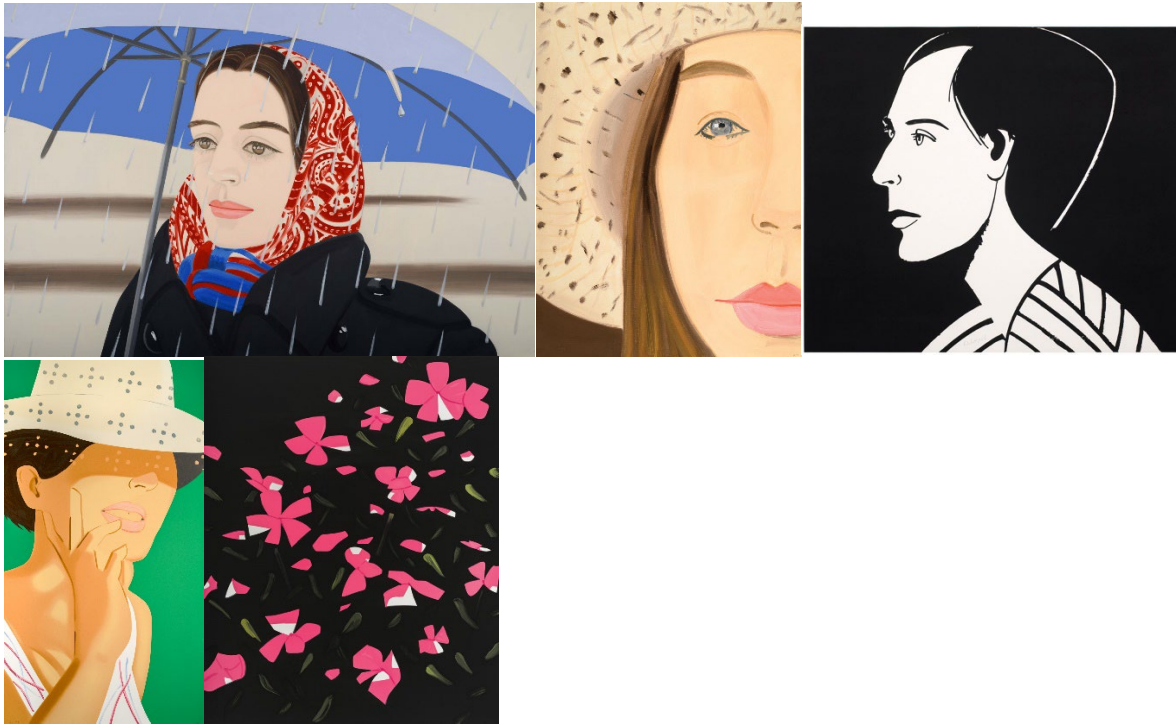


IT'S ABOUT TIME:

ALEX KATZ AT THE GUGGENHEIM NYC & MEYEROVICH GALLERY SF



(Alex Katz: *Blue Umbrella 2*, *Straw Hat 2*, *Meghan*, *Straw Hat Vivien*, *White Impatiens*)

Written by:
Michael McDonagh

New York painter Alex Katz turned 95 this July 2022 and is the subject of his first ever retrospective show at New York's Guggenheim Museum-- www.guggenheim.org .

His longtime San Francisco dealer Alex Meyerovich has mounted a spectacular and beautifully installed selection of Katz's print and sculptural work at his Meyerovich Gallery in San Francisco - www.meyerovich.com

How does one live in a culture in which only "now" exists? Or is one's attachment to this ever changing now nothing but a polite fiction we tell ourselves to just keep going when "Secrets of wash and finish that took a lifetime / To learn are reduced to the status of / Black-and-white illustrations in a book where color plates / Are rare... " as the late great American poet John Ashbery put it in his 1973 poem "Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror "? Is that what everything, including art, is about? These are just a few of the questions which Alex Katz's work provokes, and not just because he's been at it for over seventy years. But the idea that "time is of the essence " seems to have gotten a new lease on life because Katz has nailed our rapidly passing

world where no one seems to be able to listen and/or trust anyone or anything anymore, including art. And Katz doesn't buy the Hegelian / Marxist idea of composers like Arnold Schoenberg and his disciples who believed that history will end when it -- i.e. they -- have finished their "improving" cultural-societal project because they're right, and everyone else is wrong. But does anyone really believe that anymore? And what has all of this to do with Katz and his recent work on view at www.meyervich.com? Lots. And I say lots because if everything in his work is about being in the present tense then everything has to shift because the present is always shifting, and if it didn't shift there wouldn't be a present.

Katz's devotion to the present animates everything he does, and his lifelong interest in fashion - meaning clothes, and visual culture as a whole -- has been seen as heretical by the aforementioned modernist camp who believe that the greatest enemy of art is pleasure -- think Bauhaus. But painters have always responded to fashion and they've generally set their models as in -- say their depictions of biblical First Century CE Palestine -- in fashions of their own time because their art was designed to please. And Katz, like Matisse, has always provided pleasure and provocation, in more or less equal parts. Take the severely cropped 2022 "Straw Hat 1 " (archival pigment ink on Innova Etching Cotton Rag 315 gsm fine art paper) which encloses half of this model's face in a square format. Katz provides another take on the same model in "Straw Hat 3" where she's caught in close-up, eyes closed, in ambiguous repose. And let's not forget that Katz, Matisse, and the American writer Gertrude Stein have always toyed with what things appear to "mean", or don't mean in their work because everything means what it does or doesn't mean within its own context, and one's own private perception, as one "reads" their work may trump their original intentions(s)? A fragment means this here, and another fragment means something else there as in Stein's monumental repetitive 1909 word portraits of Matisse and Picasso. But what are we to make of the same model in Katz's "Straw Hat 1 " and "Straw Hat 3" other than that it's the same beautiful lady whom we know nothing about save that she figures in the game of appearances that Katz plays here, as does the Netherlandish master Rogier van der Weyden (1399/1400-1464) in his "Portrait of a Lady " where an equally stunning female beauty is seen somewhat obliquely in a 3/4 view? The only sure thing, or outcome, if you will, is that Katz and van der Weyden seduce us with their respective sitter's silence. And so Katz's interest in how things look -- meaning their surfaces -- remains the only constant in this game where everything changes in the blink of an eye. Or--how we look.

Artists have always used crops and Katz uses them in his off the griddle work here for their formal and dramatic punch, especially in the prints which feature his Brazilian daughter-in-law Vivien Bittencourt, who's almost as frequent a model as his wife Ada, and their son Vincent. The most striking of these in both pictorial and perceptual terms is the 2017 silkscreen " Vivien x 5 " where she looks as if she caught herself in the mirror, from slightly different vantage points. Or is she seen here, in split second close-up -- as if by a stranger, in the New York subway ? where one's visual awareness is often stressed? Who knows? But one thing's for sure -- its ambiguity provokes. The 2021 "Straw Hat Vivien" (silkscreened in colors on Saunders Waterford High White HP 425 gsm fine art paper), with its cropped view is mediated by a warm forest green backing her image which is just as present tense momentary as "Vivien x 5", or the 2021 "Vivien with Hat " (archival pigment ink on Innova Etching Cotton Rag 315 gsm fine art paper), which though

extremely cropped, and equally mysterious, feels entirely serene. Katz has always painted flowers, and the three monumental examples here use obsessive rhythmic patterns which border on the abstract. The 2018 "Yellow Flags" (archival pigment inks on Crane Museo Max 365 gsm fine art paper); the 2016 "White Roses " (16-color silkscreen on Saunders Waterford 425 fine art paper); "White Impatiens "(26-color silkscreen) have varying degrees of visual and perceptual presence, though "White Impatiens ", with its white flowers appearing to be red over a deep dark ground is the definite knockout with its Ying-Yang pull of these over this ground. These two seemingly opposed visual contrasts in harmonious accord, with color as light, and light as color, the present moment "frozen", yet alive , before the next thing happens to be.

Some Katz cognoscenti prefer his flowers to his landscapes -- there are several of these here -- or his still lifes, to his portraits of people; and www.meyerovich.com's carefully and beautifully chosen selection gives you lots to choose from. One can of course always choose sides when celebration seems more in order in Katz's 95th birthday year.

But his major achievement here might be his 2017 suite of 11 female portraits "Smiles 2 " which is an entirely new but completely successful take on the original paintings, several of which I saw at Santa Monica's Fred Hoffman gallery when they were new. And Katz's working process is not unlike that of the seminal American film director George Stevens (1904-1975) who shot his pictures live, in real time, and then "made " them in the editing room because Katz works from direct "on the set" observation, which become sketches, drawings, and small oils so he can determine how his images will play live to his prospective audience. The lush black-and-white and everything in between tones in "Smiles 2" have enormous suggestive power which is not unlike what Stevens achieved in several of his many classic black-and-white films like A PLACE IN THE SUN (1951), and THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK (1959). And then there's one of Katz's indisputable masterpieces here -- the 2020 "Blue Umbrella 2 " (archival pigment inks on Crane Museo Max 365 gsm fine art paper) which I saw live in real time when it was a 1972 painting of the same name shown as part of "Alex Katz Paints Ada " at New York's Jewish Museum. And I don't think it's an exaggeration for me to quote the last two lines of Katz's great good poet friend Frank O'Hara's memorial poem for Billie Holiday " The Day Lady Died " while she whispered a song along the keyboard / to Mal Waldron / and everyone and I stopped breathing . " That's how I felt there, and how I feel now, here in San Francisco after seeing Katz's beautiful second take "Blue Umbrella 2."

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