

**ALEX KATZ**  
COOL PAINTING

## Exhibition Facts

Duration	8 March 2023 – 29 Mai 2023
Venue	Bastion hall   ALBERTINA
Curator	Mag. Gunhild Bauer
Works	100
Catalogue	Available for EUR 32,90 (English & German) onsite at the Museum Shop as well as via <a href="http://www.albertina.at">www.albertina.at</a>
Catalogue Raisonné	Available in the ALBERTINA shop, at <a href="http://www.albertina.at">www.albertina.at</a> and <a href="http://www.hatjecantz.de">www.hatjecantz.de</a> (English EUR 153.00)
Contact	Albertinaplatz 1   1010 Vienna T +43 (0)1 534 83 0 <a href="mailto:info@albertina.at">info@albertina.at</a> <a href="http://www.albertina.at">www.albertina.at</a>
Opening Hours	Daily 10 am – 6 pm Except Wednesday and Friday open until 9 pm
Press contact	Daniel Benyes T +43 (0)1 534 83 511   M +43 (0)699 12178720 <a href="mailto:d.benyes@albertina.at">d.benyes@albertina.at</a>  Nina Eisterer T +43 (0)1 534 83 512   M +43 (0)699 10981743 <a href="mailto:n.eisterer@albertina.at">n.eisterer@albertina.at</a>

# Alex Katz

## Cool Painting

8.3. 2023 – 29.5. 2023

For the 95th birthday of Alex Katz, the ALBERTINA Museum presents a comprehensive tribute to this artist from the rich holdings of its collection: in 2022, the ALBERTINA Museum's principal works by Katz had been lent out to the Guggenheim Museum and the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid.

Alex Katz, born in New York in 1927, numbers among the most important exponents of US contemporary art. Large formats, broad brush strokes, vivid colors: these are the familiar Katz hallmarks. His concerns are color and composition. But why has Alex Katz's oeuvre remained so unique to this day? In terms of formal aesthetics, we doubtless have Katz to thank for his rescue of hard-edge painting's strictness for use in figurative painting. The sharp edged outlines of hard-edge and "radical flatness" had been viewed as painting's terminal point: it was art that sought to depict pure abstraction and artificial motifs. In other words: art for the purest depiction of artificial motifs and forms, by no means suited to portraying motifs from the realm of banal reality. Alex Katz broke with this ideal, however, combining emotionally detached depictions of everyday reality with this supposedly incompatible way of painting taken from hard-edge.

Ever since then, Katz has since then been considered—analog to Miles Davis and "cool jazz"—the inventor of "cool painting." Katz found the motifs for this highly reserved style of painting in the well-heeled leisure society of his art world circles as well as in the landscapes of Maine. The depicted individuals are almost exclusively friends and literary figures, and quite a few hail from New York's dance scene.

Katz thus ascertained just what reality he was surrounded by—albeit in an abstract and radical manner. By doing so, he succeeded in placing his emotional and vibrant subjects at a cool distance. Even before pop art hit the scene, he had already set out into the realm of

figurative painting, characterized by equal measures of rationalism, sensuousness, and abstraction. His art would seem to be purely figurative. Upon closer inspection, however, an infinitely high degree of abstraction is revealed.

Katz only became world-famous as an artist in his 70s. And today, Katz is one of very few artists whose works can be seen in contexts such as the permanent collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York's meatpacking district: one can therefore most decidedly view Katz as being among the "most contemporary" artists, as one of the most important pillars of an understanding of contemporary art. For this reason, as well, Katz also numbers among the "cornerstones" of contemporary art at the ALBERTINA Museum— together with figures such as Maria Lassnig, Georg Baselitz, Valie Export, and Arnulf Rainer.

To mark the occasion of the exhibition *Alex Katz ,cool Painting'*, in the ALBERTINA, the second and expanded edition of the Catalogue Raisonné of Alex Katz's *Prints*, is being published. Available at the ALBERTINA and [www.hatjecantz.de](http://www.hatjecantz.de).

Curator: Mag. Gunhild Bauer

# Exhibition Texts

## INTRODUCTION

*“Style is the content of my painting.” Alex Katz*

Alex Katz, born in New York in 1927, is considered one of the foremost US American artists of our age. The ALBERTINA Museum seizes the occasion of his 95th birthday to honor him with an exhibition from the rich holdings of its collection.

Even before Pop Art, as whose precursor he may be regarded, Alex Katz chose his own approach to figurative painting, which is marked by sensuousness, self-reflection, and abstraction alike. He devotes himself to the people in his immediate surroundings—family and friends from the New York art and fashion scenes—as well as the light-flooded landscape of his Maine summer residence. Katz deliberately chooses subject matter lacking in content, which he abstracts and brings to a cool distance through his manner of painting, which, both rational and sensuous, is inspired by the stencil painting of commercial art and such devices as the close-up made use of by film and television.

The large format, characterized by its expansive force and unmistakable, powerful presence, was dictated by Abstract Expressionism, to the generation of which Alex Katz belongs and whose struggle against illusion he joined. It is concrete representation that permits him to paint nothing but “images,” whose essence does not go that far beyond the mere surface—a technically perfect, wafer-thin, and homogenous layer of paint. Unlike Pop Art, which makes reference to images already existing in advertising or the yellow press, those by Alex Katz are always based on a direct and purely visual observation of the real world that surrounds him. Quite often these pictures convey a melancholic mood, for one recognizes in them the contrast between the vigor and permanence of iconic images and the fleeting moment they represent. From a formal and aesthetic point of view, Katz translates the sharply outlined separate segments of Color Field and Hard Edge Painting, the radical flatness of which was once considered the end of painting, into figuration. On the lines of Miles Davis and the

restraint and control of Cool Jazz, to which the visual artist feels drawn, Katz may be referred to as the inventor of “Cool Painting.”

## BILLBOARD EFFECT: THE ART OF ALL-OVER

*“Outdoor billboards were still very grand, and they had some sentiment. They had this idealistic sentiment of the American dream.” Alex Katz*

From the 1960s, Alex Katz’s pictures took on the dimensions of advertising billboards. These new advertising medium for chewing gum, Coca-Cola, and tobacco measuring 4 by 14 meters began lining the highways in the 1950s. The billboards were hand-painted in order to achieve more vibrant colors. Blown-up heads with parted lips and Coca-Cola bottles were an omnipresent motif. The forehead and chin were cut off so that the head would seem even larger—a stylistic device also deployed by Abstract Expressionism. Through the huge format, clear light, and perfectly crafted surface Katz translates the portrait into the American idiom so that it became a public and impersonal image. It seemed only natural that in 1977 Katz competed with advertising on New York’s Time Square, then one of the most hectic locations in the world, with his installation of 23 billboard portrait heads six meters high.

## ADA

*“She has the elegance of the city.” Alex Katz*

Alex Katz feels particularly connected to the city of New York and its people, with their passion for art and beauty. For sixty-five years he has lived and worked with and in the presence of his wife Ada. Not only is she Katz’s preferred model, she is also his inspiration in terms of style. All we know about her from hundreds of paintings is her beauty, her elegance, her self-assured style, and her reservation. It has been told that her Italian mother used to attach great importance to high-style fashion and sew clothes based on the patterns of *Vogue*. Ada continues a long tradition of female portraits, from Rembrandt’s Saskia and Rubens’s Helena to Monet’s Camille, Dalí’s Gala, and Picasso’s Françoise. As a personification of female beauty, she stands for the peaceful everyday culture of the postwar era. Being as

mysterious as Nefertiti, she is, at the same time, an ambiguous symbol alluding to various references.

## PROFESSIONALS

*“I thought that they would be very interesting women. You know, these very ‘New York,’ professional people – or women!” Alex Katz*

As a rule, Alex Katz chooses his own sitters. He painted the editor-in-chief of *Vogue* Anna Wintour, the performance artist Meredith Monck, the singer Marisa Monte, the actress Mary Tyler Moore, the poet Ann Lauterbach, as well as the models Kate Moss and Christy Turlington—all of them highly professional women from the domains of culture and fashion who are public figures and have this iconic look.

Preparatory charcoal drawings, which allow for soft transitions between light and dark, play a crucial role in the idealization and harmonization of details and proportions. Katz uses them to define tonal values and light effects and develop and play with luminosity and the impact of a picture when seen from a distance. Few dark lines activate the extreme light effect of the white tone of the paper. Working with few volumes, minimal emotions as expressed by parted lips, and the close-up and Cinemascope format of film, Alex Katz transforms fleeting appearances into monumental figures.

## THE PERFECT SURFACE

*“You cover the canvas with one color of paint, and you paint into it. And so it becomes different tones. You have to pay attention to what you are doing.” Alex Katz*

Alex Katz usually completes his paintings within a few hours, using a wet-in-wet technique by which he typically achieves his smooth surfaces. Working this rapidly requires meticulous preparation with oil, pencil, and charcoal sketches, as well as an underdrawing that is transferred to the canvas by means of cartoons. The act of painting as such, which is

ultimately swift, intuitive, and gestural, recalls Jackson Pollock's Action Painting. Instead of practicing a personal, recognizable brushwork, Katz carefully spreads the paint, thus creating a smooth, homogeneous surface. He places carefully drawn gestural lines for the landscape and a few controlled, strongly stylized, and descriptive brushstrokes to model the faces. Using minimal means, he presents extreme light situations such as nocturnes or natural and artificial light. In more recent works, the artist has arrived at a more expressive hand that seems to be more emotionally charged than before.

## LANDSCAPES

Since the 1950s Katz has spent his summers in his little house in Maine, painting his neighbors, outdoor leisure activities, and garden parties. Having bought an adjacent forest with a rivulet called Black Brook in the mid-1980s, he took to painting landscapes. Black Brook has become his "Water Lily Pond": like Monet, he paints oil sketches en plein air and subsequently transfers them onto huge panoramic formats in his studio—formats that enclose the viewer and allow the artist to work more freely. The extreme light effects, the decorative character, the cropped views, the magnification and mystification of the pictorial space derive from Monet, while the controlled gestural manner of painting and the expansive all-over are indebted to Abstract Expressionism. Everything evokes the Cinemascope format and close-up of cinema. Despite the flatness there is a powerful pull into the depth of the picture, which unlike Mark Rothko's or Barnett Newman's has no transcendent connotation. More recently, Katz has tackled dark chords of bright lights and black.

## CELEBRATING THE PRESENT: BRAND NEW & TERRIFIC

In the mid-nineteenth century Baudelaire demanded from artists to be children of their time and commit themselves to modernism while rejecting academism. Alex Katz has stuck to this postulate ever since the beginning of his career. He depicts the here and now, but at the same time makes reference to multiple traditions. Like symbols, his paintings may be read in different ways. His art is not cynical and ironic like Pop Art, as it lends topicality to art history's great repertoire by being rooted in the present. He paints individuals with the aura



of archetypes. The glamour of Hollywood celebrities stands for beauty. Each romantic empathy or identification with the sitter is suppressed. The American coast dwellers in *Beach Stop* betray no romantic interest in the sea. Katz deprives them of everything descriptive, as the tables are empty. Only few volumes and color chords in the form of the figures dominate the format next to plastic chairs and parasols. One is reminded of Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*: "I love his large paintings for their ambition and for their sympathy with the people he depicts," says Katz.

## CARTOONS

Katz's impersonal application of paint prevents any illusion of tangible corporeality, any glimpse behind the mask. Homogenous fields of color, foregrounds and backgrounds collide in prominent, sharp-edged contours which Katz observed in Hard Edge Painting and the works of Kitagawa Utamaro, as well as Egyptian and Byzantine art. In the cartoons on kraft paper, which Katz uses to trace the preliminary drawing onto the canvas, they correspond to brutal cuts into the paper. Giant abbreviations serve as lips, chin, and nose. They are reminiscent of commercial art influenced by industrial design and Bauhaus typography.

## THE IMMEDIATE PRESENT

*"There is no eternity other than in the immediate present. So, I try all different lights. In an instant you have a blast, and I want to make that instant." Alex Katz*

Only Monet depicted such a multitude of light effects. Similar to the Impressionists, Alex Katz captures time in a "frozen" state, a short moment in a transient world. Everything he depicts has been observed empirically and visually. His paintings capture translucent water that can be looked into or which reflects sunlight back into the space. He combines shadowy foregrounds with the indirect light of forests, paints nocturnes or artificial light, appreciates the dark Northern light of Maine, which augments all of the colors. Katz is a colorist: he goes in search of a colored equivalent for the natural light he has observed, an

equivalent that is apt to intensify the impression of an immediate presence. Since the 1980s details and modeling have given way to homogenous fields of color the sustainability of which the artist has studied in the art of Matisse, as well as Color Field and Hard Edge Painting. Applying a few descriptive, broad brushstrokes, he creates an image that becomes instantly memorable.

## FACES: THE CLOSE-UP

*“They could take that 18-inch screen and really push it into your face.” Alex Katz*

Relying on close-up and the Cinemascope format, Katz referred to the aesthetics of cinema, television, and billboard advertising. He was not so much interested in the films of the 1950s and subsequent years because of their content, but because of their well-made images: the way in which the actors talked, wore their clothes, moved, and looked. One saw things through the films, and according to Katz the cinema took the place of the church. Katz’s horizontal formats have nothing to do with the intimate portraiture of European painting of the past. The heavily stylized, unsentimental portraits of Manet, Matisse, Picasso, and Léger provided models for Katz’s impersonal style. In the pictures of his family and friends he goes in search of the universal, anonymous face. He paints hats and sunglasses instead of heads and eyes, make-up and lipstick instead of skin and lips. Apart from their element of fashion, these pictures also convey the individual’s forlornness, like in the cool and distanced films of Michelangelo Antonioni or Ingmar Bergman, which deal with boredom and alienation. Everything in these works preaches understatement, and yet they seem monumental.

## FASHION

*“Light. Clothes. People.” Alex Katz*

In 1983 Katz received a commission from the magazine *Esquire* involving designer fashion. He decided for Norma Kamali and showed five couples at night. The title *Pas de Deux* betrays

Katz's affinity for ballet and his friendship with the choreographer Paul Taylor, for whom he had designed stage sets and costumes. The focus of the picture is solely on the staging of fashion. Katz, who wished to see fashion in movement and in use, asked his models to touch each other and then froze their poses similar to a fashion photographer. He paid attention to minute detail, such as costumes, hairstyles, sunglasses, shoes, ties, scarfs, and earrings. Since the mid-1960s Katz has used true-to-scale cartoons in order to prepare his paintings as they have grown bigger and bigger—an approach that supports his impersonal, distanced style. Economical lines drawn with wide gestures keep the surfaces they enclose in a dynamic equilibrium.

## CUTOUTS

Alex Katz has created cutouts since 1959: painted or printed flat wood or metal sculptures cut along the contours. They derive from the technique of collage, with which he was experimenting at the time. If the flat background of the paintings pushes the zoomed heads into the viewer's field of vision, the cutouts actually transport traditional portraiture into the center of real space. In subsequent years Katz also used this new medium for stage sets he designed for his friends, the New York choreographer Paul Taylor and the New York School playwright Kenneth Koch. Katz was inspired by the so-called billboard extensions of the 1950s, images of larger-than-life smokers, beer bottles, and automobiles illusionistically integrated into the real landscape along the highways. However, one may also be reminded of Picasso's or Matisse's cut-outs, made at around the same time, which Katz may have used as a source of reference here.

The radical flatness and typification of the sitters make it hard to perceive them as an illusion of reality. Katz places his figures in front of landscapes or installs his cutouts in front of his own paintings. The image character, abstraction, and superficiality become the actual subject matter. Katz consciously manipulates his pictures.

## PRINTS

*“I paint almost like a printer—preconceived, in layers, color into color.” Alex Katz*

Unlike Pop artists, who appropriated motifs from commercial art and the yellow press, around the mid-1960s Alex Katz began translating his own paintings according to the characteristic aesthetic laws of both traditional and state-of-the-art printmaking. His artistic principle of radical flatness and his renouncement of a personal hand come into their own here like in now other medium. Eagerly experimenting with the luminosity of the colors, Katz pushes the boundaries of technical possibilities as he prints a multitude of thin, translucent layers of color on top of each other, or he eliminates the physical appearance of the print altogether by trimming the paper inside the platemark. Quite frequently he bursts beyond conventional formats. His most recent works fascinate us with their physical and crude aestheticism of the woodcut, in which Katz reduces his paintings to black (and the radiant white tone of the paper). These technically highly accomplished works are often developed over many years in collaboration with the printers.

Thanks to Alex Katz’s generous donation, the ALBERTINA Museum owns almost the complete printed oeuvre of the artist, which comprises 800 editions.

## Press images

The following images are available free of charge in the Press section of [www.albertina.at](http://www.albertina.at):



Alex Katz  
Black Hat 2, 2010  
Oil on canvas  
The ALBERTINA MUSEUM, Vienna – Batliner  
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