

At 95, Alex Katz is having another moment. His Guggenheim show is a knockout.

This 'very New York' artist's retrospective is the show that Frank Lloyd Wright's spectacular building has been waiting for all its life



Review by [Sebastian Smee](#)

October 29, 2022 at 6:00 a.m. EDT



"Blue Umbrella 2," 1972 by Alex Katz. (Private collection, New York/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society) Photo courtesy of private collection

It took me years to come around to Alex Katz.

I don't know what my problem was. I had an inherited idea, I suppose, of what sorts of things should be taken seriously. It was like a cupboard, crowded with old gewgaws and dust-coated knickknacks — the critic's mind! — and, fool that I am, I couldn't squeeze Katz into it. If we already have Matisse (I told myself) and Warhol, do we really need Katz? His work was facile, cartoonish, kitsch.

Thankfully, Katz, who turned 95 this summer, wasn't waiting for me or for anyone else to come around. He had already struck aesthetic gold in the 1960s with his deadpan, Pop-inspired yet obstinately painterly portraits and his disarming painted cutouts. He was a commercial success. Better yet, the people whose opinions he valued most — friends who were poets, dancers, filmmakers, fellow painters — adored his work.

The Washington Post

Since then, Katz's portraits, along with his laconically decorative renderings of trees and flowers, New York cityscapes and Maine landscapes, have spent long periods looking out of tune with the zeitgeist. But what goes around comes around, and today Katz — with his astute reading of individuals within social settings, his alternating hot and cool emotional registers and his savvy use of old-fashioned paint to best modern mass media — suddenly looks central to the conversation. Whether they recognize it or not, today's hottest painters — Nicole Eisenman, Salman Toor, Kerry James Marshall, Elizabeth Peyton, to name a few — all look like Katz's progeny.

That's partly why the [Alex Katz retrospective](#) at the Guggenheim feels uncannily of the moment, maybe even predestined. More than [Hilma af Klint](#), more than Kandinsky, more than Tino Sehgal or [Matthew Barney](#), this is the show Frank Lloyd Wright's airy spiral has been waiting for all its life.

Katz is efficient — and so is this show. You can be in and out in half an hour. His works are meant to be seen all at once. They pop off the walls like old flames emerging from crowded kitchens at parties: *kiss-kiss, how lovely, what a surprise, see you later*. You stand there, engrossed, dazed. But then you turn around: The party is carrying on without you. It's not that it's hostile. It has just moved on. And so must you.

That's how it is at "Alex Katz: Gathering," where each encounter is like a frozen still from a movie, a close-up charged with intensity, glamour, perfume. But when you swivel to take in the glorious, centrifugal spectacle of the Guggenheim's interior, the paintings you passed farther down the ramp smile back across a gaping void. Snapped out of the moment, you suddenly register the existence of other people, other relationships, a whole city pulsing outside. It's all just ... oh! Wow.

The beauty of Katz's painting is worth emphasizing. What a colorist! What devastatingly succinct brushwork! And what a lovely, unforced accord with nature he regularly manages to achieve! Much as he loves bright hues, his color is sometimes most affecting when least high-keyed — as in "Vincent and Tony," a gorgeous study in browns and blues. In paintings like "Gold and Black 2" — five tree trunks and a sprinkling of green leaves against a saturated yellow ground — his discipline and deftness in the face of teeming nature can leave you gasping.

But beyond being beautiful, the show is excellent company. Katz's paintings leave you buzzing with the pleasures of social life. Reticent about things best left unsaid, they dare instead to be witty, charming and disarmingly heartfelt. Celebrations of social display, they're about the joys of seeing and being seen.

I find some of them hilarious. When Katz treats his wife, Ada, or his friends as replicable units, as if they were Warhol soup cans or minimalist boxes, the effect is inevitably comic. His flat cutout portraits, painted on both sides, occupy the gallery's space like brazen party-crashers, daring you to question their right to be there. And is there anything more delightfully preposterous than Katz's depiction of the members of [Paul Taylor's](#) avant-garde dance company striking strenuous poses in brightly colored leotards?

The Washington Post



"Ada and Vincent," 1967 by Alex Katz. (Private collection/Licensed by VAGA at Artist Rights Society/Photo courtesy of Alex Katz Studio)

There's wit, too, in Katz's formal decisions. In recent years, he has worked on an increasingly vast scale, as he searches for the most minimal means to convey nature's immersive enormities: dark forests, distant escarpments, moonlight on water, wintry fields. To paint on the scale of Anselm Kiefer or Tintoretto and yet to have made barely any impact on the quantity of paint with which you began — that's funny.

Katz is serious about what he does, don't get me wrong. But in his 90s, he is more and more like an old sage tossing out Zen koans. His pictorial enigmas may be profound, or they may be cheap tricks, borrowed from cartoonists. It's really up to you.

For seven decades, Katz has been providing a visual descant to the work of the New York School of poets, many of whom were his friends. He shares with them a love of the tangy, bittersweet, evanescent qualities of daily life, a feeling both for New York's antic energy

The Washington Post

and languid summers in New England, and an appreciation of the ways in which banal surface values can coexist with hidden depths.

I am more accustomed to seeing Katz's work in Maine, where he spends about half of each year, than in New York. (I am forever indebted to Maine's art museums — [Portland](#), [Bowdoin College](#), the [Farnsworth](#) and, above all, [Colby College Museum of Art](#), which has a dedicated Katz wing — for slowly turning me on to Katz's genius). But when all is said and done, he is a very New York artist, just as this is a very New York show.

One of the things that makes it so is that, even as Katz's paintings convey an undeniable love for the world, they can also appear, as the mood dictates, arrogantly unimpressed. They're chatty and brisk, but occasionally moody, even gloomy, like Manhattan in late fall.

It's possibly just my projection, but beneath his bright society portraits and sun-kissed flowers and landscapes, I sometimes detect an underground cistern of melancholy. It's there in the frozen smile of Ada, his favorite subject; in the bafflement of Ted Berrigan; in the hurt and suspicion in the eyes of the boys Vincent and Tony; and in the unexplained discomfit of Rudy Burckhardt on an otherwise golden late afternoon in August. It's there, too, in the preoccupation with office windows at night and slashing rain.



"Vincent and Tony," 1967 by Alex Katz. (Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Society for Contemporary Art/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society/Photo courtesy of Alex Katz Studio)

The Washington Post

But my lingering memory of this show is not of sadness. On the contrary, I left feeling elated. I wanted more.

He's 95, I know. He has every right to relax, to sit back and enjoy the accolades. But that's no reason not to ask. So: Please, Mr. Katz. Would you be willing to paint on for a bit?

Oh, but I forgot. You're not in the habit of waiting to be asked.

Alex Katz: *Gathering* Through Feb. 20 at the Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Ave., New York. guggenheim.org.