

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Jonathan Goodman, "Alex Katz at Gavin Brown's Enterprise," *Whitehot Magazine*, August 03, 2019



Alex Katz at Gavin Brown's Enterprise



Installation view, Alex Katz, Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York NY

Alex Katz (<http://www.alexkatz.com/>): 439 W 127th Street, New York

Gavin Brown's Enterprise (<https://gavinbrown.biz/home>)

April 27 - August 3, 2019

By **JONATHAN GOODMAN**, July 2019

Now in his early nineties, Alex Katz continues to paint with the gods directly behind him. His landscape paintings in particular, the result of time spent at the home he has had for decades in Maine, grow deeper and, often, intensify to the point of being apocalyptic. He is a painter whose stylizations have moved beyond social description--the depiction of artists and writers (poets in particular)--into a place in which other arts (dancing) and nature (foliage and trees), as well as steel sculptures outlining family, become inspired renditions detailing the lyric, a determination, for Katz, of the fiercely real.

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Finding the poetic in the figure is not an easy endeavor; it involves the right amount of specificity as well as an openness to how a person's face and body emblemize feelings and motives deeper than can be easily seen. At first glance, Katz's work seems to stem from surface and outline; but there is more than that in his art, which is becoming classically restrained and fiercely free in the same moment. It is not the first time that the bringing together of opposites results in outstanding art!

Earlier on, Katz was a painter of art-world society; his friends included the poet and dance critic Edwin Denby, the poet and art critic John Ashbery, and the artists Fairfield Porter and Rudy Burckhardt--but in this show he concentrates on isolating aspects of art--the several works that homage Degas--and nature--the remarkable, visionary treatments of light on trees and leaves in the morning, at twilight, and at night. The five paintings reconciling Degas with a newer painterly idiom offer female nudes with short hair, in various dance poses against a green background. The works demonstrate what is by now Katz's well-known schematic simplicities, which seem an eschewal of visual complications, but which are not, in the sense that the paintings convey, in a muted, elegant fashion, Katz's love of art and art history.

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The clarifications evident in the faces and bodies of the dancers Katz portrays signals his refusal to overly pitch the composition in the face of a weighted awareness of art's past. Instead, the paintings demonstrate an awareness of art as a repository of a graceful gesture, no matter where it originates in paint or physical movement. This sense of minimal gesture--of less becoming more to the point where intimations of form are meant to supply the form in its entirety--also has its examples in the tubular steel sculptures accompanying the Degas dance paintings on the first floor. Katz has never repudiated sculpture; some of his most charming efforts are the steel cutouts of people he has shown in the last couple of decades. The sculptures we see now are drawings, strongly oriented toward a two-dimensional presence, in which the artist's son, poet Vincent Katz, appears, as well as Katz's wife Ada and studies of dancers.



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As beautiful as these works are, for this writer Katz's visions of nature moves into a sublime made more so by its absence of the human. The very large (126 by 96 inches) painting *Sunset* (2019) consists of very dark branches and trunks of trees, likely evergreens, that take over the right side of the painting. Bits of foliage look like they are falling from the branches, but this may only be a stylistic effect. The sky is divided into three colors: gray at the top, pale blue in the middle, and a bright tan at the bottom. It is a joyous painting about the aftermath of light that is stylized without being weakened by its overall patterning. The companion piece, *Sunrise* (2019), is the same size as *Sunset*.

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In the painting, too, we are looking toward the light through a maze of dark green trees and the squares of light, framed by light orange, that illuminate the painting's background. A blue sky, also given squares of light, can be seen through the foliage at the top of the work. Together, the pair of paintings relay Katz's love of nature and, also, his very strong schematic sense of composition.



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Given as this writer is to deep twilight scenes, Katz's 2019 painting, entitled *Blue Night* (2019) more than enchants. It consists of a very dark blue engaging an equally dark green body of trees. The dark blue has swirls of black--maybe the last traces of visible clouds before the night completely takes over. It is a deeply felt work of art, something the German romantic painters of the 19th century could sympathize with. But it is also a celebration of art, its ability to differentiate the dark tones of the end of the day in a way that celebrates the thin line between darkness visible and entire darkness. Clearly in this show, late, late in Katz's career, the artist shows himself to be a painter boldly manipulating his medium in favor of graphic designs that link up to painterly abstraction and color-field imagery by artists working not so long ago. Katz has become a master of a number of painting genres, an achievement made more remarkable by the social nature of much of his art. Even as he was recording the visages of friends, Katz never forgot that social description in painting is finally secondary to painting itself (maybe he picked up the insight from James Slinger Sargent). Whatever his influences and precedents might be, it is clear that he is now pretty much on his own, working in a field of remarkable achievement and formal clarity. **WM**