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Karen Wilkin, "Alex Katz at the Met," *The New Criterion*, February, 2016

The New Criterion

Art

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Alex Katz at the Met

by *Karen Wilkin*



Alex Katz, Rosamond and John (2007), Oil on linen, 48 x 120 in., Promised Gift of the artist.

Since the beginning of October of last year, a small, sharply focused installation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art has celebrated the work of Alex Katz. It will continue to do so through June 26. Seven paintings from the Met's collection, recent gifts, or promised gifts, document the artist's mature career from its start to the present—the most economical retrospective imaginable. (The museum owns several other paintings and some prints by Katz, not included in this installation, although on my last visit, one of them, a generous 1976 head of the artist's wife, Ada, was installed in a nearby gallery.) The earliest work in the current installation, *Ada*, the artist's first portrait of his muse and most constant model, was painted in 1957, the year when the couple met, when Katz, born in 1927, turned thirty, and when he had his second solo show in New York. Modest in size, loosely painted, and firmly constructed, *Ada* at once bears witness to the climate in which it was painted—when gestural abstraction still exerted a powerful influence on aspiring artists—while its forthright image challenges that inheritance. The most recent painting in the group, *Nicole*, a large, horizontal canvas of a watchful blonde in a red coat, dates from 2014. The decades between *Ada* and *Nicole* are accounted for by *John's Loft* (1969), a composite of cut-out figures and figure fragments, at various scales, spread across the wall; *Philip Pearlstein* (1978), a two-sided cut-out on aluminum; an over-scaled, aggressively cropped head of Ada in a nifty red hat and coat (1982); a brooding view of an apartment building at night (1995); and a strangely affectless double portrait of John Russell and Rosamond Bernier (2007), their larger-than-life heads too big to be contained by the canvas.

The selection, in many ways, is exemplary. It accounts for Katz's nearly constant dedication to painting the figure and to finding ways of doing so that defy convention. We see him adopting extreme points of view, playing with scale, fragmenting his images, or even wrenching them free of the boundaries of the support—sometimes all at once. The selection allows us to follow Katz as he examines faces in ferocious close-up or conjures up full-length figures, at a distance, in indeterminate space. The double-sided cut-out of a half-length, gesticulating Philip Pearlstein shows Katz thumbing his nose at the time-honored assumption that a painting is a flat, contained, wall-hung surface designed to be seen from a single viewpoint. At the same time, the identity of the subject reminds us that Katz was not alone in rejecting the conventions of Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s, in order to make paintings of things that were recognizable; his friends and colleagues Pearlstein, Lois Dodd, Jane Freilicher, and the much older Fairfield Porter, among others, were

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similarly investigating territory recently thought to be not only exhausted but also off-limits to anyone making serious art. The large, confrontational night view of a nondescript apartment building, glowing windows partially screened by the branches of a bare tree, is evidence that Katz, from the start, has been almost as interested in landscapes and the built environment as in the figure. And the portrait of the late international art world luminaries, Russell and Bernier, attests to the octogenarian Katz's own status as an American modern master.



Alex Katz, Philip Pearlstein (1978), Oil on aluminum cutout painted front and back, 48 × 32 1/2 × 8 in., Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace Gift, 1979, 1979.213.1, © Alex Katz.

Almost all of the works in the Met's installation are, as we have learned to expect from Katz, notable for their flat, almost anonymous paint handling, for a breadth of application that has invited comparison with Edouard Manet's early works, and for drawing and details that seem to owe more to the short-hand references of a certain kind of commercial art than to the "high art" traditions of representational painting. But there are surprises, too, such as the way the lighted windows in the apartment building are suggested by rough, repeated swipes of a loaded brush dragged over the flat deep purple expanse of the picture. As we have learned to expect from Katz, as well, everything is presented with an air of detachment so unshakable that it seems to define hipster cool—an attitude that links his work to that of his nearly exact contemporary, Andy Warhol, absent the "camp" irony. Because of their deliberate disengaged quality, these paintings, with their giant images and often ample size and horizontal proportions, trigger associations with billboards and movie screens. These popular-culture mass-media allusions enter into a tug-of-war with the fact that Katz invariably composes his paintings with a near-Platonic sense of the ideal geometry underlying everything in the perceivable world. Katz's works are often described in terms of a coexistence of figuration and abstraction, but their presumed incipient abstractness is often simply the result of the sheer size, economy, and lack of overt emotion of his images. Because, for example, the heads Katz paints are so large, because they are described with so little incident, and because the people they refer to seem so uncommunicative, we are forced to read them in terms of relationships of shape, color, and expanse, rather than simply recognizing them as likenesses. (That may be one reason that Katz's occasional smiling heads, which seem overtly photo-based, usually seem unconvincing and forced; they declare themselves as being too much about likeness and not about *painting*.) It might be more accurate to forget about abstract underpinnings—all paintings are, obviously, abstract at some level—and say that in Katz's dispassionate,

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unyielding images, the vernacular and the classical compete for attention. Just when we are convinced that his work simply aestheticizes the values of outdoor advertising, before the age of mammoth digital displays, we are engaged by his elegant sense of placement and structure.

There are enormous differences among the works installed at the Met. The pared-down 2014 *Nicole*, a bare-bones combination of black, red, and pale flesh color, is striking for its asymmetrical composition, with its wary half-length figure off-set against a stark, impenetrable black ground. For all the picture's apparent guilelessness, there's something slightly eerie about *Nicole*. The double portrait of Russell and Bernier seems weirdly impersonal. Both look preternaturally smooth and youthful for a painting made when the sitters were both close to ninety and both look strangely unfocused and disconnected. They face each other and seem to occupy the same plane, but Russell, his eyes partly obscured by the boldly indicated reflections in his glasses, seems to gaze past Bernier; she looks introspective and vague. Still, the schematic drawing of their features is straightforward enough, free of the kind of irritating "how-to" mannerisms in *Red Coat*, the 1982 cropped head of Ada, with its carefully itemized eyelashes and dotted highlights on the lower lip, or the repeated swipes standing for wisps of hair in *Nicole* that threaten to detach from the otherwise tightly controlled image by calling attention to their own cleverness.

The most compelling work at the Met, for some of us, is the 1957 *Ada*, a fresh, energetic, smallish painting on masonite as intimate and personal, its lack of sentimentality and its plain-spoken quality notwithstanding, as everything else in the installation is cool and detached. In *Ada*, the declarative, flatly painted, essential shapes of hair, clothing, and chair, set within and against a freely brushed, pale ground, are tempered and animated by fragments of supple red drawing, now explicitly describing the chair, now barely visible as "escaping" under-drawing.

Ada was not included in last summer's "Brand-New & Terrific: Alex Katz in the 1950s" at the Colby College Museum of Art in Waterville, a comprehensive gathering of the artist's early paintings, works on paper, collages, and cut-out paintings, but it would have been a stand-out in that context, too. The exhibition surveyed the portraits, interiors, still lifes, and landscapes that the precocious Katz made when he was still in his twenties or, at most, barely into his thirties. The title comes from a statement Katz made in 1961 about his aspirations for his painting, expanding on the idea by saying that while he found it difficult "to pinpoint qualities that make something new and lively, and something dull . . . [s]omething brand-new is a magical state, not an intellectually contrived situation."

"Brand-New & Terrific" introduced us to a stubborn, abundantly talented young man determined to affirm the continuing aesthetic relevance of recognizable images at a time when Abstract Expressionist values still dominated and the "necessity" of abstraction was insisted upon in progressive art world circles. It took him a while both to find his own voice and to commit unequivocally to representation. During the 1950s, Katz painted his surroundings, table-top arrangements, and the places he visited—especially Maine, after he started spending summers there in 1954—and then began to concentrate on portraits about 1957. In the earliest works on view at Colby, we could participate in the young, ambitious painter's irresistible desire to abandon abstraction and his struggle to do so, first in stylized responses to the frontality and the stop-time allure of vintage photographs that teetered on the brink of abstractness. Stylized landscapes and interiors followed, along with simplified figure paintings, informed almost equally, it appeared, by Henri Matisse and early American self-taught artists. By the mid-50s, Katz no longer seemed to have any ambivalence about making overt reference to what he saw. His landscapes of the period, while often calligraphic and sensuous, pointed to the expressive simplifications that would characterize his best-known later work. Their sometimes exaggerated gestures appeared to have less to do with memories of Abstract Expressionist conventions than with his feelings about the natural world, while Katz's figures, interiors, and still lifes grew increasingly economical about this time.

Part of the pleasure of the Colby show was recognizing Katz's cast of characters—a cross section of a fascinating time in the recent history of American art. There were, not surprisingly, multiple iterations of the dark-haired Ada, with her clearly defined features, as well as several paintings of the photographer Rudy Burckhardt and his then-wife, the painter Edith Schloss, along with their close friend the dance critic Edwin Denby. An affectionate double portrait of the distinguished art critic Irving Sandler and his blonde art historian wife, Lucy Freeman, embracing against an expanse of white ground, was one of the high

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points of the exhibit. The curator and poet Frank O'Hara was present as a near-life-size double-sided cut-out. Such significant figures as the poet James Schuyler, the dancer/choreographer Merce Cunningham, and the painter Norman Bluhm appeared in (mainly) confrontational full-length seated or standing portraits. A double portrait of Robert Rauschenberg, seated and facing himself, with the pose subtly varied rather than a mirror image, stood for yet another iteration of Katz's interest in combining the apparently observed with the impossible—the same impulse that generated the painted cut-outs, none of which presented what you might expect when you investigated the “other” side. Some figures were seen in bright, beachside light; some inhabited elegantly geometricized, simplified interiors; all seemed isolated against neutral expanses, which further emphasized the tension between fidelity to perception and the artifice of painting, even of presumably representational painting.

The most striking difference between the paintings at Colby and the deadpan, flatly painted images that sustain Katz's reputation today, such as the majority of those currently on view at the Met, is their lively touch. As a young painter, Katz was willing to let his hand show. His work of the 1950s is distinguished by a loose, relaxed, assured paint application that seems perfectly congruent with his casual evocations of specific appearance. This subtle, but juicy, materiality was emphasized when Katz painted on Masonite, as he often did in smaller works well into the late 1950s, but the looseness and the assurance come through even in the larger paintings on linen or canvas. Since the 1950s, as the Met's installation attests, Katz has spent decades painting himself out of his work. Exhibitions of his small, intimate studies have revealed that they remain as energetic and engagingly irregular as any of his early works, but when these direct little paintings are translated into larger works, Katz transforms them into uninflected, usually larger-than-life, highly recognizable but deliberately impersonal images. By contrast, his work of the 1950s, such as the 1957 *Ada*, at the Met, vibrates with personality and youthful enthusiasm. The works in “Brand-New & Terrific” are no longer brand-new, since they are now more than half a century old, but they are still terrific—as Katz said he wanted his work to be, all those years ago. Like the 1957 *Ada* at the Met, they make us look at his subsequent work in new ways.

¹ “Alex Katz at the Met” opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, on October 9, 2015 and remains on view through June 26, 2016.

² “Brand-New & Terrific: Alex Katz in the 1950s” was on view at the Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine, from July 11 to October 18, 2015.