than anyone around. Period. It's been incremental. I started out and the paintings were just terrible but they kept getting a little better every year. In the first 10 years I destroyed a thousand paintings. That's a lot of painting. I'd try anything, then I'd look at it and do another one. A couple of years later, I'd look at this painting again and say, there's no reason for it to be here. So I destroyed them.

BC: *When did you know you were onto something that made sense?*

AK: You make sense at different times. You never know but other people can tell you when you're so stretched out you really don't know what you're doing.

BC: *I gather you weren't getting a lot of support from the boys at the Cedar Street Tavern?*

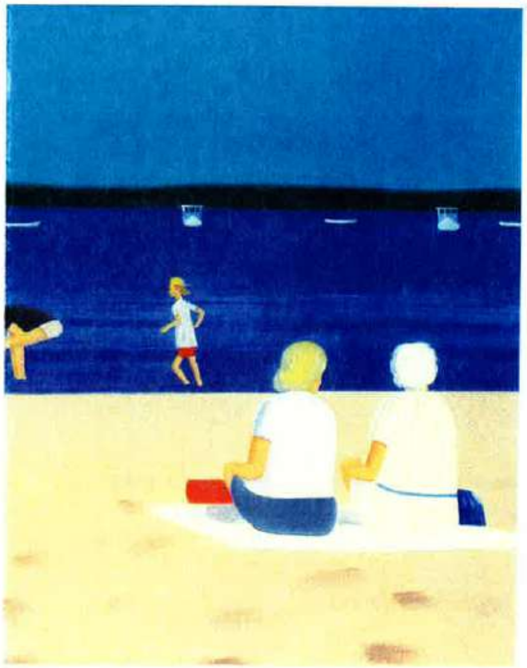
AK: When I put up the first show with figures and flat backgrounds in 1959, the reaction was very split. But de Kooning came over and told me they were terrific. And he said, "Don't let them back you out." I was just scared silly during those days because it didn't make any sense at all. Like when I did the little paintings in the '50s, I thought they were pretty good but I didn't *really* know if they were any good.

BC: *You used to make at least a painting a day. Do you still paint that much?*

AK: No. I do something in the studio every day but I don't paint as much. The energy is more focussed. If I'm painting very heavy I can do a painting a week but it's hard, you know.

BC: *When you're as good a painter as you are, do you want to resist your facility, do you need to find ways to make it more difficult?*

AK: I'm always trying to stretch a little bit. I did two paintings last summer; one was a 30-foot-long painting of reflections of under water, called *Black Brook, no. 16*, that I've been working on for maybe 10 or 12 years. I've never done anything that mushy in my life. It's got a lot of soft tones in it and it's kind of a challenge. Now I'm working on a painting called *Beach Stop* with eight people on benches and a cross-light at 5:30 in the afternoon, and



top: *Harbor #8*, 1999, oil on canvas, 8 x 16'. Courtesy Pace Wildenstein, New York.

below: *Harbor #5*, 1999, oil on canvas, 8 x 20'. Courtesy Pace Wildenstein, New York.

it's way beyond my technical powers to do it really smooth. But I want to try something with more elements than I can handle easily. Because you get a lot of image kick from it.

*BC: Was it a major leap when you moved towards multiple figures in the late '50s?*

AK: Oh yeah, because I was going from painting things I knew or could see from a photograph to painting things I was making up. And that's a big difference. It's a more synthetic idea. The picture looked good but it was against my aesthetics. I changed my aesthetics and you're not the same person if you do that.

*BC: And if you put six Adas in a black dress like you did in 1960, does that make it even more complicated?*

AK: Yeah, because I was taking it as far as it went. I've done another one since, but I guess that first one took it out as far as it went.

*BC: When I look at the black shoes of the Ada on the left-hand side, they look like they were painted by Ernst Kirchner. They look like Expressionist feet.*

AK: They're stylish, right. And it's done straight from life: she posed and I painted. It was an afternoon. I realize I'll never be this lucky again. Because I was painting those big canvasses direct.

*BC: It must have been exhilarating.*

AK: I remember the whole thing was pretty wild. I had an idea of the size of the figure to the perimeter. So that was settled and everything was great that day. I sort of had a great touch.

*BC: Why do you bring Ada's multiple self back a few more times?*

AK: I was just trying to do the same thing over again with another form. I was working on those big compositions then. So I did six girls and then I did six guys, then I did children, then I did Ada six times. You're just running through a whole bunch of things and you put them in different lights so every one has different problems.

*BC: Was Ada a natural subject for you to paint because she was available to you?*

AK: Not only available but she was also a dream model. She was totally self-conscious, like a dancer. She knows exactly who she is and what she looks like in space. She doesn't make a bad gesture. You stand in a photograph with her and try to smile and you come out second-best.

*BC: What role has self-portraiture played in your work? I think of that early self-portrait from 1960 where you look like you're auditioning for a film Tarantino is going to make 40 years in the future. You look like Mr. White.*

AK: I just was disgusted with Rembrandt's self-portraits. All that soul, all that content falling over the frame. It made you want to wipe yourself clean. You wanted to detach yourself from all that soul and just put in the *appearance* of the person. So I thought doing the man in the grey suit was like a Dutch painting because the middle class wore suits. The grey flannel suit was the equivalent of what those 17th-century burghers would wear. It was the middle-class uniform.

*BC: Then in 1978 you make yourself look like a cheesy Latin matinee idol.*

AK: A Ricardo Montalban image. That was the '70s look and I thought it would be outrageous to do that as a portrait. When artists do self-portraits, they're so sympathetic to themselves. They make themselves better, more serious and soulful. My idea was to go over the top on it.

*BC: So is self-portraiture always ironic for you?*

AK: I don't think of it as ironic so much as just trying to make an image of the time. And also taking that traditional self-portrait and making it a detached object rather than something recognized for its subjective content. The look belongs to the time, it doesn't belong that much to the person. It's not about soul.

*BC: Were you consciously creating a world that was almost Arcadian?*

AK: Well, it was out of the social world I lived in.

*BC: One you actually lived in rather than one you were constructing?*

AK: The style of the pictures was very misleading to people.

*BC: So the subjects weren't that beautiful?*

AK: I generalize. If everything is described, then it isn't realistic. It's descriptive and hasn't got the life of anything realist. The realistic has to do with an illusion. It almost comes out of the vitality of the painting. That has to be part of it for me, so I leave out a lot of naturalistic details and there's an elegant style, which makes the whole thing cohesive. Actually, my portraits look like the people. In the Rudy Burckhardt photos of the cut-outs you can't tell the difference between the people and the cut-outs.

*BC: So likeness matters to you as a portrait painter?*

AK: Well, I try to get a pretty good likeness and then at the end I just let it go. I'm fairly good at likenesses. There were times in their portraits when Picasso and Matisse weren't very specific.

*BC: I always thought of Picasso's portraits as being very specific. Don't you know every woman he's painting?*

AK: You know everything about the person but in a generalized way. I mean you see the portrait of Dora Maar and you say, wow, she's a knockout. Then you see the photograph and you say, I knew he lied. He made her prettier in the painting. The problem with her was the neck and shoulders.

*BC: He doesn't worry about them?*

AK: He made them more standard European.

*BC: When you change things, is it always a conscious choice?*

AK: I don't know whether I change things so much. There's a likeness and then there's the line and there's the rhythm and they all have to go together. So things get, as they say, Alex Katzized. That's what they say, so I guess it's true.

*BC: Is rhythm the movement that actually happens in the moment of painting?*

AK: When I make the big paintings, I draw with a lot of rhythm, so you have natural rhythm from one stroke to the other. Things get into that.

*BC: Once you have the armature of the drawing, is that what gives you the painting?*

AK: Yeah. That's where all the work is, in the armature of the drawing. The painting is more open.

*BC: I read a piece in an early* Parkett *where the writer suggested that you consciously sought out portraiture as a way of furthering your career.*

AK: He might be right. I don't know what my intent was. I don't really believe intent is a valid way of thinking about paintings. Who knows what the artist intended; how can you speculate on that area?

*BC: But when you're an accomplished painter, doesn't the relationship between what you intend and what you get become narrower all the time?*

AK: No. It never works out right.

*BC: So are all the paintings just failures moving to the next step?*

AK: No. They go there and all of a sudden you're halfway done and this thing is so awful and you don't know how you're going to get through it. Then you work on it a little more and you say, wait a minute, I think I can make it. But on some paintings it just feels so awful.

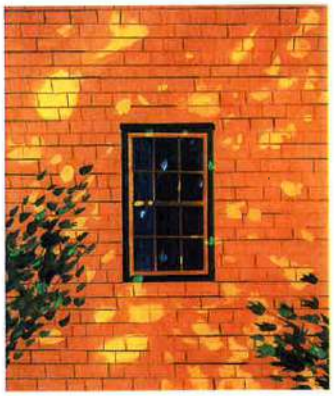
*BC: Why do you keep doing this to yourself?*

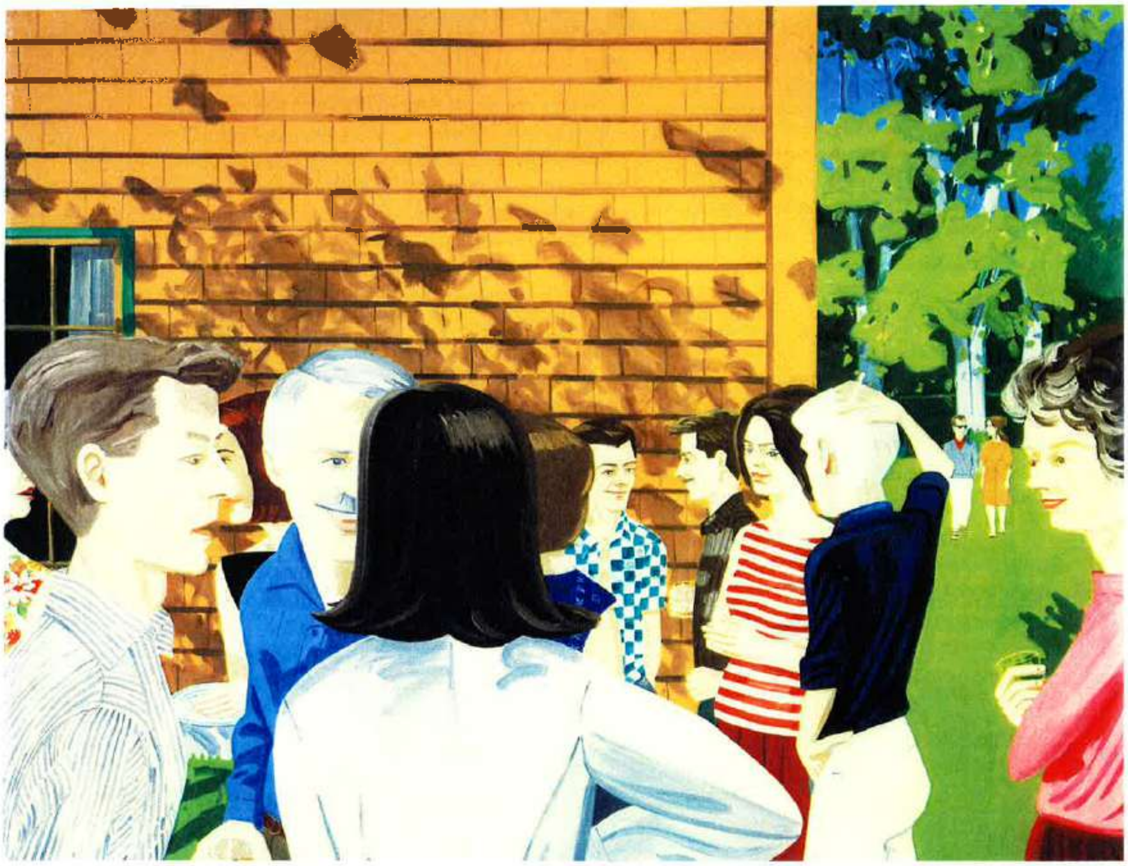
AK: Because in the end you can get something that's really interesting. You've got the idea and you want to see what it looks like. I know the things I can do with paint, but I don't know what that thing is going to look like. You can end up with a technically nice surface and it can become no good.

*BC: Is there a point where you always know what you're going to get? A point where the painting won't surprise you?*

AK: There was a film crew filming me while I did that *Black Brook, no. 16*. I was absolutely sure of myself on that one. So I said, you come and watch me paint and I'm going to make a real good painting. I painted it in three and a half hours and the lights on the painting produced so much glare I couldn't see what I was doing. I had to say, turn off the lights and let me paint for a while so I can see some of this. It was just a nightmare. But my technique was perfect and I took chances. I mixed some colours on the canvas. I had to have the right brush, I had to have the right amount of paint on top and mix it right there and then. And everything I did was perfect. The next day at the time of the drawing I said, this doesn't look bad, and the second day it looked better, and by the third day I could say, wow, I really, really did it. Then I had this painting with eight people and I had to solve some of the areas that were unsolved on the paper. I said, I wonder what I'm going to do with this corner? And it was really a nightmare going through that. You think, do I have a big turkey? And my dealer came up to Maine, saw the sketches and said, "These are fabulous." And I said, well, I'm going to do this 20-foot painting and he says, great, we'll make it the centre part of my show in Paris. So I'm painting on this thing and it looks pretty crude. These two figures look like lumps

The realistic has to do with an **illusion.** I leave out a lot of naturalistic details and there's an elegant style which makes the whole thing cohesive.





in the middle of the painting. I didn't feel like King Kong, I can tell you that. I felt like a beggar.

BC: *I'm surprised that it's still that difficult.*

AK: Well, if you're not stretching, you're falling. Like Clyfford Still found truth and his paintings got worse and worse. I mean, from 1948 to 1952 he was fantastic, but then he just kept cranking them out. You could put a cot in that shrine for him at the Met, it's so boring.

BC: *Was there somebody whom you wanted to be like, whom you felt kept raising the bar all the time on their own work?*

AK: I think Pollock tried but he was hampered. He just didn't have the inside strength for it, he was a little delicate inside.

BC: *How come you had the "inside" strength?*

AK: I don't know. I think growing up between cultures helped. I guess I got that from my parents. I was always *apart* in a way.

BC: *You always felt that?*

AK: Yeah, my head was somewhere a little different from anyone else's around.

BC: *Was your outsiderness because you were Jewish as well?*

AK: Yeah. I was Jewish in a neighbourhood that wasn't Jewish, but I wasn't brought up religious. Then, when I got in the Navy, you had to go to some religious thing and I went with the Jewish boys. They were all very nice and there was a kind of a warmth there that had nothing to do with who I was but with my being Jewish. I didn't like it.

BC: *Because it was unearned?*

AK: It was like taking something for granted. I liked the guys but I just walked out. So I was the only guy out of 110 who didn't go to a religious thing. I cleaned up the barracks instead. I was really surprised at it.

BC: *So where does your persistence come from?*

AK: You live in an environment where everyone's trying to kill you as an artist and the environment for me was pretty good. The art world was really fugitive but I was able to survive in it somehow. The cost of living was so low that I could be a failure for 10 years and in that time develop a real good painting technique. By the end of those 10 years I could really paint. And you have friends around who help you by arguing. You argue with people, you change your view—all that contributes.

BC: *The atmosphere really was intense and ambitious?*

AK: It was very intensive. People talking and arguing just seemed to suit me. The prime thing wasn't to be a famous artist; the prime thing was to make that object.

BC: *Did the dark paintings represent a difference in attitude, or was it just a change in palette?*

AK: Well, I'd done dark paintings all through. The background of *The Cocktail Party* is dark. But I think it was another step when I started doing those "Night Paintings." I've been trying to get all the paintings since then into that elevated technical level.

BC: *So the change was technical. The dark paintings didn't represent a shift in psychology?*

AK: No, it was a technical thing. They were very complete paintings and some of those windows just took a half hour or an hour to paint. They took very little time and they were perfect paintings. You could put them up against anyone. It was like a different way of painting, different way of thinking. And I worked, trying to bring it into figurative painting. I went into areas—like twilight—where people hadn't worked much. You have a 15-minute interval to paint a picture of the twilight. You wait all day for 15 minutes. It's a challenge. The Impressionists never did it right because they would paint on it every day. You've got to be quick, you've got to just nail it right on that short interval. And because no one had ever been there, it was interesting and very challenging.

facing page, top: *Yellow House #2*, 2001, oil on canvas, 10 x 10' Photograph: Kerry Ryan McFate. Courtesy Pace Wildenstein, New York.

below: *Lawn Party*, 1965, oil on canvas, 9 x 12' Courtesy Pace Wildenstein, New York.

BC: *So the landscapes are* en plein air *paintings?*

AK: The sketches are actually all out there. I was painting on West Broadway for some of those "Night Paintings." People would think I was out of my fucking mind. It was winter—I had a hat on and gloves—and I couldn't see what I was doing. When I was in Gramercy Park 30 years ago, a guy comes over to me and says, "That's pretty good, I'd like to buy it." I told him I was an amateur and couldn't sell my work. Another guy wanted to get me a show in his friend's restaurant. I had to tell him I was a professional.

BC: *I look at some of your "Night Paintings" and I think of Ad Reinhardt.*

AK: He used colour in that Abstract Impressionist way where it becomes atmosphere. He called me neo-figurative and I called him neo-plastic and he started to spit. Neo-plastic with an impressionist surface. He was fair game. Usually I don't pick on people, but with that guy you've got to hit right between the eyes. He used to say how corrupt everything was, how the museums are just whorehouses and he was getting a big show at the Modern.

*BC: You've got a little bit of the imp of the perverse in you?*

AK: With him, yeah. He'd been after everybody for so long you figure he could take a joke.

*BC: Was it natural for you to gravitate towards the world where painters and poets came together?*

AK: I liked poetry before and then these new things were exciting. I never searched it out; it was always a question of someone telling me to look for most things. It was a crowd and I sort of drifted into it with Jane Freilicher and Larry Rivers and Rudy Burckhardt, Edwin Denby, John Ashberry and Frank O'Hara. We'd all be together in the living room and I started thinking, what the hell am I doing here with all these brilliant people?

*BC: And you thought you were the village idiot?*

AK: I didn't think I was on that level, really. But they did because they invited me.

*BC: It sounds like you were living a life that was ideal and idyllic.*

AK: Well, we were living over a lumber yard in a loft that had no heat, so there was a rough edge to it. And I don't think I'd been to a dentist or doctor in eight or nine years. It was pretty severe. I was living on $1800.00 a year at that time. I bought a suit in 1949 and the next one in 1966. People gave me clothes because I fit everyone who grew out of them. So I had nice clothes and I was one of the first guys to go to the Army & Navy Store. I used to buy these iceman pants that were striped. I never felt I was in poverty, I just felt I was poor.

facing page, *Wave #2*, 2000, oil on canvas, 90 x 66" Courtesy Pace Wildenstein, New York.

*BC: Was fashion important to you? I mean the look of things.*

AK: Yeah, look was important. I was not going to be like those older painters in the Art Students' League with red shirts covered in paint. I thought they were disgusting, so I always had clean white shirts and ties, a nice jacket and pants. And I didn't like the uptown AE guys either.

*BC: Was there a point where you knew that you were going to make a good living as a painter?*

AK: When I was 45, things had stabilized and I started selling. When I made the first paintings that were so shocking, several people came over and said, "If you need money I'll loan you some." But it was tough. I remember once I came in from the country and I had to call my brother up for $150.00. I was 30 years old and I didn't have a cent.

*BC: I find it hard to understand from this vantage point why those paintings would have been shocking.*

AK: In this country people would absolutely start to scream in galleries. I was kind of surprised because I was just trying to make pleasant pictures that would make people feel good. In France in 1975, they actually said things like, you should go back to art school. I think when you're aggressive stylistically, you're always going to get people who see things differently. And you're making those people feel insecure. It isn't your intention but that's what it does. Because you're saying, this is what a painting is, it's not what you think it is.

*BC: One of the amazing things about your work is that you get so much out of so little. There's so little there, so few marks, so few gestures, and yet it has such velocity and power.*

AK: Yeah. You just take out the unessential to get a great overall. That's style.

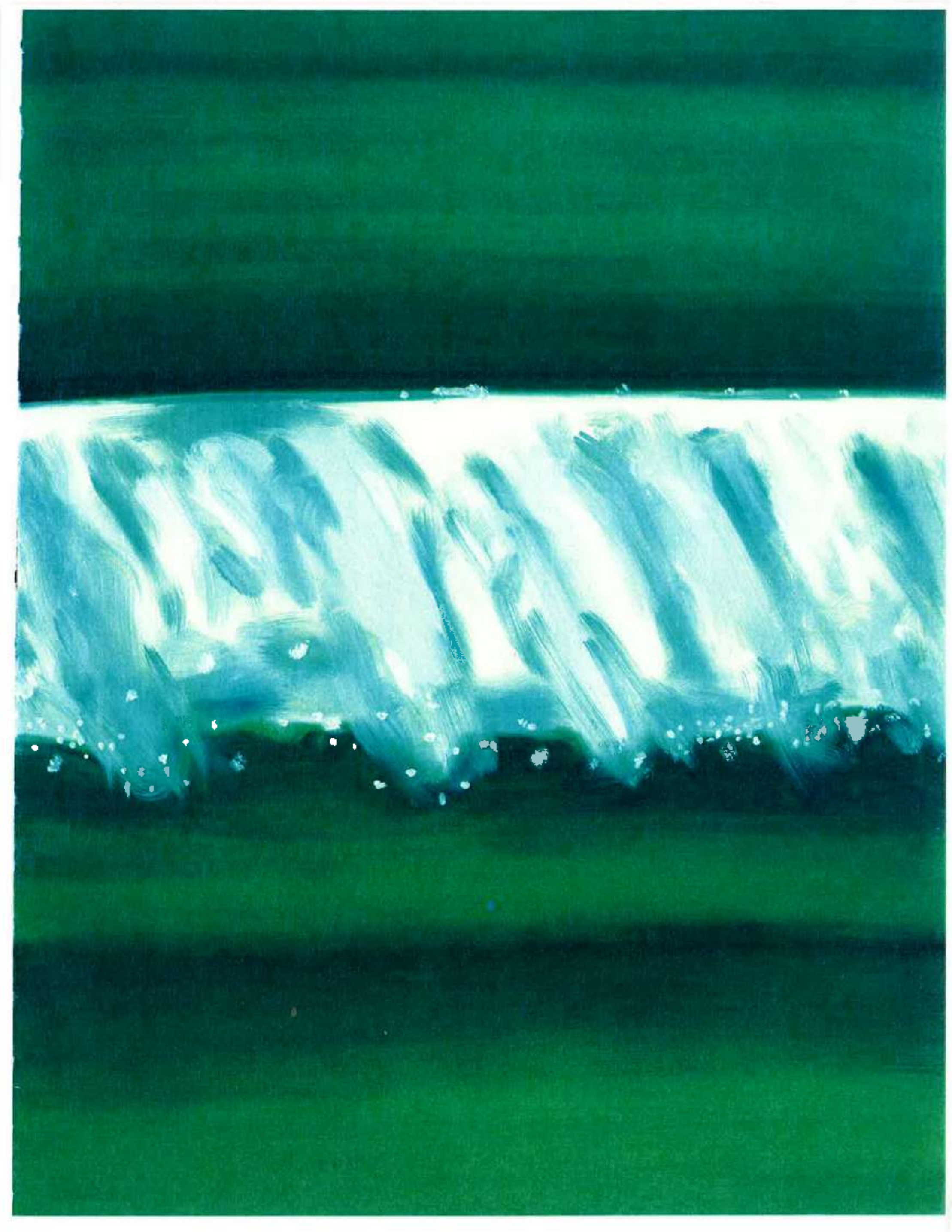
*BC: It keeps coming back to style.*

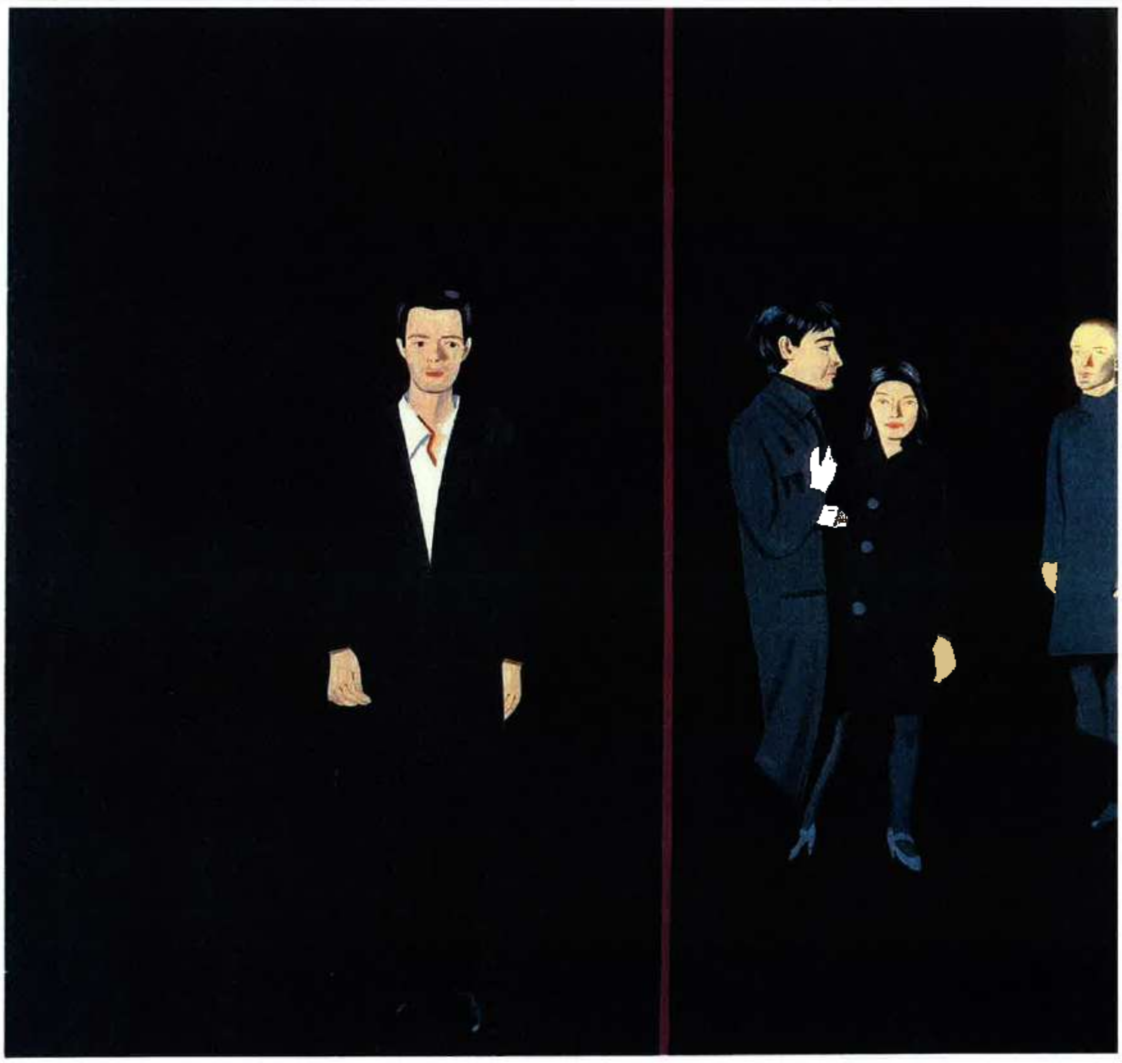
AK: Style is a cohesive way to make a picture. The style is reductive, you get power by the overall. And you get power out of evenness. So sometimes I say I prefer who I am.

*BC: Because it's consistent.*

AK: It's even, rather than hysteria, which is hot points and cold points.

*BC: There are critics who seem to want to say that you're superficial, but because you're such a good painter they won't go that far*





*On Time*, 2001, oil on canvas, 102 x 216. Photograph: Ellen Page Wilson. Collection of the artist. Courtesy PaceWildenstein.

AK: What I do is figurative painting without values and a content; it's the opposite of Rembrandt. That content is buried way in the back, which is where I want it to be. I think there's nothing more interesting than appearance.

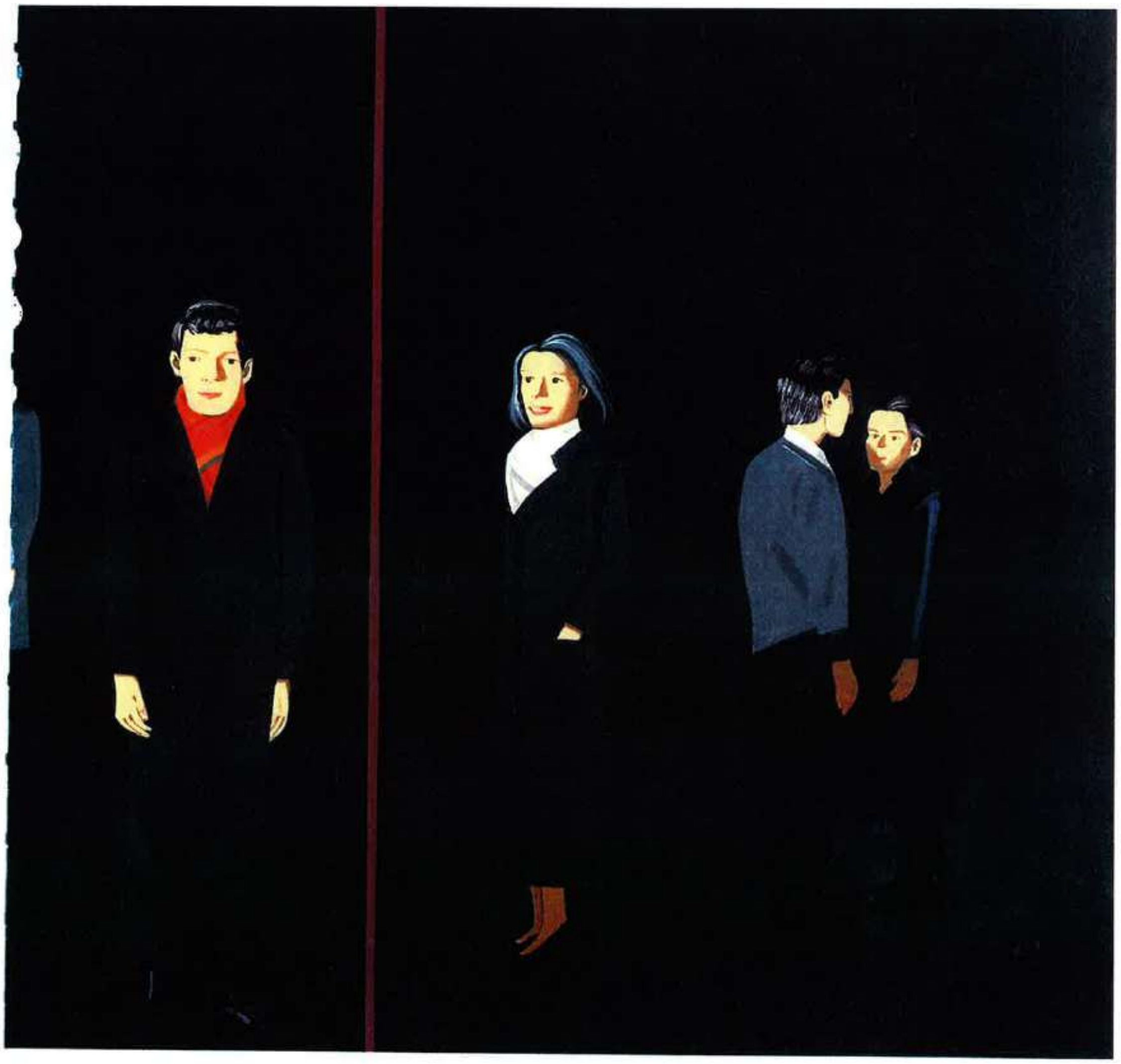
BC: *What was the motivation behind the free-standing pieces you began making in 1959?*

AK: I couldn't get paintings to work, so I just cut the people out of them. I threw the painting away and kept the people. It was figure and ground, figure and ground, but they were really separated anyway. It opened up a lot of ideas.

BC: *And you liked what you had when you cut them out?*

AK: They were all life-size in the painting and they were just lying there cut out of the painting. It was totally weird.

BC: *Your* Upside Down Ada *is a fascinating painting because*



*of its source in Courbet's* Woman with a Parrot *from 1866. But what you pick up on is not the normal ignition of the painting—the moment when the bird bites the woman's hand. That doesn't interest you.*

AK: No. Baudelaire really goes on about a Delacroix painting in which the gesture of the head going up is a sexual thing. I never thought about anything like that until I read it. When I saw the Courbet, I realized it was a very interesting gesture. I'm interested in gestures of people.

BC: *Do you think you've been influential and does that matter to you?*

AK: I've always been influential but it's a secondary pleasure.

BC: *And the primary pleasure is making the painting?*

AK: The painting's the thing. ■