

ALEX KATZ

We are delighted to be presenting an exhibition that traces four decades of the career of American artist Alex Katz (b. Brooklyn, 1927), who is recognized as one of the great names of his generation. This carefully chosen selection explores Katz's personal interpretation of portrait and landscape, genres central to the tradition of Western painting, where his renewed vision has earned him international renown. This retrospective survey of the New York painter's creative work takes us back to the mid-1970s with the fascinating *The Light I*, and brings us up to the first decade of this century with an extraordinary study of the female nude, the one of the model *Tracy*. The exhibition includes some outstanding examples of his monumental group portraits from the 1980s, which appear in dialogue with major landscapes from different periods.

From the beginning, Katz was interested in classical portraiture and making it contemporary. In the early 1960s, influenced by the new mass media—photography, cinema, television, advertising, comics—he began to paint his large-scale figurative compositions. The dominant school then was Abstract Expressionism, and certain elements, such as its preference for large dimensions and all-over composition emphasizing the painting's flat surface, may have influenced aspects of his art; in everything else, however, his work was in complete contrast, as he chose to create a figurative style that he defined as "totally American". His art also shares features with Pop Art, such as the use of flat, bright colours, the preference for everyday scenes, and the iconic transformation of the image through the repetition and fragmentation of motifs, but rather than focusing on graphic elements, Katz sought to explore the modulation of light.

Landscape has been the other genre that stands out in Alex Katz's paintings ever since he studied art in Maine in the late 1940s, where he began to observe and understand nature as a constantly changing ensemble of space and light. Over the years, he has maintained the initial balance that he found between the figurative and the abstract that can be seen in the landscapes in this exhibition, where the forms are sometimes on the verge of dissolving into chromatic patches of uniform tones applied with fluid brushstrokes. Katz has acknowledged that his images are more instinctive than descriptive, communicating a spontaneity that involves careful prior planning. He follows a complex process of execution: meticulous sketches from life, which serve to note chromatic and luminous aspects that he will later develop; charcoal drawings; and cartoons at the final size to define the contours.

Ever since he painted his wife Ada in the late 1950s, the female presence has been a constant in his portraits, not only in studio portraits but also those set outdoors, and the works on show in Madrid are good examples of this. Another recurring element in Katz's paintings is the incidence of light on surfaces, with special attention to reflections on water in the case of rural landscapes. His search for beauty in his surroundings has led him to focus on his immediate environment, especially family and friends from his closest circle, whom he captures both in the urban environment of New York's Soho and in the coastal area of Maine, trying to represent the present moment, here and now.

Hailed as a painter of modern life for his iconic portraits and impressionistic landscape images, he has inspired subsequent generations of artists. Throughout his extensive career, Katz's work has been the subject of numerous solo and group exhibitions, and it forms part of major public and private collections in the Americas, Europe, and Asia. The Guggenheim Museum in New York has just dedicated the retrospective *Gathering* to his work, covering the last eight decades of his production, and his paintings were in a show at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid, while the Espace Louis Vuitton Seoul is currently paying tribute to him. Upcoming exhibitions include *Cool Painting* this spring at the Albertina Museum in Vienna and an exhibition in the Netherlands next summer.

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