



NEW YORK

"Alex Katz at the Met"
at the Metropolitan Museum of Art
"Alex Katz: Present Tense"
at Richard Gray Gallery

Featuring paintings at the Met and drawings at Richard Gray, these two retrospectives make the case—again—for Alex Katz's enduring relevance. The heroic sizes of his paintings and cutouts, with their swaths of flat decorative color, clearly owe something to Modernist experiments, especially Matisse. Indeed, the pleasure of looking at a Katz recalls Matisse's dictum that art should be something like a good armchair. Yet the blunt efficiency of Katz's painterly attack and the deliberate awkwardness of his drawing give his work a peculiarly American edge that keeps the viewer from getting too comfortable. Katz adds to that mix influences such as advertising, movie stills, the cool affect of fashion photography, and the graphic punch of Japanese woodblock prints. The result has proved a rich source of inspiration that successive generations of artists have profitably tapped over the course of Katz's long and enviable career. Particularly appropriate for the age of the selfie, these two retrospectives, especially the drawings at Richard Gray Gallery, highlight Katz's close-up portraits as a showcase for his mastery of form and scale.

The Met has seven paintings, all in one large sunlit room that span almost 50 years. There is only one landscape, *Purple Wind* (1995), which is a shame as, even after his 1998 retrospective at PS1, that facet of his work remains underappreciated. This particular painting belongs to a subgenre that Katz has excelled at: the nighttime cityscape. At once balanced but asymmetrical, with a dark purple ground that seems to glow, the huge (10-and-a-half by 8 foot) painting features a number of formal paradoxes, all of which make it highly satisfying. *Purple Wind's* melancholy mood recalls the works of Edward Hopper, yet the highly stylized realizations of the windows and branches, along with the schematic composition, exude the aesthetic reserve of an *Ukiyo-e* print.

Katz's cutouts in this show, *Phillip Pearlstein (1924 -)*, (1978), and *John's Loft*, (1969), feel less convincing, as they diminish his strengths as a painter while never fully becoming sculptural objects. *Phillip Pearlstein*, an aluminum sheet, painted on both sides and connected to a pedestal, shows the eponymous painter of nudes from the waist up, gesturing with one hand while holding a drink in the other. In this context, Katz's awkward drawing just looks awkward, as there is no background to push against for the sake of tension. *John's Loft* consists of multiple panels of varying shapes and sizes attached to the

wall. The intention appears to be a depiction of a loft party, with some panels representing figures or fragments of figures, as if one were peering through a doorway. It has a playful whimsy, enjoyable enough, but the separate panels never cohere. Katz began making cutouts in the early '60s, but it was in the '70s when many in New York City's downtown believed painting outmoded, incapable of holding its own against video, performance, installation, and other post-studio practices. Perhaps the cutouts in this show, playing image against object, were bids on Katz's part to defend the vitality of the medium.

In the '80s, painting came back with a vengeance to New York, and Katz enjoyed a surge of interest in his work. In the process, his deceptively spare, cool style became a beacon to the Neo-Expressionists looking for new ways to paint the figure. The Met show includes an iconic work from that time, *Red Coat* (1982). The painting nicely illustrates Katz's fascination with images from cinema, fashion, and advertising. *Red Coat* reveals a three-quarters-cropped head of Katz's wife Ada, the subject of dozens of portraits over the life of his career. Brown eyes and red lips as impassive as always, she sports a matching red hat and raincoat against a darker red background. The features of her face, her black hair, her clothing, and the background all read simultaneously as representations and as abstract shapes. Katz pulls off this feat through scale, and to some extent color. The image in reproduction reads as a face, but when seen in actual size (8 by 4 feet), the simplified forms of hair, hat, eyebrows, etc. take on a life of their own, effectively suspending, if only for an instant, the gestalt of the human face. The vivid red of the raincoat and hat adds another level of distraction, drawing the gaze away from the face toward the background. The highly keyed color also conveys an emotional charge, which, since this is Katz's wife, feels unabashedly erotic. Ada's cool mien serves as a foil to heighten that impression.

The Richard Gray drawings give a peek under the hood, as it were, at Katz's careful calibrations of shape, line, and placement—the mechanics that make a portrait like *Red Coat* so credible. There are a total of 16 drawings in this show, divided between earlier pencil drawings and later works in charcoal. While the pencil drawings show great finesse, the later charcoals have real authority, and stand up to the power of his paintings. *Black Hat 2*, (2010), a small charcoal on paper, fuses fashion imagery with strong graphic form for an especially convincing result. The cropping of the head roughly divides the picture plane into four quadrants, where the axes skew slightly off kilter. The underside of the hat forms two darker shapes that frame the woman's partially concealed face. The top of the hat dominates the upper half of the picture, actively competing for the viewer's attention with the model's face in the lower half. As one would expect from a fan of Japanese prints, the negative spaces around the model's head make the page's corners come alive, adding to the dynamism of the image. In their studied precision, the drawings demonstrate how much thought Katz puts into his compositions, while implying how difficult they must be to successfully scale up. It's a little like having the magician explaining his illusions. The paintings at the Met have the power to enthrall, but the Richard Gray show makes an excellent accompaniment, as it reveals the effort behind the master's tricks.

—HOVEY BROCK

"Eric," 2008, Alex Katz

CHARCOAL ON PAPER, 15" x 22½"

PHOTO: MICHAEL TROPEA, COURTESY RICHARD GRAY GALLERY