

RICHARD GRAY GALLERY



After the Fame Come the Masterpieces, Alex Katz at Richard Gray Gallery

MARCH 29, 2016 BY LEE ANN NORMAN



Alex Katz. "Jeannie," 1974. Pencil on paper, 14 3/4 x 22 1/8 inches.

RECOMMENDED

In a survey of master drawings running concurrently in Richard Gray's Chicago and New York City locations, "Alex Katz: Present Tense" stresses the importance of drawing to the painter's practice. Initially trained as a draftsman, Katz's drawings are studies for many of his well-known figurative paintings of family and friends.

The Chicago exhibition features two rooms, one filled with meticulous charcoal sketches made in the last fifteen years and the other of graphite works from the 1960s and seventies, a time when Katz was beginning to shift away from painting landscapes and cityscapes and turning to figures. Most of the portraits in the exhibition are women—all beautiful and stylish, and styled perfectly to match Katz's emphasis on light, shadow, composition and contrast.



Installation view of “Alex Katz: Present Tense” at Richard Gray Gallery, Winter 2016.

The newer charcoal works stand on their own; their completeness and precision is striking; black, white and shades of gray mimic the layered contrasts that Katz creates in his full-color paintings.

Producing study drawings requires a presence and durational intimacy that Katz effortlessly displays in the work. The graphite drawings seem lighter both in their marks and material—their heft is only realized at a distance. It may be easier logistically to sketch friends and family, as Katz has done throughout his career, but choosing such intimate subjects raises the stakes for the artist to get it right. In these drawings, Katz seizes an opportunity to go beyond the surface and reveal the things that only he can know as a lover, father or close friend. He is the rare artist who has been able to paint six days a week for six hours a day consistently for the last sixty years. In a class I took with his son, the curator and poet Vincent Katz, he told us how his father always said that after an artist has received his fifteen minutes of fame, it was time to go away and make the masterpieces. This exhibition offers a rare opportunity to bear witness to such discipline and the process of how perfecting a craft can create unique and affecting works of art. (Lee Ann Norman)

“*Alex Katz: Present Tense*” shows through April 23 at Richard Gray Gallery, 875 North Michigan.