



ARTS

At the Guggenheim, a Major Alex Katz Retrospective Finds the Light

BY GABÉ HIRSCHOWITZ

October 25, 2022



Installation view, *Alex Katz: Gathering*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, October 21, 2022–February 20, 2023. Photo: Ariel Ione Williams and Midge Wattles © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York.

Born in 1927 to Russian émigrés in Brooklyn, Alex Katz's career roughly parallels the modern history of New York. A melting pot of Modernist experimentation, it was there that Katz carved a niche for himself among mid-century luminaries like painters Jane Freilicher, Fairfield Porter, and Larry Rivers; photographer Rudolph Burckhardt; and New York School poets John Ashbery, Edwin Denby, Kenneth

Koch, Frank O'Hara, and James Schuyler.

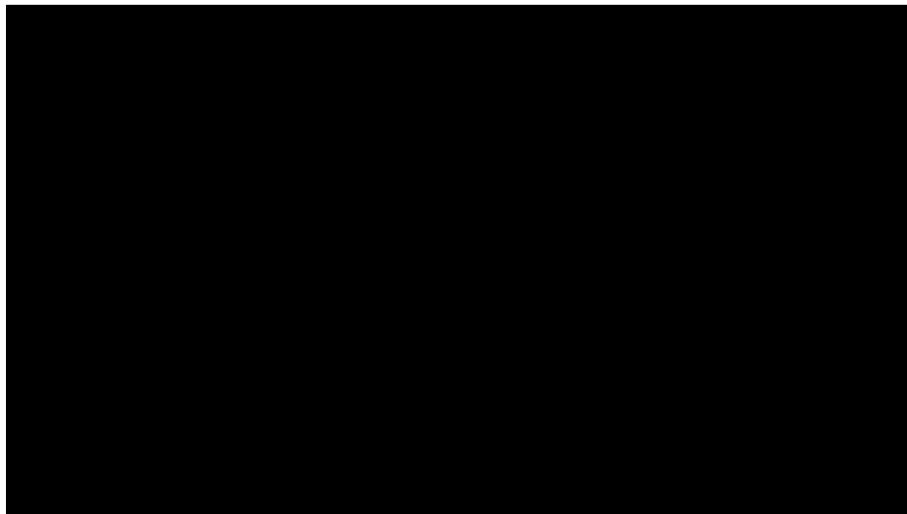
Since those early years, Katz's art has also evolved *with* the city. From his 1950s paintings, which included numerous portraits of friends and his wife, Ada, an accomplished research biologist, to his more recent collages and large-scale landscapes, his career has been a story of continuous growth, as landmarks like the Empire State Building, the Waldorf Astoria, and Lincoln Center sprang up around him. It seems only natural, then, that Frank Lloyd Wright's iconic Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum—which recently celebrated its 63rd anniversary—should host the definitive retrospective of Katz's life in art, "[Alex Katz: Gathering](#)." In such a setting, Katz's often domestic, personal subjects become universal, symbolic not only of a period in history, but of an entire people.



"We see [in Katz's work] a panorama of the artists, poets, dancers, [and] curators who extended the achievements of the Abstract Expressionists in new ways," says Richard Armstrong, director of the Guggenheim. "Looking around, you can sense that Alex was not only a chronicler of these gifted folks, but also of the changing face of New York City."

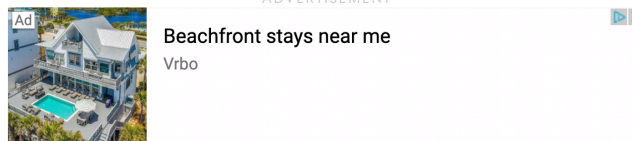
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"Both the challenge and the wonder of planning this show was the extraordinary sweep of history that it encompasses," adds Katherine Brinson, the Guggenheim's Daskalopoulos Curator, Contemporary Art. "It offered a rare opportunity to include work that dates from the beginning of the postwar period ... and [also] be in dialogue with a living artist who's making some of the most riveting and experimental work of his career today."

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Arriving at the Guggenheim, the first painting to draw the eye is Katz's 1946 *Ella Marion in Red Sweater*, a tender portrait of his mother, Sima Katz, followed by a series of sketches of subway riders from the late 1940s and beach scenes from the late 1950s. As they progress through the exhibition, attendees are treated to a chronology of Katz's work that speaks to his changing fascinations over 70 years, with each floor representing roughly a decade in Katz's career. Indeed, the top-floor space, featuring the show's very latest paintings, actually smells faintly of fresh pigment—*Ocean 9*, a commanding black and white oil study, was

still drying when it was hung.



Alex Katz, *Ada Ada*, 1959. Oil on linen, 49 1/2 x 50 in. (125.7 x 127 cm). Grey Art Gallery, New York University Art Collection, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Golden, 1963. © 2022 Alex Katz / Licensed by VAGA at Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Courtesy Alex Katz Studio.

Still, the 150-plus examples of Katz's deftness and style, both as a portraitist and as a colorist, yield certain standouts. An early double portrait, 1959's *Ada Ada*, depicts Katz's wife smiling wryly, her arms crossed and toes pitched diffidently inward, conveying a hard-won intimacy. The painting *4 PM*, also from 1959, again depicts Ada Katz, this time situated in the living room of the loft the couple shared early in their marriage. Yet where *Ada Ada* utilizes the sort of monochrome background so frequently associated with Katz's portraits, this one presents the artist's intimate space in exceptional detail, down to the silhouettes of potted plants on the sills of a window inviting white light into the room. The atmosphere is a decidedly happy one, with Katz again composing the scene in warm shades of yellow.



Alex Katz, *4 PM*, 1959. Oil on linen, 57 1/2 x 50 in. (146.1 x 127 cm). Private collection. © 2022 Alex Katz / Licensed by VAGA at Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

Others are inspired by life outside of the city. In *Crosslight*, from 2019, the seemingly opaque darkness of a nearly solid black and deep-green void still leaves room for Katz's characteristic optimism, apparent here in the flecks and zagging streaks of white that crisscross the painting. To any native of Maine—where Katz

has spent several months of the year since the 1950s—it's clear what the piece depicts, both literally and metaphorically: As you stare down at a rain-soaked forest floor on the darkest of nights, a vibrant array of color and light still meets your eye. Meditative and profound, it is undeniably one of the show's must-see pieces.



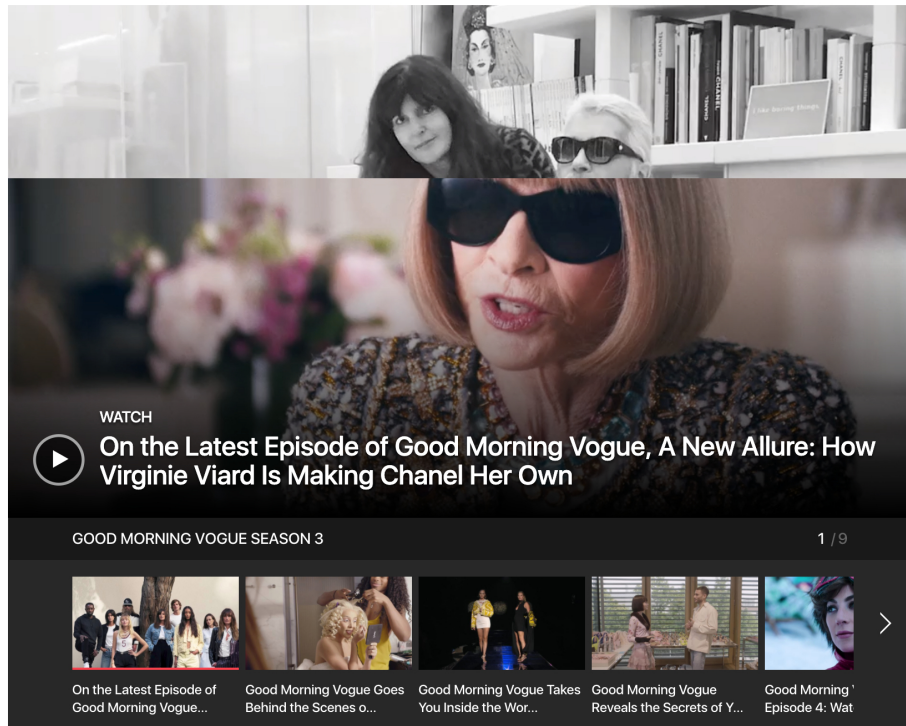
Alex Katz, *Crosslight*, 2019. Oil on linen, 126 x 96 in. (320 x 243.8 cm). Dallas Museum of Art, TWO x TWO for AIDS and Art Fund. © 2022 Alex Katz / Licensed by VAGA at Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: © Paul Takeuchi 2022.

Another recent work, Katz's 2020 *Yellow Tree 1*, is striking for the ways it both invokes and departs from Katz's more recognizable compositions. Like his Flowers series, which Katz reportedly began as an attempt to capture the movement of his surroundings in Maine, it takes flora as its figurative subject, and is composed primarily of vibrant golds and yellows. Yet where the Flowers paintings depict their numerous lilies, marigolds, petunias, and other wildflowers realistically, *Yellow Tree 1* is painted in a more kinetic, impressionistic style, with spreading autumn foliage overwhelming the picture plane—a vision of bounty and joy.



Alex Katz, *Yellow Tree 1*, 2020. Oil on linen, 72 x 72 in. (182.9 x 182.9 cm). Private collection, Republic of Korea. © 2022 Alex Katz / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

“Alex Katz: Gathering” runs through February 20, 2023.



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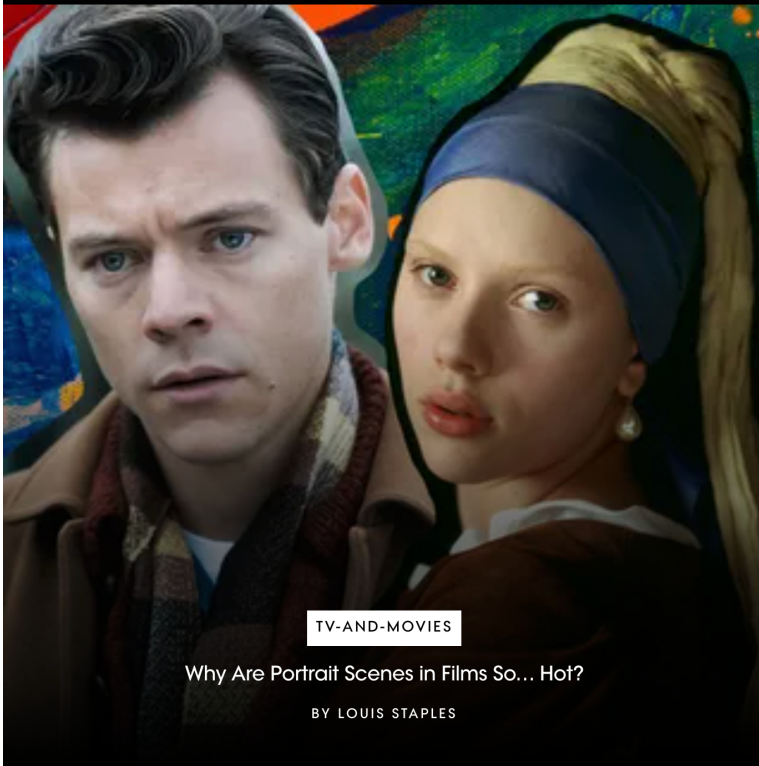
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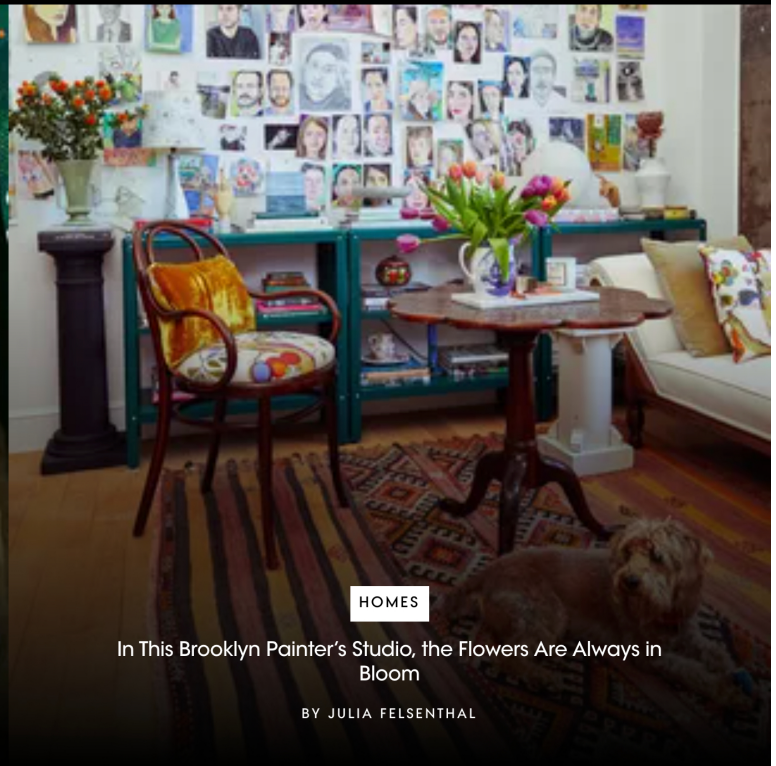
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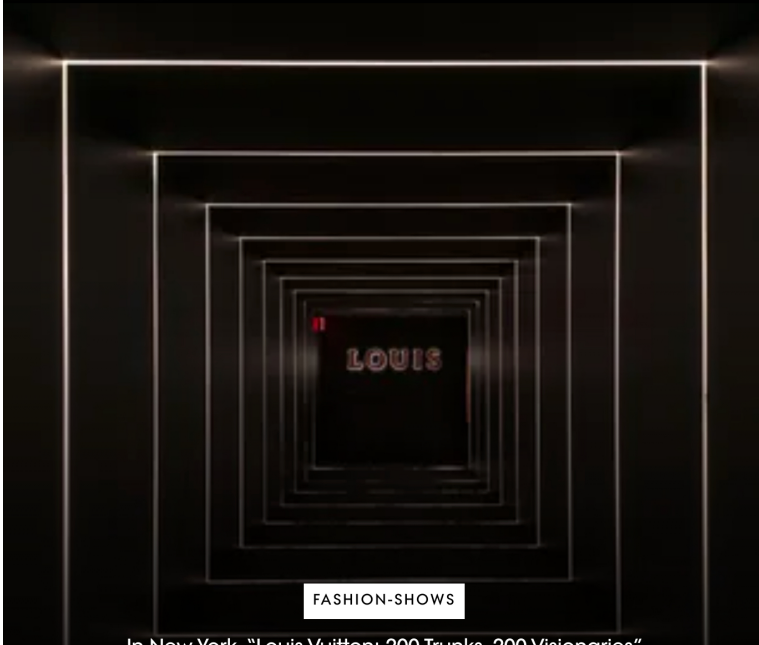
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