

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Prudence Peiffer, "Alex Katz," *Artforum*, September, 2015

ARTFORUM



Alex Katz, *Black Brook 18*, 2014, oil on linen, 96 x 120".

Alex Katz

GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE

Alex Katz's glorious exhibition at Gavin Brown's Enterprise this past spring reminded us why we should just surrender to enjoying the compact range of this artist's long view. The paintings that were on display, all but one from 2013 or 2014, offer a bourgeois dream of a year in the country: a glowing cabin on the lake, a barn in winter, a house at the edge of a field in summer. (Giving these pastoral scenes an uncanny afterlife, the gallery brought live horses to the same space for its next show, restaging Jannis Kounellis's *Untitled [12 Horses]*, 1969—a tremendous last hurrah before GBE's move uptown to Harlem.) These are uninhabited sets in which, just out of the frame, you imagine a golden retriever frolicking with the broad-mouthed, perfectly pressed figures of Katz's best-known portraits. (Just up the road, one can see his *Red Smile*, 1963, presiding over the Pop galleries in the new Whitney Museum of American Art's own magisterial hang, and two monographic exhibitions are currently on view, at Colby College Museum of Art in Waterville, Maine, and the High Museum of Art in Atlanta.)

The show was hung for maximum impact. Two nighttime scenes of a cabin by a lake flanked a doorway; through this wide threshold one could see in the far gallery another house by water, but in brilliant daytime, with a sun as round and white as the moon burning through the trees. The single dark, smudgy cityscape only underscored nature's pull; billboard-size works appeared as tall as the majestic trees depicted in them, creating a kind of grove one walked through, occasionally emerging into a dazzling clearing. Katz played with this scale. *Fog*, 2014, a gorgeous monochrome painting in white-grays, appears to be a close-up of plant stalks. But after turning to your right, you saw these same shapes in black: tree trunks towering over a little cabin.

Color was applied in thick, brushy strokes; an uptick flick of the wrist becomes grass in one scene, and the swirled direction of sky in

another work suggests transparent clouds breezing over a perfect day. There was a 1960s palette evocative of the paintings of Jane Freilicher and Fairfield Porter (both of whom, like Katz, had strong ties to Maine): sun-bleached reds, goldenrod, puddles of viridian under pines. (The dappled shadows of trees on the lawn in multiple scenes provided an excuse for Katz to work with at least ten shades of green.) In *12:30 pm 2*, 2014, a bright-yellow band behind the trunks reminds us that Katz painted throughout Color Field's heyday, and his stylized flatness always threatens to collapse subject and background into a single, Matissean plane. Broad, cutout color lets the artist use repeated motifs that oscillate between the borders of different objects. Shadows turn into leaves and leaves turn into birds.

Overlaying set-like scenes onto patches of color is nothing new in Katz's oeuvre, nor is the internal compass of his compositions, as the famous 1960 *Luna Park*—a chalky-oil-on-Masonite moonlit scene, which hung in a side room of the show—reminds us. It, too, plays with the space it encloses: The horizon and the dark vertical slashes of trees create a kind of windowpane through which we see an Albert Pinkham Ryder scene. We imagine Katz, at the beveled edge between abstraction and landscape, taking his cues less from his contemporaries over more than a half century of painting than from the great experimental canvases of the Impressionists.

One of the boldest works on display was *Black Brook 18*, 2014. A watery bleed of brown creates a wavering, silty bank; chartreuse circles (water droplets? growing algae? lily pads?) are cut across by a few white needles. Without a perspectival anchor, the scene veers toward abstraction. We are not so far from the lost horizon of Claude Monet's late *Nymphéas* works (or Leo Steinberg's brilliant reading of them), but with a contemporary flair—a little Luc Tuymans, even, particularly if we imagine this to be an extreme close-up. Katz has been painting this exact same ordinary spot for twenty-seven years. No one ever steps in the same river twice.

—Prudence Peiffer