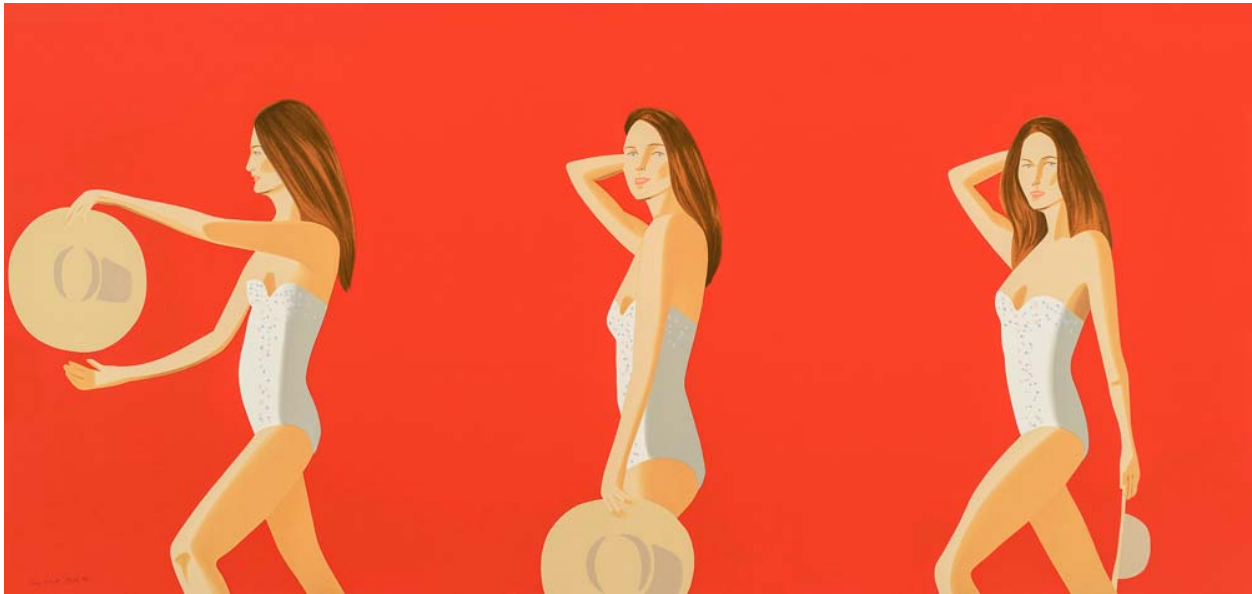


## Pop Artist Alex Katz Returns to S.F. For the First Time in 30 Years

Alex Katz's new exhibit at Meyerovich Gallery  
cements his status as a foundational figure for Pop Art.

by Jonathan Curiel

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Alex Katz, "Ariel", 2016. (Courtesy of Meyerovich Gallery)

Alex Katz's history with Andy Warhol goes all the way back to 1949, when both artists were ensconced in New York, but the real turning point in their relationship came in 1959. That was the year Katz, for the first time in his career, made a painting with virtually repeated images. *Ada Ada* showed Katz's wife in a blue housecoat, arms crossed tightly across her chest, while standing next to a second iteration of herself. *Ada Ada*, Katz says, was the first time that anyone in the New York art scene made such a duplicate painting, and the canvas' exhibition — and that of other repeated works, like Katz's *Double Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg*, made the same year — prompted Warhol to copy the motif. Warhol, Katz says, also borrowed Katz's "flat backgrounds" and square portrait size.

Without Katz, there would be no Warhol as we know him. Without Katz, Pop Art would be different — even if the average art-goer now associates the movement with Warhol instead.

"I'm one of the precursors" of Pop Art, Katz says. "I did the repetitive figures first. I did the flat backgrounds with figures on them. And the square portraits. Andy looked at it and took it. He adapted them. He stole them."

Katz says he isn't angry, though — and Warhol, at least once, acknowledged his work's similarities to Katz's.

“Once you make something,” Katz says, “it’s up for grabs. Lots of people have been influenced by me. Fashion. Movies. It’s a positive thing. It’s useful. Andy took it and made it into great graphic art.”

At 89, Katz — who was born in Brooklyn and raised in Queens — is as opinionated as ever, and as prolific. His new exhibit at San Francisco’s Meyerovich Gallery, “Alex Katz: New and Recent Works,” is festooned with art pieces that are instantly recognizable as Katz’s, with scenes that distill faces and figures to their essential charms. *Red Hat Ada* shows Katz’s wife burrowed under a giant red sun hat. *Ariel* has a young woman in a one-piece bathing suit traipsing right to left with a hat that moves with her arms — three variations of the same woman that are almost a five-decade extension of the aesthetic approach Katz originated with *Ada Ada*. In *Ariel (Black & White)*, Katz upends the color scheme and gives his frolicker more of a graphic-novel quality, with sharp, cinematic tones.

One thing that hasn’t changed in Katz’s career: People tend to look young and vibrant in his renderings, even if they’re in the stage of life that can be termed elderly. Katz says he wants his artwork — whether silkscreens, oil paintings, lithographs, or some other form — to give people “pleasure.” So “Alex Katz: New and Recent Works” also features a series of frolicsome, large-scale flower scenes.

It also marks the 30-year anniversary of Katz’s first exhibit at Meyerovich Gallery. For that 1986 show, the gallery produced a catalogue that opened with this quote from the artist: “The ordinary is quite marvelous.” Katz flew out to San Francisco for that exhibit and delighted in gabbing with fans who’d known his work for years, models from his paintings, and others who crowded into Alex Meyerovich’s Union Square gallery space. Besides his new show, Katz currently has exhibits at London’s Serpentine Gallery and Paris’ Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, plus one at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art called “Alex Katz at the Met” which *SF Weekly* visited in January and which contains the kind of work that has long been associated with Katz: The cutout.

Since the 1950s, Katz has made large figurative cutouts on wood, like the one from 1959 — also called *Ada Ada* — that was a three-foot-tall version of his wife and (like the painting of the same name) had his wife side-by-side with her self; and the 1959-1960 work *Frank O’Hara*, which had the poet standing five feet tall in a green suit coat and black tie. At the Metropolitan, which gives Katz the kind of cavernous exhibit space that suits his work well, everything is bold and intimate, including a 1978 cutout of painter Philip Pearlstein with a drink that accentuates his thinning, flying hair; and the eight-foot-tall 1982 painting *Red Coat*, which has Ada’s red lips, red coat, and red hat as fiery anchors of a tight close-up of his wife’s gaze. The exhibit has just a handful of Katz’ work from the past 60 years, but that’s enough to thrill and satiate.

Like many iconic artists (including Warhol, who died in 1987), Katz can be a contradiction. His work celebrates the best of people, but he has openly talked about moments of stubbornness that have separated him from his peers. For the 2012 Metropolitan exhibit “Regarding Warhol: Sixty Artists, Fifty Years,” Katz told curator Marla Prather of the time around 1959 when Warhol asked Katz to paint him and his boyfriend. Katz snubbed Warhol, thinking his offer of \$150 wasn’t high enough, and telling Prather, “I had a lot of social problems. I don’t think I’ve ever gotten over them.”

But Katz has befriended many people throughout his life, including artists like Bill Berkson, the New York-born poet who moved to the Bay Area in the 1970s and had a prolific career as an art critic before passing away three months ago.

And Katz claims he's still experimenting in his work. Around 1990, when he was in his mid-60s, he began doing night scenes, like the one at the Met called *Purple Wind*, an enthralling work that has trees bending before lights of a building. *Purple Wind* has mystery and depth. Both traits are also buried in Katz's drawn figures, even if his models seem problem-free, and in the 2010 work at Meyerovich Gallery called *Reflection*, whose dark patterns are almost like splattered ink blots.

"I have a lot of difficulty with semi-intellectuals," Katz says. "People who've had lots of art history lessons are locked in another time period. They don't get my work. And they don't have the background to get the complexity of my work."

With his typical candor and verbal gusto, he adds, "I did a lot of paintings this summer — they're sequential paintings that are completely different from anything I've done before. I've always wanted to move on rather than work inside a constrained area. I like to move on. I'm sort of impatient."

*"Alex Katz: New and Recent Works" Through Sept. 30 at Meyerovich Gallery, 251 Post St., S.F. Free; 415-421-7171 or [meyerovich.com](http://meyerovich.com).*