

The art of omission

ALEX KATZ PRINTS
AT: MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS,
THROUGH JULY 29TH

By Sebastian Smee
GLOBE STAFF

Here's what to like about the work of Alex Katz, a survey of whose prints is on show at the Museum of Fine Arts: Large color blocks. Exquisite, often unexpected harmonies. The pleasures of visual distillation in an era, an epoch, of visual onslaught. Humor. A powerful sense of place. A light spirit. An unapologetic sense of beauty.

You can imagine with what relief and gratitude art-lovers must have encountered Katz's work in the '70s, a decade dominated by edgy poker-faced minimalism, blurry black-and-white videos, and clever conceptualism.

The situation is not so very different now.

Admittedly, people might feel a similar kind of relief walking out of a high-minded gallery and into a street full of zesty fashion billboards. But Katz brings something extra.

He borrows the idioms of fashion illustration and movie close-ups - everything magnified, but almost all details submerged - and then performs his little tweaks, which are the pictorial equivalent of fish-hooks: a facial expression close to contempt (see "Black Scarf," a portrait of his wife, Ada); a dominant, acidic orange ("Orange Hat"); prematurely blue eyes ("The Orange Band"); a 5 o'clock shadow ("Self-Portrait (Passing)").

Katz is a master at all this. His admirable lightness of touch as provided a lovely, ongoing accompaniment to a major strain in postwar American poetry, with which he shares a love of the urban vernacular, a feeling for everyday rhythms, a penchant for summers in New England, and a relish of the benign, the banal, and the commercial even as the heart valves remain open to the tangy, the bittersweet, the evanescent.

No wonder so many poets like Katz. And no wonder so many have invited him to illustrate their work.

There's a "but" coming, but it's hard to know how to frame it. The fact is, I enjoyed the Katz show and can't imagine any but the most curmudgeonly visitors failing to take some kind of pleasure in it.

The exhibition comprises around 125 screen prints, lithographs, etchings, and aquatints, along with a smattering of instances of an adorable innovation of Katz's own: colored screen prints affixed to free-standing aluminum, cut to the silhouette of the figure depicted. These, without exception, are great fun.

So is a series of painted cut-out portraits on aluminum, "Rush," which Katz gave to the MFA in 2011. The series, which shows three-dozen members of Katz's New York circle at the time - critics, gallery workers, poets, family - is given a room to itself, and it's wonderful - perhaps the most captivating room in any New England museum right now. Full of human idiosyncrasy, honesty, and wit, it's a reminder of what a good eye for detail Katz has (his large-scale works can let you forget



Alex Katz's penchant for borrowing the idioms of fashion illustration and movie close-ups is seen in "Black Scarf," a portrait of his wife, Ada

this), and how charmingly, non-chalantly he deploys his exceptional gifts.

Most of the prints are on a large scale and boast ravishing color saturation. This and Katz's signature close cropping of his subjects create a sense, as you walk through the show, of ambling through a Sunday afternoon summer house party, with faces popping out left and right - attractive, enigmatic, but never too intrusive.

Still, a sense that something is missing is impossible to cast off. How to account for it? And is it really a problem, when anyone can see that it is Katz's willingness to artfully omit things that constitutes his number-one talent? (What's missing, in other words, is almost the point.)

The great innovation of the Pop artists of the 1960s, Katz among them, was to engage openly with preexisting visual culture in the popular and commercial realms. Roy Lichtenstein, Marisol, Richard Hamilton, David Hockney, James Rosenquist, and Andy Warhol, among others, gave popular, perishable expressions of cultural energy more permanent form.

They did so not just by adapting these forms to the world of "high" art with tricks like magnifications of scale and the use of traditional materials (paints, canvases, frames). They added something else: an attitude toward that subject matter.

For each artist, the attitude was different, and it was almost always elusive, ambivalent. Sometimes it had an ironic or critical edge. Sometimes it was openly celebratory. And sometimes, as in Warhol, it was pointedly neutral - a deliberate and beguiling refusal to attitudinize. But in every case the artist attempted, by reframing mass culture, to create a new view onto it (and back onto art).

We're talking, don't forget, about the '60s. Advertising's entry into the home through television and mail-outs, the barrage of blandishments on billboards and street posters, the thrust and pummel, the wit, the stylishness, the sexiness, and the crassness of popular culture - all this was new in degree, in tone, in pervasiveness. It fascinated and challenged the Pop artists.

Many realized, as the makers of the television series "Mad Men" have clearly realized, that at the heart of advertising - which is the business of making commodities desirable - is the creation of enigma.

Enigmas are seductive. They are, by definition, questions that want to be answered, holes that want to be filled. But how do you create an enigma?

In most cases, very simply. You do it by omitting crucial parts of the truth. If you're trying to advertise skin-care products, to take an easy example, you might use a wide-eyed model with a shocked expression (what just happened?!), and you overlook distracting facts - that the lotions in question don't actually remove wrinkles, for instance.

Again and again, "Mad Men" returns us to the idea that while anything enigmatic is seductive, the enigma is usually a vacuum, a spiritual abyss. The principle applies to the lead character, Don Draper, himself as much as to the brilliant ads he concocts.

Katz, who in one ironic self-portrait early in the show, comes across as a smoothly tailored executive straight out of "Mad Men," seemed to alight on this aspect of pop culture - the creation of enigma through omission - more than any other.

His wife, Ada, who has been his muse for several decades, is depicted in many superb prints in this show. She has been described by commentators through the years as both "goddess" and "Sphinx."

"How little we know about her after all," wrote the critic, curator, and academic Robert Storr in a celebratory essay accompanying a 2006-7 show at the Jewish Museum in New York called "Alex Katz Paints Ada."

"That is her job," he continued. "To keep us guessing, to forestall the consummation of reciprocal recognition, in short to captivate by simply, imperturbably being there."

The passage sounds like the inspired rhetoric of an advertising guru - Don Draper on the lecture circuit.

The question at the heart of Katz's work is one of style. How far, it asks, can art - or a human being - be pushed in the direction of pure style, taking all its cues from advertising, fashion, and the movies, and still feel humanly substantial, still retain force as art?

The answer is, surprisingly far. Katz may have adopted and perfected advertising's language of enigmatic simplicity. But he has also transformed it, at his best, into something warm, intimate, and ideosyncratic.

But there lingers in his work a sense of facility, of glibly achieved enigma. As a notorious recluse once said, "Just because you don't know me doesn't mean I'm interesting."

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