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Misty White Sidell, "Alex Katz Sticks to His Artistic Convictions," *WWD*, February 6, 2018

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Alex Katz Sticks to His Artistic Convictions

Alex Katz, 90, continues painting at a rapid clip, his studio practice coexisting with a changed art world that is increasingly tailor-made for the Internet.

By Misty White Sidell on February 6, 2018

It's a brisk winter morning in SoHo, when elevator doors to the studio of legendary contemporary painter Alex Katz pry open. Ada Katz, the figure most often depicted in his large-scale abstract portraits, is there waiting.

From down the hall a figure emerges, extending a tepid greeting. It is the artist himself, his presence looming tall and slender — much like the vertical coat rack on which he props *WWD*'s jacket. At 90 years old, Katz's features are pallid, the only hairs gracing his head congregate in small patches on each earlobe. With a graveled voice, he talks in frank, oft-cantankerous jabs.

To speak with Katz is to encounter a paradoxical time capsule. His art was conceived well before the rise of the Internet and digital reliance — a time when paintings were made to be viewed in person, not on a screen, and when artists gained repute by word of mouth rather than their social media following. But while his artistic style and intent have remained essentially unchanged for 60 years, Katz's work is praised for its enduring modernity.

Sometimes regarded as cold or enigmatic, Katz noted that his work — so recognizable that art historians say it doesn't fit in with any one movement or derivative — toys with elements of novelty and restraint.

The context in which he depicts people and places never seems to age. Other than recognizing them as works of the postwar era, it is difficult to peg any year to their creation without explanatory wall text, therefore challenging the concept of modernity itself. This is Katz's very motive.

As he walks through his studio, he casually motions to a new series of work featuring models in cotton underwear by Calvin Klein. "I wanted to paint realistically and since realism is a variable, it changes every 20 or 30 years, I wanted to paint something that looked new. So I've pretty much been searching for something impossible — something that never felt old," the Brooklyn native says.



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Alex Katz and his wife Ada, a frequent muse in his work, at home together. Amy Lombard/WWD

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Despite this obsession with an eternal *au courant*, when asked what he thinks of Internet art — one of today's most buzzed-about categories of creative expression — Katz pointedly retorts: "I don't." It is the first reveal in what becomes a series of things Katz opts out of in the interest of maintaining mental clarity — an important agent in his minimalist paintings.

"I don't use the Internet," he says. While he owns a computer, "I don't use it. Other people use it for me. It's a time thing. I do a lot of painting, and in-between you need time to sit and do nothing. It's very important to do nothing [as an artist]."

In his ninth decade, Katz has "closed down" many of his hobbies and friendships — reserving the bulk of his physical energy to continue painting every day, remaining prolific as a result. On this morning, assistants were busy archiving 20 or so new medium-scale works that Katz says were born entirely of his own hand.

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Studio assistants archive new works by Alex Katz. Amy Lombard/WWD

They enter an art market that, in the duration of Katz's career, has ballooned from localized pockets of bohemia to a global network of moneyed rock stars. His paintings are also — in contemporary sales, galleries and museums — regularly shown alongside young artists who knew their work would be consumed digitally first, an in-person experience being secondary.

In many ways, as with everything from fashion to food, the Internet has leached a colorful, catchy and provocative mood onto the art world. This has inevitably changed not only art's aesthetic nature, but also the manner in which it's conceived.

According to Katz's gallerist Gavin Brown, this awards him an elusive freedom: "I feel sorry for many artists working today that the physical experience of standing in front of an artwork seems to be devalued at the moment. Ultimately that's the experience Alex provides. He is extremely liberated in comparison to much younger artists I know who I think are paralyzed."

His work — while pulling notions from Pop Art — is highly regarded by fellow painters for its exceptional hand technique. An exhibit on view at the Boca Raton Museum of Art focuses on the small, painterly works that serve as drafts in Katz's large-scale process.

Says Kelly Baum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's postwar and contemporary curator: "You have to see the paintings in person. In reproduction they are a little bit like posters. The way he handles the brush is very skillful — he applies paint with incredible facility. The surfaces are so much more complicated than you might imagine."

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Katz's new series featuring models in cotton underwear by Calvin Klein. Amy Lombard/WWD

While stalwart in his original medium and style, Katz is aware that painting has become only a piece of art's output, amid the rise of vogueish formats like video and performance. "It's the oldest thing that gives art stability," he says of painting's place today. "I think the symphony and the opera don't seem to get into the flow of contemporary thought and painting does somehow. As they decline, painting becomes much more popular, especially as a social event — openings and museums are much more popular. I think a lot of this has to do with education in universities. People love to study art — it's easier to study than music in the U.S."

Katz's career, best known for his large-scale paintings and cutouts offering varying vantage points of the human form and persona — came of age in the Fifties. His work — much of which depicts his wife and muse Ada — has been awarded more than 200 solo shows, including at The Met, Centre Pompidou, the Serpentine Gallery, the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao and the Tate Modern.

Throughout his career he has kept creative company — circling in social groups that included photographer Rudolph "Rudy" Burckhardt; poets Edwin Denby and Frank O'Hara; choreographer Paul Taylor, and the painters Jane Freilicher and Larry Rivers — all of whom had profound influences on his work.

"It was a strange thing, when you had just all these brilliant people in one place. Somehow I entered into it. I just felt lucky to meet so many bright people, they all seemed to like my work, too," Katz says of his contemporaries, often regarded as the New York School creative movement.

Baum explained: "Alex is part of a generation of artists that came of age in the Sixties that radically changed the discussion and expanded the parameters of what counted as art."

That said, Katz's work continually stands on its own, unattached to any particular movement. "I think one of the things that distinguishes Alex is that he doesn't fit into any of the neat art historical categories. He has bucked trends his entire life. When abstraction was hot, he started to paint the figure, but he did so in a way that embraced the abstract potential of portraiture," says Baum.

Katz is reluctant to talk up his talents beyond a certain intellectual capacity, noting: "The path is mostly intuitive. Basically, I feel like if it doesn't look good, you'd better do something."

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His generation, he feels, painted out of conviction rather than careerism. "It was more bohemian [back then]. You didn't think in terms of career. The best you could hope for was a part-time teaching job," Katz remarks. "They just keep printing more money, I live on the scraps."

At face value, many facets of Katz's own life mimic the reductive minimalism with which he paints. His studio is remarkably spotless for that of a painter, his kitchen sparse, his office desk uncluttered. Katz says he exercises each day doing "stretching, push-ups, sit-ups and chinning." He eats the same thing most days, taking cereal for breakfast and a can of sardines for lunch.

Three months of the year are spent in Maine, where he paints and swims — an annual "migration," as his gallerist Brown calls it.

"He is absolutely dedicated to trying to find essence in this act [of painting] by having one of the most streamlined lives. He and Ada live an incredibly restrained life, everything is focused on this lifetime pursuit of an exceptional coordination between high brain and hand. It's a natural act for him," Brown notes of their lifestyle.

Remarkably attune, Alex and Ada (also 90) dispatch salty attitudes with kismet timing. Ada's plans to read Tolstoy were ultimately disturbed by this interview. She barked contempt in an episode Katz found downright endearing. "She's socially perfect," he chuckles.

Katz could not recall the frequency with which his wife of 60 years appears in his paintings, only noting that "she's like a European beauty or an American beauty so she is very variable and fits a lot of ideas, that's how it's worked out. We had a show once 30 years ago and the guy at the time said there were 250 [paintings of her]." The couple has one son, Vincent, a poet, curator and translator.

While much of Katz's work meditates on women and the female form, his treatment of them is different than the anatomical depictions produced by many other male artists. "He is very sensitive in how he portrays human beings, especially women. They are perfect and idealized in many ways, but he also holds back a lot. It makes for a wonderful tension, which gives them such a psychological presence. There is an attention to beauty but the women don't feel objectified to me. They have authority and independence from us and from him," Baum says.

Katz at the moment appears dedicated to preserving a productive longevity. "When I was younger, I was all over the place. I played basketball for Cooper Union, I played squash until I was 85.... I liked to go dancing at the Palladium for Cuban music in the Fifties. I used to go out and see a lot of jazz, but now the hours are too late. I have records but it's not the same thing."



Ephemera from Katz's studio practice. Amy Lombard/WWD

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Photos of the models used in Katz's new Calvin Klein series. Amy Lombard/WWD

Despite his renown, multimillion-dollar sledgehammers his paintings are most often not. Courtney Kremers, head of Sotheby's contemporary art day sales, calls his work "undervalued for an artist who has been painting since the 1950s."

Sotheby's does not often see his work estimated at more than \$300,000 to \$400,000 for medium-scale pieces. Rare, penultimate paintings incorporating portraiture and landscape in large-scale format do not typically run higher than \$1 million.

Honestly remarking of his art's financial return, Katz noted: "Any serious painter would tell you I'm a good painter — that's a crowd. Collectors vary, though. They aren't always hot about my work because it's not decorative enough. They are OK, but not great, so I've had trouble with that. It took me about 15 years out of art school to sell to an outsider who wasn't an intellectual."

True to his radical, removed form, Katz chose Gavin Brown's Enterprise to head his U.S. representation, a gallery regarded for its risk-taking and unconventional locations as well as its support of young talent, subculture and local community. "He's not simplistic about commercial art," Katz says of Brown. "Gavin and Larry [Gagosian] came at the same time. I think Larry is a genius, but he is not my genius. I don't need the money and I like to be able to talk to the dealer occasionally. I don't know how much conversation you're going to have with Larry.

"We have shows and sometimes we don't know if people are interested in buying anything and that doesn't bother me and it doesn't bother him. There are other things they can buy of mine."

While Brown demurs, noting: "I would honestly prefer to sell everything," he did add that "he is kind of in a dance with each painting — it has to emerge without struggle. [Alex] certainly doesn't wear struggle on his sleeve and oftentimes people confuse struggle with value."

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A cutout and painting by Katz in his studio-residence. Amy Lombard/WWD

Throughout his career, Katz has displayed an uncanny interest in fashion, utilizing clothing's color, silhouette and panache as a thematic tool.

"Fashion helps make my art exist in the present tense. If fashion achieves style, it always looks good and the same thing is true with painting," he says, wearing revival New Balance sneakers with bright teal socks knit with illustrated hotdogs.

Katz notes that style and dress have always been part of his life: "My parents were interested in fashion. They'd watch the movies and talk about how so-and-so wore the clothes. In the Seventies, fashion was considered too ephemeral for a serious artist to do, which made it more interesting. I did a lot of work with fashion and a lot of serious people didn't like it and I didn't care."

Style continues to serve as a consistent thread in his work, as is evident in his new Calvin Klein series of paintings, where models pose in the brand's classic cotton underwear.

"I was in a taxi cab and there was a Calvin Klein video and I thought, 'Gee, they are terrific, I want to paint it.' So I did all these Calvin Kleins. Calvin Klein is sort of more a social worker than a designer, he makes people feel good."

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Katz often uses fashion as a tool for expression in his paintings, the sentiment also extending to his personal wardrobe. Amy Lombard/WWD



A work from Katz's new Calvin Klein series sits in the kitchen. Amy Lombard/WWD

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Katz is preparing a permanent installation for the 57 Street/Seventh Avenue subway station, as well as continuing work on his foundation, which sees him purchasing the works of young artists and donating them to museums. He considers buying art a stronger show of support than offering grants or scholarships. Recent works he has purchased on the foundation's behalf include a painting by Katherine Bernhardt and a sculptural dress by Women's History Museum, an art project masquerading as a fashion brand.

Brown says that, despite his age, Katz's appetite and conviction to paint remains unfettered: "I think he wakes up each morning and his eyes open and he says, 'I'm going to do this again, I get the chance to do it again.' I think he is all absorbed in his work and it seems to be an ever-intensifying process.

"It feels like a very sacred moment. You can compare him to something of an athlete. The greatest basketball player, the greatest sprinter, their peak or career might last up to 15 years, whereas Alex Katz became himself as an artist at 15 and has had 75 years to practice his craft and to be this athlete."

Katz was reluctant to comment on his end game, shrugging success off as an everyman nuisance. "Legacy is a word I don't like. In 100 years they will say 'You're a great painter.' I really don't care. "I think I've pretty much done what I've wanted to do."