

Alex Katz: The Merits of Consistency

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Although it has been stated that the chief problem concerning Alex Katz's oeuvre throughout his ongoing sixty year career lies in the repetitive nature of his signature painting style, this paper will make a case for the merits of his consistency.¹ Christian Viveros-Fauné, a prominent critic for *Artnews*, asserts that Katz's shortfall, his inability to arouse an aesthetic response in viewers beyond "all-that-is-there deflation," derives from his tendency to paint repetitive surfaces that are empty of meaning and "just look pretty."² But Katz's distinctly recognizable sensuous surfaces and repeated motifs do not represent his most significant failure, but rather the source of his greatest virtuosity and ingenuity. Through an examination of his work using a Postmodernist lens, a discussion of the numerous dichotomies present on his enigmatic surfaces, and the elucidation of his Marshall McLuhan-influenced approach to imparting covert messages, it becomes clear how his trademark modus operandi enables him to communicate with import that extends beyond and beneath the canvas surface.³

An analysis of Alex Katz's consistent style and repeated motifs through a Postmodernist lens reveals his consummate alignment with the classical artistic tradition which stressed the imitation of former masters in pursuit of capturing the eternity of beauty. In his 1985 treatise

¹ Although often associated with Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and other New York artists who are responsible for the ascent to prominence of American art during the mid-twentieth century, scholars and collectors alike concur that at age ninety, Alex Katz is experiencing a "supernova of creativity" and the height of his career. Ellen Gamerman, "A Look At Alex Katz's Late Career," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 30, 2015. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-look-at-alex-katzs-late-career-1430407795>; David Salle, a Neo-Expressionist painter, art critic, and theorist, similarly contends that in Katz's recent works, he has attained a sense of "fearlessness, finely honed technique, and heightened resolve." David Salle, "Old Guys Painting: David Salle on the Mature Painter's Letting Go," *ArtNews*, September 10, 2015. <http://www.artnews.com/2015/09/10/old-guys-painting-david-salle-on-the-mature-painters-letting-go/>. For an interview featuring Alex Katz's commentary on the vigor and productivity that marks his artistic production at age ninety see: Hilarie M. Sheets, "At 90, Still Raising the Bar for Himself — and the Other Guys." *The New York Times*, October 31, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/31/arts/design/alex-katz-gavin-brown-matisse.html>

² Mario Naves, "The Various Alex Katz," *The New Criterion* (December 2001): 48; Ellen Gamerman, "A Look At Alex Katz's Late Career," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 30, 2015. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-look-at-alex-katzs-late-career-1430407795>

³ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill McGraw-Hill, 1964). I accessed this source via an eBook which did not provide page numbers.

differentiating Modern and Postmodern aesthetic values, critic Umberto Eco explained that while Modernist works were judged solely according to the extent of their novelty and unorthodox originality, a Postmodernist evaluation values art in terms of its “dialect between order and novelty.”⁴ Alex Katz fully engages in this dialogue through his adroit appropriation of particular elements from both the art historical canon and the contemporaneous movements he has witnessed throughout his six-decade-long career. Katz’s synthesis of various artistic techniques from a myriad of epochs provides a palpable demonstration of his artistic strategy. For example, works such as his *Black Dress* series (2015) convey his distinct amalgamation of Pierre Bonnard’s open compositions, Amedeo Modigliani’s stylized distortions, Henri Matisse’s lyrical surfaces, Pierre-Auguste Renoir’s engagement with society through subject matter, and Édouard Manet’s simplified forms described by flat, uninflected planes of color, as opposed to delineated contour lines.⁵ Despite his unwavering commitment to the figure throughout his career, this series demonstrates his seamless incorporation of the formal elements of contemporaneous movements. Katz appropriates Jackson Pollock’s heroic dimensions and fast painting technique,

⁴ Umberto Eco attributes the “classical theory of art,” which he deemed found a renewed vigor in Postmodernist thought, to the epochs spanning from the ancient Greeks through the Renaissance. He defines the “modern era” as extending from sixteenth-century Mannerism to early twentieth century avant-gardes. Umberto Eco, “Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern and Post-Mod Aesthetics,” *Daedalus*, vol. 114, no. 4 (Fall, 1985): 161, 173, & 178.; The Northern Renaissance workshop cultures provides an example of classical aesthetic paradigm that regards repetition alluring while apathetic to the modernist barometer of success, the concept of “absolute originality.” European artistic production north of the Alps during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was characterized by a minute subset of “master” artists who employed numerous apprentices and journeymen under their tutelage to create altarpieces and paintings in the characteristic manner and style of their master. For a more detailed discussion of the Early Netherlandish workshop culture that values the idiosyncratic and repetitive stylization of masters such as Rogier van der Weyden and Robert Campin see: Stephan Kemperdick, “The Workshop and It’s Working Materials,” in *The Master of Flémalle and Rogier van der Weyden: an exhibition organized by the Städel Museum Frankfurt am Main, and the Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin*, ed. Stephan Kemperdick, Jochen Sander, and Bastian Eclercy (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 95-116.

⁵ Allusions to past masters of art abound. Please refer to the seventh page of this paper for a more thorough discussion of how Claude Monet’s explorations of atmospheric color and light interactions influenced the guiding tenets of Katz’s practice.; Jackie Wullschlager, “Time is on His Side.” *Financial Times*, May 26, 2012. http://www.alexkatz.com/bibliography/selected_articles_and_reviews/Time_Is_On_His_Side-Wullschlager_Jackie-Financial_Times; Andrew M. Goldstein, “Alex Katz on Distilling Art to it’s Essence,” *Artspace*, August 14, 2012. https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/in_depth/alex_katz_interview-5122

Mark Rothko's weighty color qualities, Pop Art's flat immediacy, and Minimalism's reductive austerity, while rejecting their interests in psychoanalytic introspection, surface agitation, primitivism, and overt commercial references.⁶

In addition to recycling elements from past and present doyens of the art-world, his routine employment of similar motifs also parallels many prior masters of art. Just as Cezanne produced countless paintings of Mont Sainte-Victoire, Monet filled over two hundred and fifty canvases with waterlily portrayals, and Picasso constantly returned to the subject of his female muses, Katz likewise situates himself within that venerable tradition of consistency. Katz's ingenious approaches to rendering the four hundred portraits he has painted of his wife Ada, exemplifies the Postmodern valuation framework that regards both repetition and innovation as the touchstones for aesthetic value.⁷ Examples such as his 2011 woodcut *Ada* and his 2017 painting *Ada in Purple Hat* display both his evocation of the serial nature of the imagery and his ability to evade monotony with constantly innovative artistic strategies.

The multiplicity of paradoxes present on Alex Katz's intriguingly enigmatic surfaces stimulates below-the-canvas substance that engenders a dynamic aesthetic response in the viewer, the utter antithesis of "all-that-is-there deflation."⁸ In 2015, Cardiff University neurologists, psychologists, and art historians collaborated on a multidisciplinary study to examine what factors contribute to a viewer's inherent appreciation of art. The researchers concluded that the degree in which representational artwork conditions an aesthetic effect on the

⁶ Almost every critical review of Alex Katz's paintings or exhibitions includes a discussion of his assimilation of multifarious influences from other artists. Some examples include: Karen Wilkin, "Alex Katz at the Met," *The New Criterion* vol. 34, no. 6 (February 2016): 45; McGill, Douglas C. "How Alex Katz Puts Power on the Canvas." *The New York Times*, March 24, 1985. <http://www.nytimes.com/1985/03/24/arts/how-alex-katz-puts-power-on-canvas.html?pagewanted=all>; Jackie Wullschlager, "Alex Katz and Etel Adnan at London's Serpentine Gallery," *Financial Times*, June 3, 2016. <https://www.ft.com/content/eb518ec8-2806-11e6-8ba3-cdd781d02d89>

⁷ Eco, "Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern and Post-Mod Aesthetics," 161; Please refer to my sixth paragraph for a more thorough examination of Katz's innovative approaches to his repeated motifs.

⁸ Naves, "The Various Alex Katz," 48.

beholder hinges on the dichotomous nature of paintings, a perceived discordance between the dual awareness of the materials of the art object, and the representational subject matter itself.⁹ An analysis of Katz's work in light of their findings reveals an abundance of dichotomies, namely the dualistic juxtaposition of formal elements apparent of his surfaces. Katz presents a "soft" subject matter, attractive women, pleasant flowers, and lyrical landscapes rendered with planes of "cool" color and the underlying purity of a "near Platonic sense of the ideal geometry," unobstructed by so much as discernible tonal modulation or contour line.¹⁰ His 2013 painting, *Red Hat (Renee)*, clearly conveys the stark contrast between these sedative qualities and his simultaneous employment of aggressively immediate tactics. The artist uses dramatic cropping and a magnified perspective, resulting in an uncomfortable "zoomed-in" view of the sitter's face, an anonymously detached manner of paint handling, which eliminates any remnant of painterly touch, and a scale that utterly engulfs viewers in its seven-by-five-foot enormity.

⁹ Robert Pepperell, "Artworks as Dichotomous Objects: Implications for the Scientific Study of Aesthetic Experience," *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 9 (2015). This scientific study on the neurological effects of aesthetic experience effectively incorporates a substantial degree of art theory and art historical references to reinforce the conclusions of the experimental test. An extract from a 1966 interview between painter, Francis Bacon, and art critic, David Sylvester, reveals a parallel between the British Expressionist and Alex Katz in their ability to create a dichotomous experience for their viewers. Bacon asserted, "one wants a thing to be as factual as possible and at the same time as deeply suggestive or deeply unlocking of areas of sensation other than simple illustration of the object that you set out to do. Isn't that what art is all about?" Bacon and Katz are both concerned with presenting a deeper meaning beyond the mere illustration of the subject matter at hand. Bacon strived to reveal the object's existential sensation, while Katz seeks veracity in his preoccupation with color and light interactions. Robert Pepperell, "Artworks as Dichotomous Objects: Implications for the Scientific Study of Aesthetic Experience," *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 9 (2015).

¹⁰ Michael Jarvis, "Articulating the Tactic Dimension in Artmaking," *Journal of Visual Arts Practice* vol. 6 no. 3 (2007): 201. Michael Jarvis presented this paper in a Symposia, The Documentation of Fine Art Processes and Practices, at the Lancaster University Institute for the Contemporary in December of 2005. Jarvis, an artist, writer, and fine art lecturer at Northumbria University, asserts that Alex Katz's characteristic techniques, to create elegant surfaces absent of discernible brush strokes or gestures that would point to the painter's intervention, mask their calculated, intensive, and complex construction. He ultimately advocates that contemporary artists should strive for greater transparency with their viewers about their techniques and practice in order to facilitate a "more enlightened grasp, understanding, and encouragement of the artist in the contemporary climate;" Wilkin, "Alex Katz at the Met," 45.

In addition to the juxtaposed elements that manifest on his paintings' surfaces, Katz handily creates a dichotomous experience for his viewers by conditioning the way in which they encounter his work. Andrew M. Goldstein, Editor of *Artspace* publication, describes how Katz's portraits of undeniably beautiful subjects initially draw the viewer in through their attraction to the elegant surface, but retains their attention as they become engrossed in their endeavor to penetrate the seemingly deadpan and "psychologically mum" face before them.¹¹ By distilling his subjects to their reductive essences, Katz's portraits possess an "Etruscan-like inscrutability" that engenders a profoundly mesmerizing aesthetic experience for his viewers.¹² Katz's artistic objective extends the theme of contradictory dualities, as he aims to "make an image that's so simple you can't avoid it, and so complicated you can't figure it out."¹³

Alex Katz's painting, *White Visor* (2003), provides a helpful paradigm to examine how viewers experience a Katzian piece. Upon entering the gallery, an observer cannot help but to feel an alluring attraction towards the glacial surface, soothing light blue expanse, and ravishing female countenance. As they attempt to unravel the woman's laconic expression however, tension replaces this fleeting tranquil sensation. The lack of any overt narrative prompts the viewer to immerse themselves in the fabrication of their own speculations about the possible object of the woman's hollow gaze and the context that might elicit her visor and bare shoulders. Katz's ability to present a dichotomous painting that raises more questions than it does provide answers results in a fully enthralling experience for the viewer.

¹¹ Goldstein, "Alex Katz on Distilling Art to it's Essence."

¹² Ibid. Australian art critic, Sebastian Smee, likewise describes Katz's technique of extracting the pure and reductive forms from his subjects. Smee argues that Katz achieves "visual distillation" by "creating enigma through omission and simplicity." Sebastian Smee, "The Art of Omission," *The Boston Globe*, May 18, 2012. http://www.alexkatz.com/bibliography/selected_articles_and_reviews/The_Art_of_Omission-Smee_Sebastian-The_Boston_Globe

¹³ Faith McClure, "Review: High's "This is Now" Explores Alex Katz Conundrum Through Lens of Landscape," *ArtsATL*, July 24, 2015. <http://artsatl.com/review-alex-katz-this-is-now/>

Although Viveros-Fauné condemns Katz's use of serial imagery, a consideration of the creator's impetus behind his subject matter selection illuminates his artistic brilliance.¹⁴ Katz asserts that he merely uses familiar subjects that are readily accessible to him as vehicles to explore a Monet-influenced study of the nuances of color and light relationships.¹⁵ In this way, he implores viewers to look beyond the pretty surfaces at the McLuhanian-inspired approach to imparting messages through the mediums, artistic techniques, and formal elements he employs to render his subjects. In 1964, Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase "the medium is the message" to illuminate the transpiring cultural shift of individuals placing a greater emphasis on the manner in which information was being communicated and received, rather than the information itself.¹⁶ In the same way, Katz's work displays his accentuation of the messages he creates through his medium and techniques, rather than focusing on the surface-level overt subject matter. In a recent interview with Artspace, Katz explained:

Painters construct layers. To me, if the subject matter is on top, it's a very uninteresting picture. With a complicated picture you have layers, and my pictures are fairly complicated....For me, the image is the most important thing. I'm an image-maker, and I think my paintings are visionary images: you can see things through the image. The technique of painting makes it more palatable, or more acceptable. A good technique holds it all together, makes it more fluid, and more believable, but it shouldn't get in your way.¹⁷

¹⁴ Naves, "The Various Alex Katz:" 48.

¹⁵ Susan Gray, "Staying Power," *Art & Antiques* vol. 29 no.1 (January 2006): 40. While artistic intentions and interpretations must not be overlooked, it is important to think critically about his assertion of his ability to completely disregard subject matter in light of the notion of intentional fallacy. Intentional fallacy involves the artist's tendency to explain what they intended to do with their work piece, which is not always what they actually did, which calls viewers to think judiciously about judging a work's merit and meaning solely on the artists' described intentions.

¹⁶ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill McGraw-Hill, 1964). I accessed this source via an eBook which did not provide page numbers.

¹⁷ Artspace Editors, "In Search of the "Big Technique:" Alex Katz on Why Artists Should Stick to a Style in a Changing Art World," *Artspace*, July 29, 2016.

https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/book_report/alex-katz-robert-storr-interview-54050#

A complex subject matter would likely hinder his ability to achieve the underlying principle that guides his practice, to imitate, through patterns of light and color, the honest way the human eye perceives a fleeting moment in time.¹⁸ A focus on this ever-changing interaction necessitates a dynamically parallel solution and repeating motifs permits him the freedom to focus on these relationships. At the same time, his consistency offers a means to display his ingenuity at approaching the same motifs in constantly convention-defying ways, such as extreme magnification, cropping, and even “wrenching images free of the boundaries of the support.”¹⁹

This virtuosity has become increasingly more apparent throughout his career, particularly in his late works of the twenty-first century. A comparison of his paintings from the early 1950s, such as *Ada* (1957), to more recent creations, like *Black Ada* (2000), demonstrate the progression of his development towards greater simplification of forms, open compositions, heightened colors, and a complete absence of any trace of an autographic painterly gesture.²⁰ The painter attributes the evolution of his career to his ability to constantly *see* his subjects, and the poetic light and hues that envelop them in nuanced ways. Regarding his 2005 painting *Mae* in comparison to the 2003 work of the same title and subject, he explains, “It’s the same painting over again but created in different way. I haven’t gone this direction before. The surface is simple, it’s a pretty girl on a canvas, but it’s elusive.”²¹ Katz’s motive for repetition is not to attain perfection, but to study the effects of fleeting atmospheric changes on the “universal symbols,” he paints, whose generalized universality enables him to connect and impact a broad range of viewers in various ways.²²

¹⁸ Wullschlager, “Alex Katz and Etel Adnan at London’s Serpentine Gallery.”

¹⁹ Wilkin, “Alex Katz at the Met,” 45.

²⁰ Hilarie M. Sheets, “At 90, Still Raising the Bar for Himself — and the Other Guys.” *The New York Times*, October 31, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/31/arts/design/alex-katz-gavin-brown-matisse.html>

²¹ Gray, “Staying Power,” 38.

²² Jerry “Saltz, “Cool School,” *Time Magazine* (March-April 2013): 71.

Through his consistent elimination of any narrative and treatment of solely the optical experience, Alex Katz stimulates a profound aesthetic response in his viewers. His work engenders a subliminal reaction that surpasses the bounds of a particular culture or epoch to attain the classical aesthetic value of the eternality of beauty. Seeing the world through a Katzian lens stimulates the audience to view what they might have previously considered the repetitive everyday mundanities in their lives with a fresh perspective which notion art critic Robert Rosenblum refers to as the “poetry of the ordinary.”²³

²³ Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel, interview with Alex Katz, *Parsons School of Design*, 1979, video, 58:57, <https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/diamonstein-spielvogel-video-archive/id420510891?mt=2>

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