

Museum Brandhorst | 21 March 2024

Alex Katz: Portraits and Landscapes

22 March 2024 until 16 February 2025, ground level

Alex Katz has donated two paintings to Museum Brandhorst. An early work from 1958, showing the painter and sculptor George Ortman, and a recent, very personal double portrait of his wife Ada and his son Vincent. To mark this generous donation, Museum Brandhorst is presenting the exhibition "Alex Katz: Portraits and Landscapes," which, in addition to the two new acquisitions, also presents the rich inventory of work by the artist held by the Brandhorst Collection. Following the major monographic exhibition "Alex Katz" in 2018/19, the current show once again brings together major works from all his creative phases.

Alex Katz, who celebrates his 97th birthday this year, is one of the most important representatives of contemporary painting. During his long career, which has now spanned more than 70 years, he has dedicated himself to depicting the here and now, which is why he has described his art as "painting in the present tense."

Portraits

In his portraits, Katz depicts family members, acquaintances and artist friends – whether individually or in groups – with an almost simple monumentality. His flair for painterly surfaces stands in an exciting relationship to the formal language of film, fashion and advertising. This is one of the reasons why Alex Katz is also celebrated as a forerunner of Pop Art.

One of Katz's major works is "The Black Dress" (1960), in which he depicts his wife Ada six times, each time in an elegant black cocktail dress. The repetition of one and the same figure is reminiscent of a film strip, comparable to the serial character of Andy Warhol's portraits of Marilyn Monroe, Liz Taylor and Jackie Kennedy, created a few years later. From an early stage, Katz found important allies and aesthetic inspiration among contemporary poets, musicians and dancers. Museum Brandhorst owns two iconic pictures of the choreographer Paul Taylor (1930–2018) and his Dance Company. Taylor stands before us in this 1959 portrait with a sense of challenging calm. His tense strength suggests that he could jump out of the picture at any moment and start dancing. As Katz later recalled, "I had seen Paul dance for the first time shortly before we met... and thought his choreography was one of the most surprising things I had seen as an artist. Paul's dancing seemed to be a real break with that of the previous generation: no expression, no content, no form, as he said, and with great technique and intelligence."

Landscapes

Katz celebrated his first successes in the New York art scene at the height of Abstract Expressionism. Yet he always remained committed to figurative painting. It was only late, in the mid-1980s, that he approached gestural abstraction in his landscapes and cityscapes. The branches, twigs and leaves in his paintings are reminiscent of the spontaneous gestures and 'drip paintings' of Jackson Pollock. Each individual brushstroke can be read figuratively and at the same time appears as an autonomous visual sign.

In some of these paintings, the light itself – whether direct, reflected, or diffuse – becomes the defining theme. Reflections in water and depictions in fog or at dusk often serve as a means of

capturing the moods of different times of day. "These are all very fleeting things, quickly over," says Alex Katz. "I have captured twilight in landscapes that can only be seen for a quarter of an hour. That fascinates me because it's real high-speed perception."

Studies

With their clear design and masterful technique, Katz's paintings convey the impression of great ease, as if they had come naturally into the world. However, their creation process is much more complex. Katz's large-format paintings on canvas usually develop from smaller oil studies that are created on prepared hardboard. For his landscapes, he usually sketches the same scenery at the same time in the same place on successive days and finally selects the one that seems most interesting to him in order to enlarge it to scale. Due to their sketch-like spontaneity, these studies have a special aesthetic appeal.

"George Ortman" and "Ada and Vincent": The donations of Alex Katz

Even at the age of 96, Alex Katz is still an enormously productive artist, as the more recent of his two donations, "Ada and Vincent," proves. There are 65 years between "Ada and Vincent" from 2023 and "George Ortman" from 1958. The donations bridge the gap between his early and late work and enable an examination of aesthetic and thematic leitmotifs over the course of his 70-year career. Both works provide insights into Katz's very personal family environment and are also contemporary documents of the social and artistic milieu in downtown New York in the 1950s. A juxtaposition of landscapes and portraits shows how virtuously and playfully Alex Katz navigates between improvised gestures and cool realism, traditional painting and the exploration of photography and film.

Alex Katz, who was born in 1927 and has since inspired generations of painters, is one of the most important artists in the Brandhorst Collection alongside Andy Warhol and Cy Twombly – both of whom were born in 1928. Anette and Udo Brandhorst were passionate admirers and supporters of Alex Katz from an early age. The artist's generous donation is due not least to this close relationship.

Curated by Achim Hochdörfer with Lena Tilk

The exhibition is supported by

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We look forward to your coverage.

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