Emily Steer, "Now Showing: Alex Katz: Quick Light," *Elephant,* June 2, 2016

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Now Showing: Alex Katz: Quick Light

Text by Emily Steer

Quick light is a phrase that we may more readily associate with photography than painting, a medium which comes into being most often when shown the briefest flash of light. But in the paintings of 88-year-old American artist Alex Katz, light is fleeting. His works can be seen as instantaneous moments, paintings, as he describes, in 'total present tense'. Today, Katz opens *Quick Light* at London's Serpentine Gallery.

The figurative artist's instantly-recognisable paintings are always going to be appealing. Flat, vibrant, somehow upbeat and a little sad all at once; his works adeptly mix simplicity and knowing, his subjects' expressions appearing both vacant and worldly. *Quick Light* includes 13 paintings from the last three years, and some older pieces that span back to the mid-nineties. The newer works shown at Serpentine's South Gallery depict women who have an air of familiarity about them, their grey-toned clothes and hair, peachy skin and simple poses bouncing from rich, slightly luminous backgrounds.

It is this luminosity that Katz explores again and again through *Quick Light*. In some of the older works light is seen in human-less scenes, reflected cooly through trees onto mildly tempered water or else dappled onto flowers in clean chunks. At some moments light warmly splashes across a whole work, lighting up an entire corn field, at other moments it sits as a solitary streak across an otherwise darkened sky.

A comment made by Katz prefaces the show: 'It's the instantaneous light. If you get it right then you get it in the total present tense–that's what you're going for, that's eternity.'

'Alex Katz: Quick Light' shows at Serpentine Gallery, London between 2 June and 11 September 2016. All images: Alex Katz: Quick Light; Installation view; Serpentine Gallery, London (2 June – 11 September 2016); Image © Tristan Fewings / Getty