

Alex Katz and Deborah Kass Review | Culture Vulture

by Michael McDonagh, May 2016

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Appearances are deceiving or are they? When we see something for the first time do we really see it and if so can we see it again as if for the first time? Can beauty be pinned down like a butterfly to a board or is it always moving, always in flight? These questions came to mind when I caught New York painter Alex Katz's show of his prints which he shares with those by fellow New Yorker Deborah Kass.

It's a good pairing because both artists are interested in making images which connect immediately with the viewer. But there's a catch. Our experience is always mediated by other factors, say one's mood, or whether one is preoccupied, but you also have to factor in expectation. Will what I see live up to what I see before I see it? And so fixing the present in its "pure" momentary state is almost a losing order but one which Katz has been filling with clarity and sophistication from his small scale works in the 1950's to his large scale/ monumental works which he began to produce in the 1960's and continues to produce today. There's always a feeling of direct address and, more often than not, ambiguity.

What is one to make of Katz's portrait of his wife and constant muse Ada in his color woodcut "Red Hat Ada" (2015)? Is she vulnerable, distracted, or unhappy with her advancing years or maybe one or two of these things, or all of these at once? Who's to say? But its visual impact is undeniable, and Katz shows how a "simple" and "direct" image can be read in many different ways just by presenting the facts of the matter. The face of a woman, the left side of her hat caught in warm overhead light as warmer light from the side defines her face in late morning perhaps late afternoon, or dusk. What it means is up for grabs which reminds me of what director Rouben Mamoulian said to Garbo when she asked what she should think in the closing close-up of his film *QUEEN CHRISTINA* (1933). "You don't have to think anything. The audience will fill it in."

The other portraits in the show are just as ambiguous because Katz's art has always been one of paradox. How can two of the portraits here, which are silkscreen versions of the monumental

five by seven foot paintings in the artist's first show at New York's Gavin Brown's Enterprise — see my previous piece on this show www.culturevulture.net — be both in your face and mysterious? And how can his sitters be both “known” by the viewer and yet remain stubbornly “unknown”, or “unknowable”, or — unfathomable. Even the young New York actress-writer Sophie Holman, now www.sophieellsberg.com, in “Sophie” (2012), whom I do know, seems unknown, though I told her at lunch at New York's Coffee Shop, that Alex had really caught her. But here she is looking worried perhaps, determined, hurt, or maybe a combination of all three, or maybe just inscrutable, the paradox of course being that the closer you hew to the “surface”, as Katz always does, the more you may glimpse and even understand what's going on underneath. This is also the case with “Sarah” (2012) who appears to be caught in a reflective moment, or perhaps Katz saw her moving from one expression to another as when a friend asks you to pose for a snapshot and something between your public and private self is seen.

Katz's two 2016 woodcuts of his Brazilian daughter-in-law Vivien Bittencourt's nephew Daniel show the visual/psychological contrast between two different “takes” of the same pose. The right side of his face is in light, and the left side of his face is in shadow in both, though the black and white only, and the black and white with color added in the second “take” or “state” has a completely different visual and psychological charge. The two screen print takes/states of the commandingly seductive “Ariel” (2016), who also appeared in his four by nine foot “black” painting shown at www.timothytaylorgallery.com, explores the positive/negative pull of black and white in the black and white only one, and what happens when color is added in “Red”. But that's a bit of a misnomer because this is not a scarlet red, but an almost red, or orange red, as in his sequence of “Fashion” paintings with their figures caught in front of an orange ground. And it also suggests a lustrous Pompeian, with the three shots/takes of Ariel moving across like a figure in an ancient mural. Katz gets stillness and motion at the same time, as he did in his 1988 “Red Nude” where we see the same female model twice both in and going out of the picture frame, while Ariel's figure here is cut out of space and color, with both suggesting moving time. Katz captures the present tense in each piece in this show, including the two screen prints derived from nature — “White Impatiens ” — red from morning or afternoon sun with an almost mathematical grid of slashing green strokes — and in the caught up close “Reflection.” The scaffolding of all our made-up notions of what a picture “means” falls away so that we're left with nothing but the charge of the moment, and that's the real point or message, if you will of Colombian director Ciro Guerra's 2015 film *EL ABRAZO DE LA SERPIENTE* (*The Embrace of the Serpent*) which asks the explorer and by extension the viewer to throw everything which gets in the way of direct perception overboard.

Deborah Kass' suite in her “Deb” series fools wittily with the same questions of color and figure/ground that Katz addresses, but in a much more conventional and obviously inspired by Warhol way,. His Liz Taylor “shots’ are the point of reference or jumping off point, and judged from what I've seen reproduced and read of her work, she's a figure to be reckoned with, and a certainly post-modern one.

<http://culturevulture.net/art-architecture/alex-katz-deborah-kass/>