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## At 87, Alex Katz rules the landscape at High Museum of Art

**ARTS & THEATER**

By **Howard Pousner** - The Atlanta Journal-Constitution  
Posted: 12:00 a.m. Saturday, June 27, 2015



Ada Katz in front of a glamorous 1972 portrait of herself, "Blue Umbrella 2," painted by her husband, Alex Katz. Ada Katz often has served as a model of her husband's work. BRANT [SANDERLIN@AJC.COM](mailto:SANDERLIN@AJC.COM)

**Alex Katz** exhibited a warm smile and a gentle, grandfatherly manner inside the High Museum of Art galleries where one of the largest exhibitions ever focused on his landscape paintings, “This Is Now,” was being hung earlier this month.

At 87, Katz is indeed a granddad, an unusually natty and arty one who has modeled for J. Crew and recently turned Barneys New York’s Madison Avenue windows into temporary galleries. But when the Brooklyn-born artist recounted stories from an accomplished career spanning six decades, there was little mellow in the fellow.

“Most painters fold when they meet tough resistance. With me, I just got harder and tougher,” Katz said, recounting long-ago wounds that somehow remain fresh. “When I got bad reviews, (I thought), ‘You don’t like this? Next time I’m gonna shove it down your throat.’”

He laughed and continued, seeming to revel in his outrage at critics and other art world creatures, some of whom, one would assume, have long ago gone to that great exhibit opening in the sky.

“It just made me hostile, and the paintings got bigger. It’s in your face. I’m gonna knock all those AE’s off the wall.”

AE’s?

Ah, those are the lamentable abstract expressionists who held a death-grip on the art-world spotlight around the mid-century when Katz, educated in modern art at Manhattan’s Cooper Union Art School, emerged from two summers of post-graduate study at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. At the Maine school, he was introduced to painting under the open sky. Creating en plein air is a practice to which he has returned throughout his epic career.

The figurative painter persisted through the long glory ride of abstraction, without once doing violence to an AE or his work. Still, it rankles.

“I spent 10 years carving frames three days a week and living on really no money at all and being patronized by second-rate abstract expressionist painters,” he recalled. “They always said, ‘Well, Alex can paint well.’”

Well, talent will out ... eventually.

Katz became well-known and well-compensated for his iconic, large-scale portraits of the late 1950s through '70s, executed in signature flat planes of color and lean lines. Museums and collectors were hot to have these emotionally cool paintings of his artist and poet friends, models and his greatest muse, wife Ada — incorrectly reading into their attractive, aloof countenances a celebration of some sort of carefree, upper-crust American dream life.

Katz fed the market with these compositions, which he acknowledged increasingly borrowed the scale, energy and “grammar” of abstraction, though without embracing AE’s untamed imagery.



New York painter Alex Katz at the High Museum of Art during a preview of his exhibit “Alex Katz, This is Now” on June 18. The High-organized show then will go on a European tour. BRANT [SANDERLIN/](#)

Landscape played an important role in these portraits, not just as fields of color against which his figures are set, but sometime suggesting a narrative. For example, in the magnetic picture of Ada, “Blue Umbrella 2” (1972), shown in the first gallery of “This Is Now,” her dreamy eyes are as liquid as the long, drenching raindrops falling around her.

By the late 1980s, what was once background and context had shifted to the foreground. The figures were beginning to disappear from Katz’s increasingly large canvases, replaced by landscapes as his subject.

This wasn’t the oil paint version of Ansel Adams’ purple mountains majesty, however. Katz’s works are unquestionably beautiful but far from documentary renderings. Then and now, he was more interested in capturing the flash of perception before an image comes into full focus, the time and light of what he refers to as “the present tense.”

These fresh expressions, some scaled as large as the 43-foot-high-by-30-foot-wide “This Is Now” banner that hangs off the High’s Peachtree Street facade, were shown in a scattering of gallery exhibits in the early ’90s and at a 1996 exhibit at what’s now MoMA PS1 in Long Island City of Katz landscapes from 1951 to ‘95.

Then ... pfft.



“January 3” (1993), 78.5 inches by 155 inches, is included in the exhibit “Alex Katz, This Is Now,” opening June 21 at the High Museum of Art.

“They were commercially dead (because of) the scale and the imagery,” Katz acknowledged. “And the institutions didn’t pick them up either.”

In a career long enough to have as many rises and dips as a Coney Island roller coaster, he’s able to wax philosophical about the art world’s collective shrug.

“Fashion turns,” he said, placing a finger on his front teeth for a moment, as if collecting additional data to complete the thought. “It’s relatively simple: You get tired of big knots on a shirt and they start using small knots, just like that. The art thing changes every three years or so. They want another hemline, so to speak.”

Yet sometimes old hemlines come back into vogue.

That certainly seems to be the case with Katz's landscapes, and the High Museum exhibit is playing a major part in the revival.

Michael Rooks, High curator of modern and contemporary art, has been an enthusiast dating to his student years at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and his curatorial stint at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, a city where the artist's nature paintings are well represented in collections.

"I always thought they were really very avant-garde," Rooks said, "because they oscillate between being recognizable spatial pictures and abstract paintings."

When he arrived at the High in 2010, the curator said Katz, whom he admired for charting his own course and frequently "going against the grain" of art trends, was high on his list of artists he wanted to bring into the Atlanta museum's fold.

Shortly thereafter, Rooks met the artist by chance at a Chelsea gallery. Interested in adding a major Katz work to the High's contemporary holdings, the curator soon returned to New York for a visit to his Soho home/studio.

Rooks was astonished.

"Alex's studio is packed with so many big paintings and of all sizes," he said. "He's so prolific for any age. Usually when you go to a studio you see one big thing in process, unfinished, and a number of small things. But this was a studio full of incredible paintings."

In consultation with Katz, Rooks chose "Winter Landscape 2," a 2007 oil on linen that's 10 feet wide by 20 feet long.

Katz was wowed by the curator's commitment. (The sale price remains undisclosed.)

"He had the vision to commit himself to it, which was a big deal to me," Katz said. "No one else did."

Some of the giant landscapes had been stored in Katz's studio for 20 years or more. Now many of them fill the 14,000-square-foot second floor of the High's Wieland Pavilion — a lot of "area-r" to cover, the artist might say in the New York-ese that slides into his conversation like a Nathan's Famous hot dog into its bun.

After the extensive High-organized exhibit closes Sept. 6, it travels to the Guggenheim Bilbao in Spain, with a German tour stop expected to be added.

A recently concluded show of newer landscapes at his latest New York gallery, Gavin Brown's Enterprise, where Katz paintings reportedly fetch \$350,000 to \$1.1 million, was one of his most successful in years, Katz reports with great pleasure. And it generated media coverage no money could buy, including a detailed Wall Street Journal profile.

Along with "This Is Now," which is accompanied by a coffee table book of the same name (Yale University Press, \$45), these developments have the artist optimistic that people are finally embracing his landscapes.

"Very few artists ever get on the bubble," he said, meaning that moment when an artist is about to become the next hot thing. "I was on the bubble in 1959, and Pop art took me off it. And then I came on the bubble with the landscapes in the early '90s and then it slid away. And now, I'm the most popular as I ever was in the States because of the landscapes. I don't know if I'm on the bubble again."

Bubble or not, Katz said he has no plans to slow down now, even with his 88th birthday rapidly approaching.

"No reason to," he said as flatly as one of his painted figures. "You have an idea and you want to see what it looks like. And one thing leads to another."

Besides, he may be represented in more than 100 museums worldwide and the subject of more than 200 solo exhibits, but he still has issues he's working through.

"I have hostility for people for 50 years. They're the ones who I meet in the street and say, 'Hi, how are you?'"

This artist who persisted to become an icon of post-World War II American art doesn't have to say much more to those who doubted him to make his point.

"That's what the drive is: I'm right, you're wrong, you made a mistake."

## EXHIBIT PREVIEW

"Alex Katz, This Is Now"

Opens June 21. Through Sept 6. 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Thursdays and Saturdays; 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Fridays; noon-5 p.m. Sundays. \$19.50; \$16.50, students and ages 65 and up; \$12, ages 6-17; free, ages 5 and younger. High Museum of Art, 1280 Peachtree St. N.E., Atlanta. 404-733-4444, [www.high.org](http://www.high.org).