

Shanghai

Alex Katz in China: "An American Way of Seeing"

INTERVIEW BY COLIN W. SARGENT



Ada with Green, 2009

Last spring, international art star Alex Katz, 85, had his first show in the Peoples Republic of China amid celebrations hosted by the James Cohan Gallery. We caught up with Katz at his Lincolnville home just before breakfast for an update.

Can you describe the whole experience of selling art to a Chinese audience? As *Art Daily* bills it, it was "James Cohan Gallery Presents the First Solo Exhibition of Alex Katz's Work in Mainland China." How did you choose what to show?

It was the gallery, James Cohan, at work in Shanghai. It was a great success. All five of my paintings sold. I had no part in picking them.

Though I had no experience showing in China, I've had three or four shows in Japan. I've also made prints there.

There's a sense of "American celebrity" to the skin on your por-

traits. Was it the surface 'luminousness' everyone admires that played so well in the PRC?

Well, [the stereotype of the Chinese is] they're very mysterious, elegant, and they have a sense of decoration. They tend to be negotiable. My work seems to travel. It sells well in Turkey, Poland, Finland, so I wasn't really surprised [things took off in Shanghai]. Besides, Shanghai isn't exactly China...

You've said [to Phong Bui on *The Brooklyn Rail*] that when you visited an influential Matisse show early in your career [with your instructor recommending, "He's 80 years old, but he's very good"], you "nearly fainted.... It took about three years for me to fully appreciate those Matisses."

That was in 1949, at Pierre Matisse Gallery [in



an art-deco building that still stands on the corner of East 57th Street and Madison Avenue].

The year China went dark. How would the very Matisses have gone over in Shanghai then, at the dawn of The Great Awakening, if the show had been allowed to travel there?

After the Revolution, his stuff would be incomprehensible. I don't know what kind of [art-appreciating] public was in China then.

The Mandarin world was changing to the Mao/Proletarian world. The Chinese government didn't create a lot of art museums for the people, though they did better with [rescuing, developing, and commemorating] language. They released a lot of political propaganda. There must have been some submerged art there. It was an odd economic time for China with Mao. It was still basically agrarian during the rush toward industrialization. No time for leisure...

How does the New York part of you reconcile itself with the Maine part of you that went to Skowhegan School of Art and stays with us every summer?

You have more privacy in New York.

In Maine, since everyone knows you, your life is more public. I think the two places balance each other very nicely. There's more going on culturally in New



Camp, 1990

Surprise



Vivien, 1994

York. It's a livelier than Maine, but Maine's a place where you get into yourself. For the first seven years here I didn't have a telephone or electricity. It was like being at sea. In the ocean, you were free.

With communications the way it is today, I have the same amounts of information now between here and New York.

The sea... Can you tell us about the year you spent in the Navy?

It was my only time of true freedom. The work was mindless. I was on a troop trans-

Village] on, I was always working. This was the one period in my life when I was free from myself.

What painting am I interrupting you from right now?

I'm about to have breakfast. I've been working very hard all summer. I woke up today and said, "What the heck!"

Many American artists, when they try to tap into a sense of the Universal, really mean universal in Western Culture. Why do you think your sense of the universal travels so well beyond that?

Universal is perceived by the eyes of the culture. African sculpture—we perceive it completely different than people who make it. They don't think of it as 'scary' or 'primitive.'

Here we see it as beautiful forms. I imagine it would be realistic to the people in Africa. An unconscious part of that travels with it [across the seas]. You can

only see 'beyond' through the eyes of your culture.

I painted a camp of Maine at night, grayish green, with three orange squares and a little light at the top. I called it *Camp* (pictured left), which might have had too specific a Maine meaning.

Daniel Kany, reviewing my show at Colby College, mentioned that someone from Seattle, looking at *Camp*, described it as tents. [Because he's from Maine, Kany] understood it was what you see when you come across the lake [and see cottage windows]. Paintings mean different things to different people.

'Cool,' 'breezy,' 'psychological,' 'luminous,' 'part of the Post-war pop narrative extending from Abstract Expressionism.' If you could replace all those strip-mined adjectives with one that best describes your work, what would it be?

Great. ■



Sunset 3, 2008

port. It was fascinating to see different types of people. I came from a middle class neighborhood in Queens. Every day you can get out and the water is another color. That was really fantastic.

The freedom...On liberty, you could drift around.

Before my time in the Navy, my life had been very hard driving from 14 on. Afterward, from my time as a student at Cooper Union [art school in East Greenwich

DIFFERENT KATZ DIFFERENT ROOMS

Alex Katz: Maine/New York
Colby Museum of Art, Waterville, ME

Alex Katz: Fifteen Minutes
Pace Wildenstein, New York, NY

Alex Katz: Reflections
Museo delle Arti di Catanzaro, Calabria, Italy

Alex Katz: An American Way of Seeing
Sara Hildén Art Museum in Tampere, Finland

Alex Katz: Give Me Tomorrow
Tate St Ives, Cornwall, UK

Alex Katz Prints
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA

Alex Katz: Der perfekte Augenblick
Museum am Ostwall, Dortmund, Germany

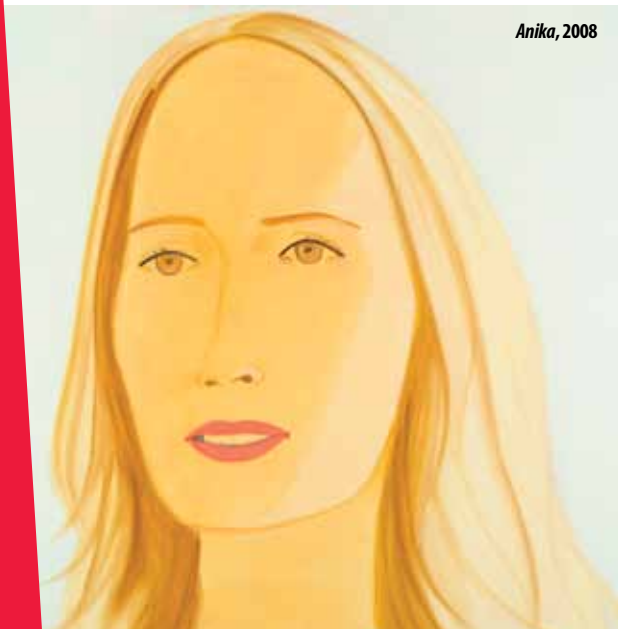
alex katz naked beauty
Kestner Gesellschaft, Hannover, Germany

Alex Katz: Face the Music
Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris, France
Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg, Austria

Alex Katz: Subject To Reversal
Galerie Jablonka, Berlin
Richard Gray Gallery, Chicago

Alex Katz
Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, Ireland
CAC Malaga, Malaga, Spain
Galerie Jablonka, Köln, Germany
Stella Gallery, Moscow, Russia

Alex Katz in Maine
Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA



Anika, 2008