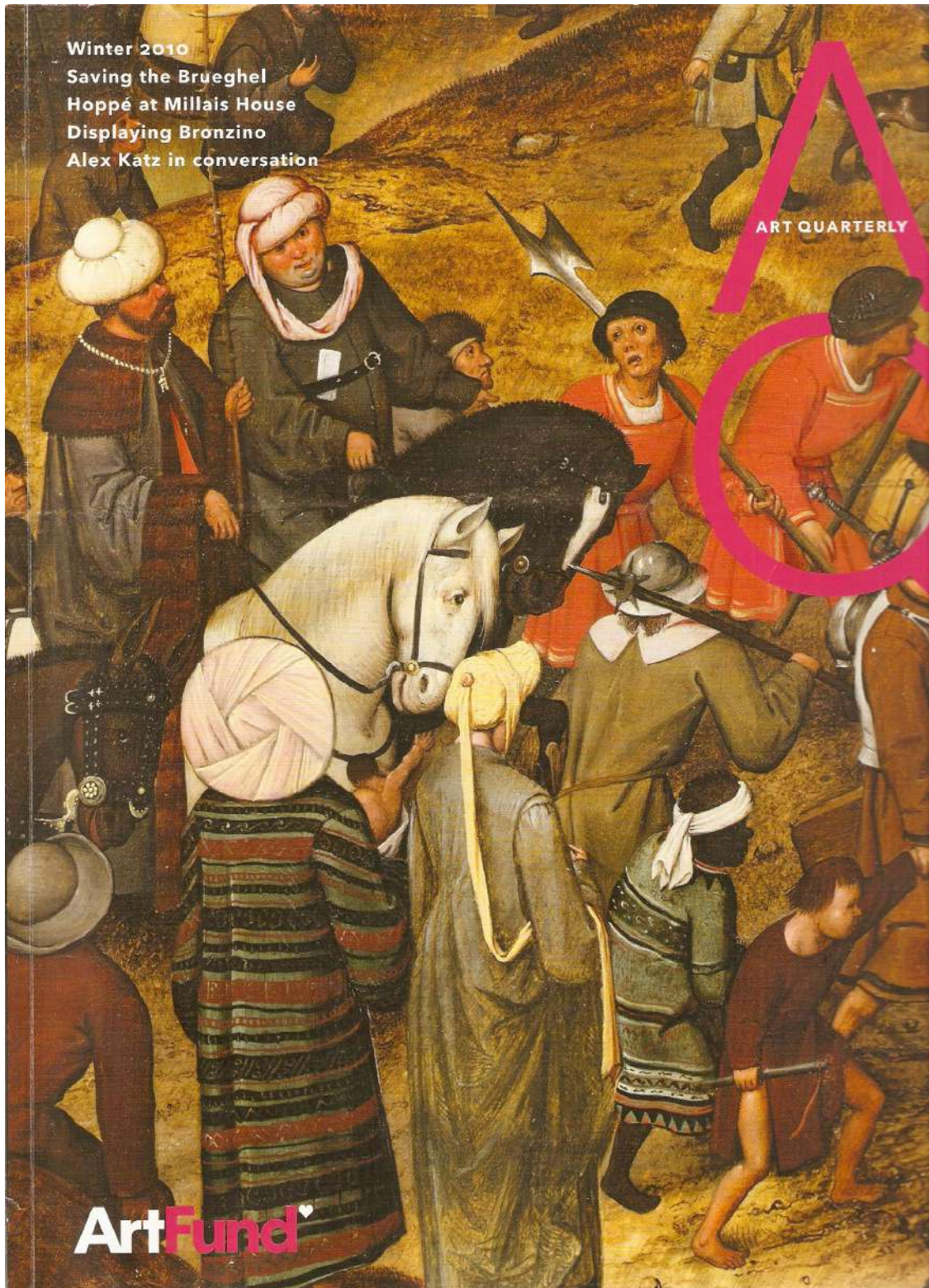
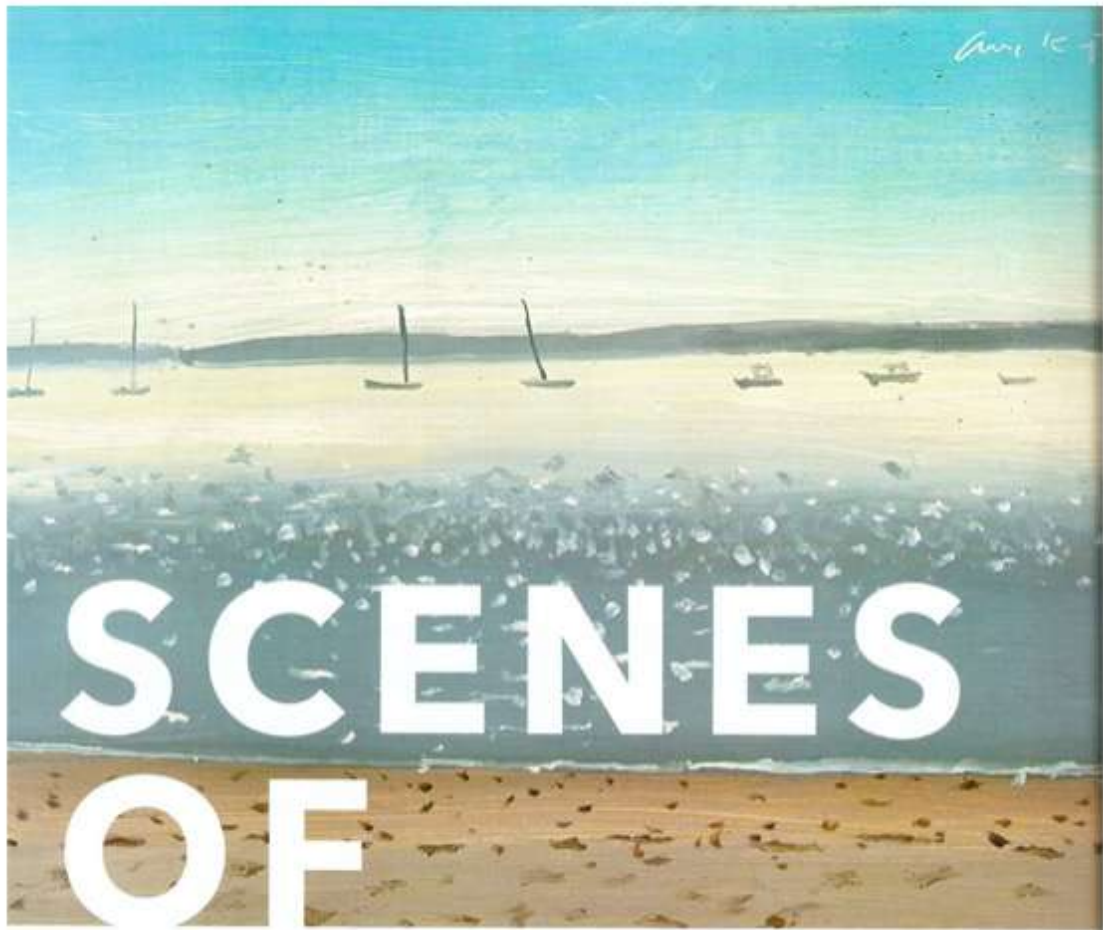


GLADSTONE GALLERY

Stephen Deuchar "Scenes of Modern Life," *Art Quarterly*, Winter, 2010

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SCENES OF

MODERN LIFE

All paintings by Alex Katz, and unless otherwise stated all from ARTSTROOMS, National Galleries of Scotland and Tate, acquired jointly through the d'Orsay Donation with assistance from the National Heritage Memorial Fund and the Art Fund, 2008. Above: *Pinobiscot*, 1959. Page 55, clockwise from top left: *Young Bees*, 1962; *Parsons*, 1947; *Vincent*, 1996; *Alex Katz in his New York studio*, 2009; *Ocean View*, 1947.

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Twenty small canvases by the American artist Alex Katz have just gone on show at Mostyn Gallery in Llandudno as part of the *ARTIST ROOMS* tour. Stephen Deuchar talks to the artist about influences, identity and new directions

SD You're very well known in the USA, but less well known here. Do you think people in this country are coming to your work in relation to the younger artists on whom you've had an impact?

AK I think the younger painters have been responsible for my career! Though people in the UK did become aware of me when I had that show at the Saatchi Gallery in 1998. The National Portrait Gallery and Timothy Taylor exhibitions this year reinstated what had happened then, as an enormous number of people saw them. It's just one of those things that has built up, and the *ARTIST ROOMS* display is certainly part of it. People who work in fields quite different from me seem to like my work. A lot of people have a relationship to it, but I don't know all of them. Peter Doig has definitely looked at my work, as you can see in his canoe pictures and his pictures showing reflections of houses on the lake. He really looked at my work and made something else out of it, but he's moved on. If you're an artist you want people to use your work.

SD You have an ongoing relationship with the artists of the past as well, don't you?

AK Early modern art was sort of like Communism or Fascism, written in stone. It had to do with working only with the immediate task, and it seemed a very restricted way of thinking about art to me. I feel anything is viable. You can use it whether it comes from billboards, from a Nefertiti sculpture, Utamaro, the movies... anything you want. And that goes for old paintings. I seem more in contact with older paintings than I am with early modern art. Take Veronese: the idea of making a large figurative painting that looked new was kind of a challenge to me. I didn't get to Europe until I was about 35, and in the Louvre I saw Veronese's *Wedding Feast at Cana*, which is enormous. There's so much stuff to see, but it's what's close to you that really counts, not what the date is.

SD Do you feel happy about taking a little bit here and there from an artist? That it doesn't



necessarily have to be a deep relationship, but can be a single trigger?

AK Absolutely. Anything you can use is OK as far as I'm concerned. For example, Warhol's flat backgrounds come straight from me, and the double figures, the duplicate thing, and the portraits. And more power to him. He made something else out of it. If you don't work with contemporary artists then you fall behind. You're not out there trying to make a contemporary painting.

SD You have a remarkably wide range of art-historical reference points, not just in Western art but in Japanese and Egyptian too. So how do you feel about sometimes being seen as a typically American artist - as one who even

helps define the identity of America itself, like Hopper did before you?

AK I kind of like the idea of national characteristics. It's like movies. For me, Fassbinder is the great artist of the 20th century. One of the characteristics of his movies is that they're German - they're something different. I've become that American thing just through painting my own backyard. I never thought of myself as that. It's sort of been thrust upon me.

SD And can I ask you about portraiture?

AK That's where the interest was in the late fifties! It was clear to me that making a modern figurative painting was more of a challenge.

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Right: *Homage to Monet 7*, 2009, artist's collection.
Below, top: *Winter Branch*, 1995; centre: 5 pm, November, 1997;
bottom: *Anna*, 2009, private collection.

I was making collages, and there came a point where if I enlarged those collages to six or eight feet I could have a very nice career. But it started in a cafeteria at about four in the morning. Some guy started talking about expression and eyes, and I thought it was the silliest thing I'd ever heard. I'd always been timid about making likenesses. The idea of making a modern portrait was much more challenging and more beneficial than coming out with a more generalised idea.

SD People here loved your portrait of Anna Wintour [see below]. Are there any sitters or subjects you'd really like to take on that you haven't yet been able to?

AK I've never thought about it. You have an idea and you try to put the people into the idea, like making a movie or something like that. When I was presented with the idea of painting Anna Wintour I was working on that National Portrait Gallery scheme. She just fitted right in. She was made to order.

SD Your career spans many decades. I'm very interested in the direction artists take in later life, when they often feel the freedom to experiment, as they aren't necessarily constrained by economic circumstance.

AK I've felt free to paint any 20-foot painting I want. When I wake up in the morning before I do it I might say, 'Does the world really want another 20-foot painting?' And the answer is no, but I want to see what it looks like. People say to me, 'Why do you paint such large pictures?' One of the reasons is because I can afford to.

SD Do you have unfulfilled fantasies in terms of painting?

AK Not really. One thing just leads to another. And you try to put yourself in a position where you get a little frightened. I got a bit frightened last summer. I started my *Homage to Monet* series, which was a little scary. The first set was really successful. I did it and I felt like a million bucks. And then in the winter I said, 'Now I want



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to do one where you don't rely on the flat colour opening up but you actually look into it see the stuff on the bottom.' So it contradicts the grammar and syntax of my painting. And I finally got enough nerve to do it. It came out OK, people seem to like it, but I still don't know what I'm going to do with it. It's up to 4 x 6 feet, and normally if we're interested in a scary thing we say, 'Hey, can you make it bigger? How big can you make it?' Last time I did flowers, the first painting was 40 x 50 inches and it took no time and had almost nothing on the canvas. I thought, 'Are you out of your mind? No-one will ever buy this, as there's nothing there. And don't make a larger one.' But by the end of the summer I'd made a 4 x 8 feet one, and that was when I said, 'You've got to go up to 6 x 12 feet', so I did. There are a lot of things that make you a little nervous.

SD But it sounds like you quite enjoy the nervousness.

AK Well it keeps you alive! »

Alex Katz

Painter and sculptor Alex Katz (born 1927) began working in New York in the 1950s, focusing on representational subjects at a time when Abstract Expressionism was in favour. This set him apart from the avant-garde mainstream, but brought him public recognition in the 1980s when many young artists began to work in related ways.

The scale of Katz's work increased dramatically in the 1960s and he is now well known for the stylised portraits of this period. Their high-octane drama creates parallels with the aesthetics of film and advertising, making them valid precursors to Pop Art. He has also explored numerous other subjects that can be seen in the *ARTIST ROOMS* collection, including landscapes, seascapes, interiors and flowers.

Throughout his career Katz has made small plein-air paintings that explore aspects

of ordinary life. He expresses line and form in these carvases with deft, residual brushstrokes, revealing the influence of Expressionism. These are used as studies for his distinctive larger works, which when scaled up are simplified and depersonalised. All the portraits in the *ARTIST ROOMS* collection depict the artist's friends or family, including his son Vincent. Since the start of his career Katz has spent summers in Maine, where most of the landscape paintings in the collection were made. His small paintings display a debt to Japanese art, with close-up or off-centre compositions and decorative subjects. Seen collectively they can be considered as a distinct and consistent body of work.

Exhibition see page 84.