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COOL KATZ

This summer, the prolific painter has three concurrent solo shows, a Barney's window takeover and a new home collection. Has Alex Katz found the fountain of youth?

BY MELISSA FELDMAN

Alex Katz is not slowing down. On the contrary, he's enjoying a revival of sorts as he juggles three concurrent exhibitions—"Brand-New & Terrific: Alex Katz in the 1950s" at the Colby College Museum of Art in Maine, "Alex Katz, This Is Now" at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta and "Alex Katz: Landscapes" at Gavin Brown's Enterprise in New York—all opening over a three-month stretch. The exhibitions have been all consuming, yet the prolific octogenarian artist has even managed to find time to create canvases for windows and produce a home collection in partnership with Art Production Fund, which was showcased at Barney's New York this spring.

"He enjoys the company he keeps by being represented by Gavin Brown. It's a younger crowd, and it's given him a different kind of visibility," says Colby College Museum of Art curator Diana Tuite, alluding to Katz's prior representation at the blue-chip Pace Gallery, where he showed for nearly 10 years. With all three shows happening simultaneously, the artist's work might appear redundant, yet Katz has maintained a fluid ever-changing style throughout his illustrious career.

The son of Russian émigrés, Katz grew up in a house in Queens, New York, where the rooms were painted various shades of yellow, green, violet, pink and maroon. The lanky youth found his métier when he enrolled at the prestigious Cooper Union in Manhattan. Yet, at a recent luncheon for his upcoming Colby show, Katz discussed feeling intimidated at the time to be a full-time fine artist because he thought it meant fulfilling a 19th century idea of genius.

The artist's profound connection and devotion to the state of Maine—where he escapes each summer—and Colby, began at the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture. Katz received a scholarship in 1949 venturing outdoors to paint al fresco. While at Skowhegan, he had an epiphany and discovered a connection between the painting process and his unconscious



Bather, 1959, at the Colby College Museum of Art



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—Gavin Brown



White Roses 9, 2012, at the High Museum of Art; the artist, above

self, as well as an affinity for the surrounding area. He eventually purchased a house in Lincolnville.

Katz wanted to make a realistic painting look new. That was the idea behind the early canvases he produced. And while he struggled to find his oeuvre, the 1950s proved to be a fertile decade with many firsts for the artist, including painting from photographs and finding inspiration in the collages of Henri Matisse, Mark Rothko's color and Franz Kline's graphic brush strokes. And while Katz experimented with multiple art-making techniques, he at least knew his paintings weren't conventional.

In 1957, Katz's introduction to Ada—who became his muse and ultimately, his wife—resulted in several portraits which are featured in the upcoming Colby show. While disinterested in portraiture that conveyed psychological or political overtones, Katz was engaged in creating a more impersonal style that was of a particular person, at

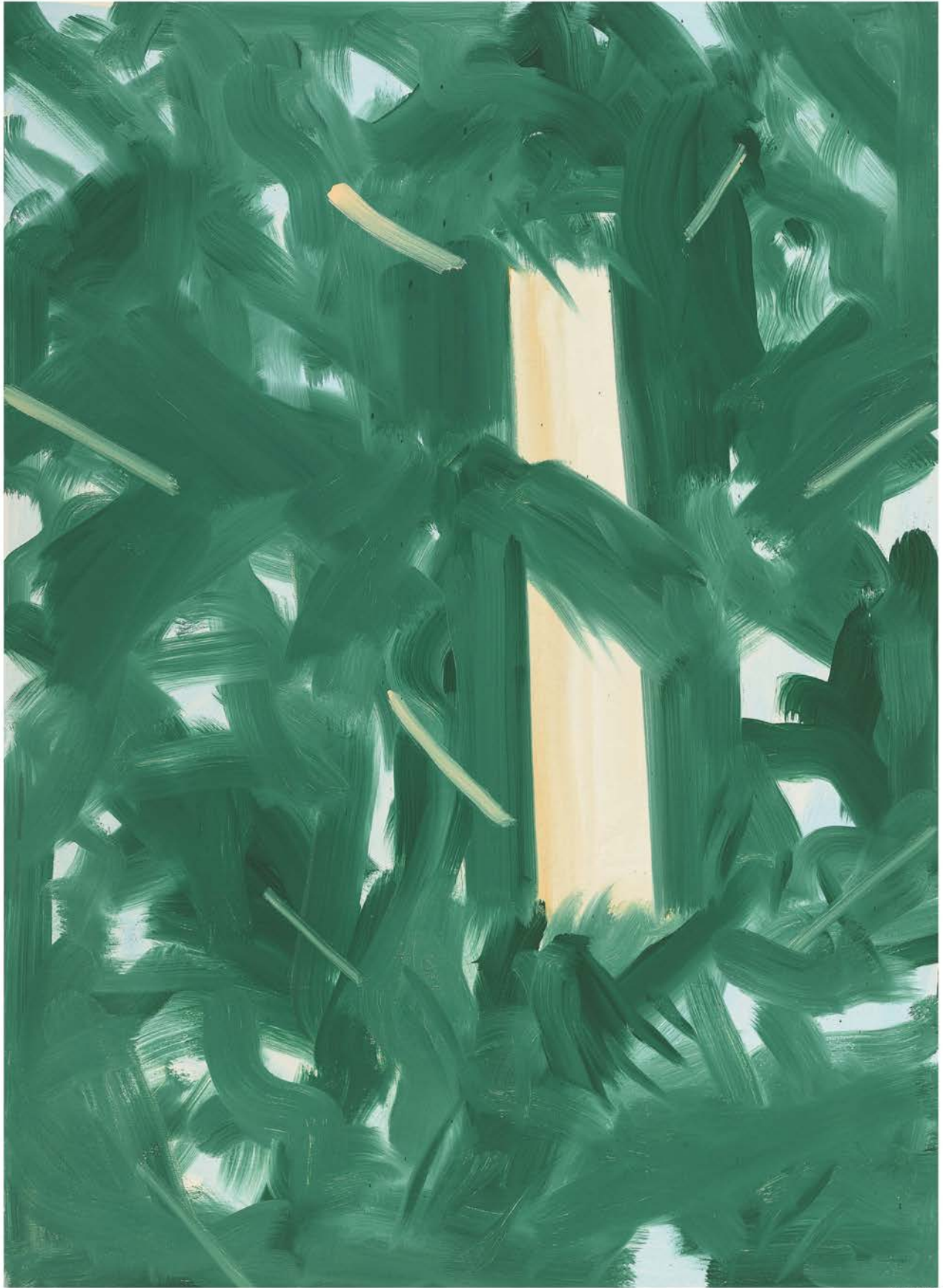
a particular time, in an abstract form, with faces and forms on chromatic backgrounds.

"At the heart, Alex has always been a painter's painter," says Tuite. The Colby exhibition is a homecoming of sorts and marks the first time Katz's work from the 1950s will be assembled in an exhibition of more than 60 paintings, collages and cutouts on loan to the museum or drawn from its deep collection. Colby is home to nearly 900 works by the artist, many of which were gifted to Colby by Katz's foundation. "I think what's so exciting about this early work, while totally unrecognizable as work by Katz, is it's so foundational," says Tuite. While Katz's early career will be commemorated in Maine, one-third of the exhibition "Alex Katz, This Is Now" at the High Museum of Art, will include works completed in the last decade, as well as 15 landscape paintings that will be exhibited together for the first time.

In May, a solo show of recent landscapes debuted at Gavin Brown's West Village space. "They're a natural landscape as opposed to a rural landscape," says Brown. "The paintings don't specifically reference Maine. They're less preoccupied with the depiction of something actual," he says. Larger in scale, this work also highlights Katz's loose brushstroke in a particular way. "There's a distinct lack of sentiment," says Brown, adding, "There's nothing romantic about these landscapes. They definitely have a sense of the profound about them."

As for Katz's recent output, the artist's savvy dealer says, "I think his journey has been a very internal one, with his relationship with his painting, his brush and with his marks. We're witness to that. Other artists are involved in a more open conversation. He has deliberately chosen a narrow path in which to explore painting in an infinite way."

PHOTO BY PAUL TAKEUCHI; COURTESY OF GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE, THE HIGH MUSEUM AND COLBY COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART © ALEX KATZ



Untitled Landscape 4, 2014, at Gavin Brown's Enterprise

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