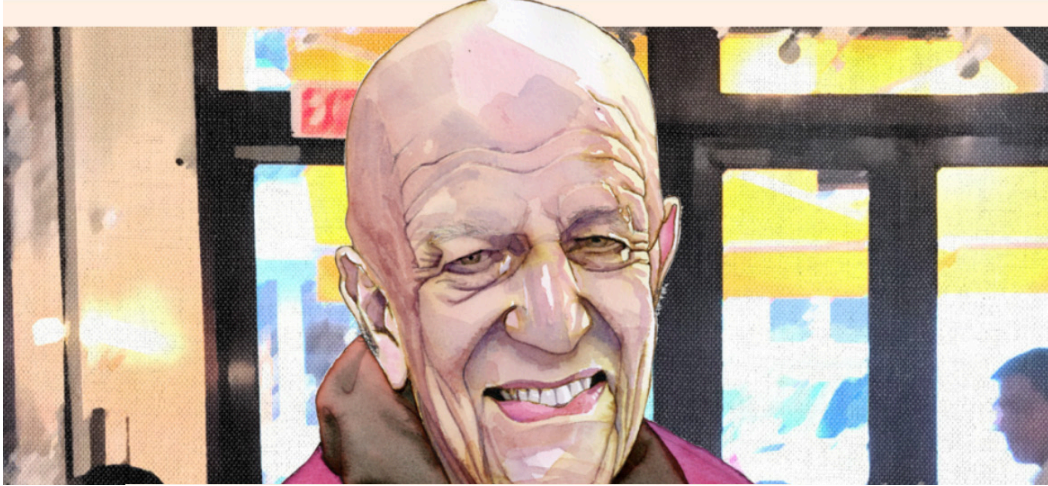


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Lilah Raptopoulos, "Artist Alex Katz: 'I'm 91, for Chrissakes, and I'm cranking out paintings,'" *Financial Times*, November 30, 2018



## Artist Alex Katz: 'I'm 91, for Chrissakes, and I'm cranking out paintings'

By: Lilah Raptopoulos

On a Soho street in Manhattan, a door opens and I am face to face with one of America's greatest living painters. He's wearing an old, pilly blue sweatshirt. He has a splotch of white paint on his right ear lobe.

"Were you waiting?" he asks. "Come on in."

I thank him for the invite to his studio. "Sure," he says. "I'm told this is a big deal."

Alex Katz is 91 years old. He is not a regular FT reader. He doesn't watch TV much, either. As he tells me later, over lunch at Cipriani, "I don't even do the...the...email?" He needs all that energy to paint.

This is what Alex Katz does: he wakes up at 7.30am every morning, works out ("half an hour of callisthenics"), eats, walks over to his studio, and gets to work. When it gets dark, he sleeps. He learnt this work ethic from a childhood in Queens, and from Cooper Union, the competitive New York art school he attended in the late 1940s. When Katz enrolled, he told a classmate: "If I can't paint better than my teacher in two years, I'll eat the paintbox!" After three years, a third of the class was copying him and the teacher was using his colours.

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“I put the energy in. I went flat out. I was drawing around the clock.”

When Katz saw how far he could get in three years, he decided to give it 20. Now we’re rounding 70 years, and Alex Katz is still running towards a finish line it seems he will never reach.

“I’m fairly detached socially now. This is a real endgame,” he tells me, laughing. “I’m 91, for Chrissakes, and I’m cranking them out.”

This energy bodes well for our Lunch, where Katz will hold court for three courses and two Bellinis. But for me to understand anything about him, first he has to show me his art.

Katz’s fifth-floor loft is the stuff of New York City legend. It’s white, immaculate, partitionless, and large enough to land an aeroplane in. Ada, his wife (and subject of his most famous paintings), lounges on a couch. She is reading the New York Times and ignoring me — and can you blame her? It must be the only way to feign normalcy in a home where strangers abound. Playful 1930s jazz from the Count Basie Orchestra spins in Katz’s record player.

Katz leads me into the back, where he paints. “I did this this morning,” he tells me, gesturing to a canvas: it’s a portrait of a young white woman. Her eyes are closed and her long brown hair is flipped over her right shoulder. In distinct Katz style, the painting is all foreground: the woman’s head takes up the entire canvas, but her expression gives very little away. Her skin looks smooth and dewy, but it’s intricately contoured. The brushstrokes are big and sweeping, decisive. The background is magenta. It’s beautiful.

“I think it’s just about finished,” he says. “It looks pretty good, doesn’t it?”

He shows me dancers doing ballet poses on green backgrounds, a series that follows his recent “Calvin Klein Girls” and “Coca-Cola Girls”. The latter is a collection of blonde women in white dresses, dancing freely across cherry-red canvases and currently on view at Timothy Taylor gallery in London. Katz didn’t go to the opening. “I’d rather stay home and paint,” he says.

The thing about Alex Katz is that he never fitted in. His parents immigrated from Russia to a New York neighbourhood with just one other Jewish family; he says he was known as “that crazy Katz kid”. When he found his style, about a decade after art school, it was also out of joint: “I didn’t fit in with the old Realists, I didn’t fit in with the Abstract Expressionists, I didn’t fit in with Pop Art,” he says. “There were a lot of parts of me that were not connecting at all.”

While Pollock and Rothko were experimenting with energy and colour, Katz was painting people. In the 1960s, he began documenting the New York art scene, painting poet friends like Frank O’Hara and Edwin Denby as they mingled at loft parties across lower Manhattan. And while Andy Warhol and Jasper Johns introduced politics into their art, Katz painted the lake and trees around his summer home in Maine.

So now, looking back, is he glad he never fitted in?

“Yeah,” he says. “I think it worked out great!”

As we walk around Katz’s studio, I ask if he feels he’s taking more risks now.

“I’m still taking risks, is what it is,” he says. “Most painters don’t continue to take risks. They flatten out and just paint masterpieces.”

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When I ask what makes him nervous, he points me to vibrant green strokes on a vast canvas painted yellow. Katz is starting to paint abstract again, for the first time since the early 1960s. “I wanted to paint grass. This is my third shot at it. Everyone liked it, but it still isn’t what I wanted.” To me, it looks like rolling hills.

“When you’re extending yourself, you can’t possibly know what you’re doing,” he says. “When it’s a portrait like I’ve done before, I know where I am. That one there,” he points to a portrait of a man and a woman, “is a masterpiece. The hair is a lesson in painting. But on some of these, I have no idea.”

Katz and I walk into Cipriani Downtown. Cipriani is a New York institution. Zagat describes it as a place where “pretty people [and] billionaires . . . go for well-prepared Italian dishes at absurdly expensive tabs”. Katz is also a New York institution in his own right, so I assumed before meeting him that he would kiss the maître d’ and order “the usual”. But that’s not the vibe.

“You know, Ada and I never ate here,” he tells me. “It’s sort of like an out-of-town place. Recently we got really desperate and tried it, and we found it actually wasn’t really that bad!” The host seats us in a quiet corner in the back. “I usually eat sardines for lunch,” he says as we browse the menu. I laugh and prod him: now that he’s here, should we have a glass of wine? He has a better suggestion.

“You want a Bellini? That’s what they make here.”

Katz asks for a lentil soup and the burrata, but they’re out of both. He sighs. “OK, I’ll get the special.” I order the spaghetti with branzino, which the waiter promises me is the best pasta on the menu: spaghetti sautéed with cherry tomatoes and topped with European bass.

“She’d like a Bellini, too,” he tells the waiter. “Mine comes with the special,” he says to me, and chuckles. “The special here is a real bargain.”

As the waiter drops off our drinks and a bowl of breadsticks, I ask Katz about the recent auctions at Christie’s and Sotheby’s. The biggest Katz sale was a self-portrait from 1957, which sold for \$855,000. A work by British artist David Hockney, to whom Katz is sometimes compared, made news by selling for \$90m. I’m curious how that feels.

“Well I think David Hockney and his paintings are completely gracious,” he says. “They’re not one bit pretentious. There’s no angst. There’s no forced masculinity. There’s no forced seriousness. The images are all arresting. There are all kinds of mitigating factors that change prices, and they change up and they change down. So I don’t think it’s outrageous. A painting is a very complicated object, and they turn it into a commodity.”

Katz’s work has divided the art world for decades. His style is recognisable (“like handwriting,” he says), and no one will deny that he is a master at his craft. But his work is also often criticised for being . . .

“Superficial,” he says.

“Simple,” I say.

“And simple,” he repeats. “In Spain, a guy said to me: ‘Do you see yourself as an over-the-hill minor talent?’”

He laughs at this memory. “So I told him: ‘No, I don’t, but a lot of people do!’”

Some of his critics, Katz goes on, “don’t understand the painting’s skill, that’s for sure. And they don’t understand the representational images as being aggressive and contemporary. There’s a lot of hostility to my work.”

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Katz tells the stories of two gallery openings — one in 1950s Provincetown, Massachusetts, and one in 1970s France. In both, he remembers that patrons screamed over his work. Actually screamed.

“I was a little shocked, because it was just pretty girls and pleasant scenes. And people are screaming! I apologised to the dealers, and they said, ‘That’s why we brought you!’” He laughs. “The gallery wanted to upset everybody! I didn’t realise that I was a vehicle.”

I ask if he thinks the critics are bothered by the aesthetics of his work.

“Yeah, they think realism should be ugly and should have some social values. I have none.”

It turns out the special is a three-course meal, and Katz’s appetiser has arrived: a white paste with two pieces of toast. “That’s it? I don’t know what it is,” he says, and takes a bite. “Oh, it’s pretty good, you want to taste it?”

I dip my fork. It’s baccalà mantecato, or salted cod whipped with olive oil, and it’s fluffy and fishy and delicious. He pushes it into the space between us.

“We lucked out. Help yourself. Very refined!”

As we share Katz’s appetiser, we return to the subject of his “Calvin Klein Girls” — young women wearing black Calvin Klein bras and underwear, their skin bright white against a stark black background. The paintings are striking, and decidedly hip; they remind me both of his own New York society paintings from the 1970s and ’80s, and also of the model Kendall Jenner’s Instagram feed. He tells me he painted this series after seeing a Calvin Klein TV ad in a taxi that reminded him of his own work (“I thought, ‘That video artist is ripping me off! Let me give a shot back’”).

When I ask whether he cares if his work is promoting these giant brands, he says he “couldn’t care less about it”.

“I just thought it’d be great to stick a Calvin Klein in some billionaire’s house. I thought it’d be funny to have the guy sitting there with the [logo] on her butt in his living room.”

I press Katz a bit on his politics, and although he says he doesn’t like the topic, he allows it. Donald Trump, he says, is the third in a row of “bad presidents”.

“To Europeans, Trump is some kind of crazy obscenity. To someone from Queens, he’s like one of my neighbours. His reasoning is all sort of Queens, like a Queens Republican — nice and pragmatic. You can understand it. If he doesn’t accept something, he gives a reason for it. So it doesn’t vacillate.”

The food arrives. Before Katz, a homemade artichoke ravioli with butter and parmesan. Before me, a beautifully plated spaghetti dotted with fresh, flaky branzino. It might be the best I’ve ever had. The waiter asks if we’d like another Bellini. We would.

Katz declares his food “very good” and plops a piece of ravioli on my plate. As I eat it, I broach the subject of how he wants his work to be remembered.

“I’d like to take my place as a great American painter,” he says. “That’s about it.”

What does he think other painters can learn from him?

“How to paint,” he says. “They can learn to take some risks. Not make a product. Everyone’s very oriented

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toward product art, so dealers don't have to take a chance in selling one. But I think you should have some hostility toward the public. I painted nice pictures in the '50s, and people didn't like them. So I thought, 'I'm going to stick a big face of my wife in your living room and it's going to kill everything, and you're going to have to throw out some furniture.'"

The waiter returns to our table with two comically large cheesecakes, one in each hand. Katz and I agree to share one.

I ask whether his decision to paint when he was young felt like a gamble.

"Oh yeah, a big risk. It had no stability at all. I had no money, my family had no money. And I wasn't emotionally prepared for it, either. I was under-developed. So it was really very hard."

He married early, before he was ready; it ended in divorce. And then he met Ada.

"You really don't know who you are until people tell you," he says. "When I met Ada, she said something very unforgettable. She said, 'You know something? You are very bright.' I don't think anyone got that about me. They knew I was bright, but not very bright. In that one sentence, I said, 'Oh. This girl's got my number.'"

So he felt understood? She reflected how he wanted to be seen back to him?

"She just sort of knew who I was. She knew it right away."

As the bill arrives, I ask Katz about his parents. He says they gave him intellectual and cultural support. "They were ahead of me," he says. "Very smart. Much stronger intellectually than I am. You know, when I was about 16, my father told me, 'Don't paint the details, paint the impression of what you see. And paint your own backyard.' Boom! So that's exactly what I did." Katz's father died in a car crash that same year.

We put our coats on and walk back to his studio, slowly, huddled together to hear each other over the traffic. I ask him if he has any final career ambitions.

"I would've liked to have had a show in a major museum in New York," he says. "But I don't think it's going to happen." Katz's last major New York show was at the Whitney in 1986.

You never know, I say.

"Yeah, you never know."

And with that, he is back home. He kisses my cheek, says "good luck!"; and disappears through that front door, the one he's had for 60 years. An unfinished painting awaits upstairs.