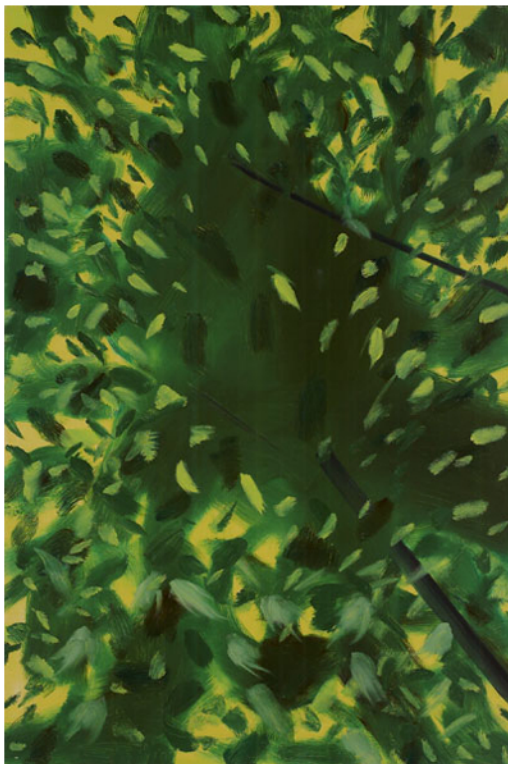


# Lasting First Impressions



**BARBARA**

The warren of rooms in the Barbara Krakow Gallery's attic-like space are awkward at best. The narrow gallery doesn't allow the viewer much distance from the art, and there are usually competing shows in the adjacent rooms.

Given this difficult layout, whoever hung the Alex Katz show did a beautiful job. Start with "Grey and Yellow." At 72" x 48" it's a medium size for Katz; in it you will be looking up into the grey undersides of summer trees thick with leaves.

Then walk down the tunnel-like gallery as if you were taking a summer afternoon stroll in July in inland Maine where Katz has lived and painted for many summers. The six small 9" x 12" horizontal or vertical paintings are close-up views cropped so as to be all but skyless. You feel you can press your face into these views and when you stand nearly that close the paint comes apart. The effect is of being so in the view that you can't distinguish its parts or can't name them.

It is capital N Nature, infinite Nature, that you're looking at and the nature of paint as laid down by a master.

This walk will deliver you to a field in which two black eyed susans draw you to them. You might reach to pluck these flowers, at least your

eye leads toward that act. Turning, you face two small portraits then a third, a larger (72" x 60") one, and over the gallery desk "Mattiheu" (1993) a profile head cropped to fit an 8" x 24" rectangle, a signature Katz format.

These are not character studies but indisputably faces of our moment presented as if on a billboard or movie screen. My guess is that this aspect of Katz's art will initially seem to date the works - only to be rediscovered and later seen as emblematic. (A random thought: John Currin looked hard at Alex Katz but either couldn't or didn't want to learn how to eliminate irony in his own work).

What is remarkable about Katz's painting no matter how modest the show is that his art is instantly recognizable yet fresh. As he paints on into his mid-70s, Katz knows how to keep the action of his pictures on the surface. His suave assurance has not diminished nor has his ability to hold the viewer to what is right there in front of him.

If he returns to similar images he does so at odd angles and without hesitation. There is no struggle in a Katz painting, no anguish over alternatives and no second thoughts. He is painter of first impressions, what comes to the eye bright and stays that way because doubt is not part of his process.

This is art by a mind and hand that moves quickly, confident in its culture. One thinks of Katz as a city man and city painter, a sophisticate, and he is all of these things, but when he paints the natural

world (landscapes does not seem the right word for what he does) he is the same painter, open, first-hand, an acceptor and American to the core.

Katz gets into his nature paintings both a world that hasn't had the rawness cultivated out of it and a world that hasn't been seen and painted into formula. Something in his painting, both nature and figure painting, reminds me of Walt Whitman's expansiveness, his art that knew neither guilt or shame. Katz doesn't render the world any less complicated than it is. He has simply (it looks easy, but it can't be), not been troubled by some of the complications we have added on to what is in our American fields.

By William Corbett

Alex Katz: Portrait and  
Landscape Paintings

At: Barbara Krakow Gallery,  
10 Newbury St.,  
through February 4th.  
617-262-4490,  
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**KRAKOW GALLERY**