

# A Look At Alex Katz's Late Career

Inspired by youth and beauty, Alex Katz, 87, is driven to paint every day

By Ellen Gamerman

One morning. That's how long it takes Alex Katz to start--and finish--a painting.

This high-speed routine has repeated itself many mornings, for many years. Such remarkable productivity would be a feat for any artist, but especially an 87-year-old whose towering pictures demand exacting brushwork across canvases that span entire walls. Mr. Katz, a painter best known for his portraits, recently finished landscapes for two new exhibits: one opening Saturday at his New York gallery, Gavin Brown's enterprise, the other coming in June to Atlanta's High Museum of Art.

The artist can't quite explain his drive, beyond saying that he loves to paint. Still, he suggests that even this late in his career, after hundreds of shows and every kind of review, he has something to prove.

"I just love putting it to people who didn't like me," said Mr. Katz, sounding more like a cocky art student than an art world elder statesman. Around his New York apartment, which connects to his sunlit studio, pretty young women in bathing suits--an enduring subject for him--stare impassively from their canvases. "There are people from 20, 30, 40 years ago that love meeting on the street and saying hello. I don't have to say anything, I just have to say hello, and my presence reminds them of their mistakes."

The late career of Mr. Katz defies easy categorization. To some, this is a master at the height of his powers in a race against time. To others, his later work pales in comparison to the canvases that brought him to fame more than 40 years ago. For his part, Mr. Katz recently told a friend that at this moment in his life, all he does is paint and sleep.

Artists who work into their old age raise an uncomfortable question: They paint because they want to--or even need to. But how do they deal with demanding art audiences, who, like



fans at a Rolling Stones concert, prefer the old stuff?

It can be difficult to judge the significance of late paintings right away. The early art is already many decades old, so its broader impact may be easier to determine than it is with canvases finished yesterday. Without careful editing, a flood of late work could potentially depress the artist's overall market if it is not well received, said Gavin Brown, Mr. Katz's dealer, who countered that he believes the artist is experiencing a "supernova" of creativity right now, leading to some of the finest paintings of his career. He added that concerns about supply and demand have never mattered much to Mr. Katz regardless: "He's not a strategist in that way," he said.

These days, Mr. Katz said he rarely destroys a canvas and estimates that he keeps hundreds of his own works in storage. The basic framework of his art hasn't changed: He paints in a flat style, over the years repeatedly gravitating to landscapes, flowers and portraits of those summery models--as well as art friends and, most enduringly, his wife of 57 years, Ada.

Despite his adherence to familiar themes, Mr. Katz's admirers say the painter is as inventive as ever.

Robert Storr, dean of Yale University's school of art, described visiting Mr. Katz recently and coming across a new painting--an image of a Manhattan building reflected on wet pavement that he said dazzled with its depth of observation. "It was a wonderful picture, and he has never made anything like it before," he said. "He keeps going back to places he's been with a new attack."

Some art critics look at the paintings--including canvases of landscapes

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"White Roses", 2014, Vaga, New York



"4 pm", 2007, Vaga, New York

and flowers that have been a frequent sight at art fairs around the world over the years--and find less meaning. "The work has a tendency to look just pretty," said Christian Viveros-Fauné, an art critic for the Village Voice and Artnet News. "The stuff I'm seeing around, the flower paintings, look awful easy and look like basically art-size decoration."

Mr. Katz said the subject of his art is not the point. "Pretty girls and flowers? Come on. Trees? It's not banal, but it's pretty pedestrian," he said. "The experience of it, the time and light, is the big thing."

Famous artists with long careers are complex case studies. Spanish romantic painter Francisco Goya's early years were a kind of warm-up act for what would come next: He was nearly 70 when in 1814 he completed "The Third of May 1808," an iconic picture of an execution that many call the first modern painting. Pierre-Auguste Renoir is celebrated as a genius for his paintings into his midlife in the 1880s and 1890s, but now some critics call his late canvases low-brow. (They did back in the day, too: Impressionist painter Mary Cassatt once dismissed a group of them as pictures of "enormously fat red women with very small heads.")

A popular exhibit about J.M.W. Turner now at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles argues that in old age the British artist freed himself from academic constraints and displayed supreme technical proficiency as a painter. He tested new subjects and formats--painting on canvases shaped like circles and octagons, for instance--and fully grasped nuances in nature and atmosphere. Today, the late work also stands out because it is viewed through the lens of the Impressionist and Abstract Expressionist movements that it foreshadowed, said Julian Brooks, the show's co-curator.

The art establishment has run hot and cold on Mr. Katz: On one hand, he is a commanding figure in the art scene, cited as an important influence on contemporary artists such as David Salle, Francesco Clemente and Elizabeth Peyton. "Alex is a wonderful artist and he casts a big shadow that younger painters have to deal with," said the artist Eric Fischl.

That said, Mr. Katz hasn't had a major retrospective in New York since 1986. Mr. Storr called him "A prophet without his own country." Dealer Gavin Brown said Mr. Katz's works sell for a fraction of the prices fetched by many of his contemporaries, with the new works priced at \$350,000 to \$1.1 million. Mr. Katz's auction record was set in 2007 with the \$690,600 sale of a 1967 painting of tulips.

Lately, the artist has started basing work on photographs, what he calls a first. He is drawn to the variety of gestures his iPhone can capture with his models, though he had to ask a stranger on the street to work the camera.

While curators examine his earliest work--a show about the artist's 1950s pieces opens this July at the Colby College Museum of Art in Waterville, Maine--Mr. Katz is testing new partnerships. In May, he will unveil window displays and an accompanying line of housewares for the luxury retailer Barneys New York.

The artist said he does most of his work himself, though once a week, two assistants come to his fifth-floor studio to set up his canvases. For a single artwork, he begins by painting a small picture on Masonite, sometimes following with another painted study and eventually transferring the outlines of that image to a large canvas. The actual painting of the monumental picture goes quickly as he applies wet paint on previous layers of wet paint, leaving little room for error.

Lanky and bald, zipped into a paint-splattered turquoise hoodie on a recent morning, he described an exercise regimen that can last up to three hours a day in the summers ("running, swimming, bike riding, calisthenics"). The idea of politics in painting ("idear," in the lingering Queens accent of his childhood) never held much appeal, he said. Youth and beauty continue to serve as inspirations.

He recently completed a canvas with six versions of the same blond woman in a black swimsuit shifting back and forth in space against a bright orange background, a work he said took experimental leaps with size and movement. Soon, he'll return to Maine, as he does every summer, looking like a Sunday painter outside with his easel as he works on landscape studies.

The artist said he's not confronting his mortality head-on in his work: "I've come to terms with that. I think it's here and now. Eternity is in total consciousness." Such complete awareness comes to him while painting, he said, comparing the feeling to running the 440-yard dash in high school. "There's always the end, where there's an enormous push," he said. "I like the resistance of the painting. When you're getting to the end of it, you're pushing it and you don't know whether you're going to get it or not."

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