
Alex Katz: Gathering
Barry Schwabsky

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Alex Katz: Gathering

by Barry Schwabsky • 23.11.2022

Painting teachers often try to drum into the heads of their students the essential distinction between size and scale. They could do worse than conduct their classes in the presence of *Gathering*, the triumphant retrospective of work by Alex Katz (b.1927) curated by Katherine Brinson, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Although some aspects of Katz's aesthetic have remained remarkably constant since the 1950s, the great mid-career shift that turned him into the unmistakable stylist he is now was precisely concerned with size and scale. As Ewa Lajer-Burcharth remarks in her contribution to the exhibition catalogue, 'Katz's work makes scale *visible*' (p.70).¹ This is well said, and yet she too confuses scale and size when she goes on to claim, of the painter's recent works, 'In their sheer scale, they seem to echo the outsize importance of the image in an era defined by the ubiquity of handheld, digitally generated visuality' (p.71). Here, she appears, in fact, to be referring to the sheer size of the paintings, and misses the opportunity to explore the apparent paradox that paintings larger-than-life-size would be required to register the outsized importance of images we see in the palms of our hands.

Katz's figure paintings of the 1950s tend to appear smaller than they really are, and so do the people pictured in them – especially those from later in the decade that isolate individuals or couples in nebulous monochromatic grounds. One of his most remarkable works from this period is *Irving and Lucy* [FIG.1](#). The man holds the woman tight against him, tenderly but also perhaps defensively. Although the figures take up approximately three quarters of the height of the painting, they seem dwarfed by the off-white field surrounding them. Unlike those in other works of this time – such as *Eli at Ducktrap* (1958), which places its child protagonist against a rudimentary landscape – Irving and Lucy Sandler are not presented as completely flat cut-outs. The slight turnout of their legs and the way their bodies are slightly angled toward each other creates a small but inexpugnable area of volumetric space, which is emphasised by the aura of more brushily applied paint that subtly mediates the space between them and the encompassing field. And yet, they nonetheless retain something of the aspect of paper dolls; they are silhouettes, almost bodiless, frozen in place and held at an indeterminate distance.

A different approach is announced in *The Red Smile* [FIG.2](#), which is notably larger than Katz's previous paintings. The real difference is in the treatment of internal scale; here, the close-up portrait head

(of Katz's favourite subject, his wife Ada) looms large and close against the painting's scarlet background. The effect is paradoxical. On the one hand, it evokes, as many commentators have noted over the years, communication on a public scale – advertising billboards and cinema screens – but on the other, it conveys a sense of the subject's proximity, even though it does not offer psychological disclosure. Moreover, the planarity that had earlier fascinated Katz is no longer dominant. Instead, a peculiar kind of spatiality prevails: one that is not quite graphic or abstract, but also not volumetric or naturalistic. It is an artifice that somehow belongs to Katz alone – fresh and a little bit awkward. This would become the artist's usual approach to individual portraits for five decades – see, for instance, a recent example, *Joan 2* FIG.3.



Fig. 1 *Irving and Lucy*, by Alex Katz. 1958. Oil on linen, 155.6 by 152.4 cm. (© The artist; VAGA and ARS, New York, and DACS, London; courtesy Alex Katz Studio; exh. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York).

In such portraits, the subject exceeds the dimensions of the canvas. Although Katz's work otherwise shows no affinity with photography, the viewer cannot help but think of these images as cropped and fragmented. Katz pursued this idea in works that break up and multiply the portrait image, most radically in the six-panel *Allen Ginsberg* FIG.4, which combines wall-mounted panels with free-standing ones, and depicts the subject from multiple

viewpoints. In another free-standing cut-out painting, *Ada with Nose* FIG.5, the artist's wife seems to stroll out of the right side of an invisible rectangle – her face, the front of her body and part of one foot are cut off in a straight line – but her face reappears in close-up on the left. The device of repeating a figure, with or without evident variation, is one that originated in Katz's earlier paper-doll phase, but takes on greater force in later works. See, for example, the six near-identical figures in *Departure (Ada)* FIG.6, with their backs to the viewer, walking away towards the top of the deep green canvas, who are tiny in relation to the rectangle they inhabit. The impression is no longer, as it was in the 1950s, of a bodiless silhouette. Stepping away with a swaying posture, Ada dominates the canvas despite her small size, a figure of casual grandeur.



Fig. 2 *The Red Smile*, by Alex Katz. 1963. Oil on linen, 200.3 by 292.1 cm. (© The artist; VAGA and ARS, New York, and DACS, London; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; exh. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York).

If the present reviewer has concentrated on individual and dual portraits, that is because these are the works through which Katz defined his style and for which he has become best known. His subjects also include groups of people, cityscapes and flowers, and in recent years especially, Katz has devoted much of his attention to landscape. Whereas his portraits typically find their scale through the relation between figure and ground, his landscapes find theirs by effacing that distinction. The extraordinary *Field 1* FIG.7 is all misty paleness, a gorgeous fog through which one sees only with greatest effort: two horizontal rows of soft, sparse, seemingly offhand vertical brush marks must be dry, brown grasses, but is that a faint bluish undertone near the top, representing a distant body of water? The slight darkening at the very top edge, is that the horizon? It is so impalpable that you feel the need to get closer and closer until – but when does it happen?

- you are somehow inside it. It is more than looking, you breathe the painting in. And while it is big, like *Departure (Ada)*, what it so intangibly contains is much vaster than its mere size. It is as big as your sensibility, or your imagination.

The present reviewer would not have thought the Guggenheim such a sympathetic setting for Katz's work. The famous spiral has often been kinder to sculpture than to painting - for many who saw it, the 1989 Mario Merz retrospective curated by Germano Celant has remained the perfect exhibition in this space.² Many of Katz's paintings seem too big for the museum's bays, but, in fact, that only helps emphasise that the scale of his work is not the same as its size - and is often even more imposing. This is a joyous, uplifting gathering. The exhibition takes its title from a line in 'Salute', a valedictory poem by James Schuyler, however it refutes the poem's melancholy recognition that 'Past / is past'. Here, all is, as Katz says, 'the now' (p.54).



Fig. 3 *Joan 2*, by Alex Katz. 2020. Oil on linen, 121.9 by 121.9 cm. (© The artist; VAGA and ARS, New York, and DACS, London; Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville; exh. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York).

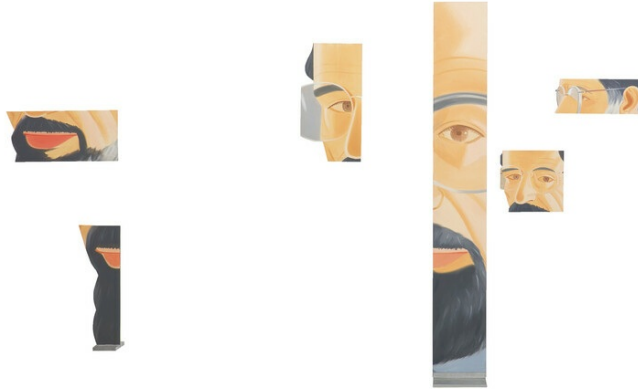


Fig. 4 *Allen Ginsberg*, by Alex Katz. 1985. Oil on aluminum, 6 parts, dimensions variable. (© The artist; VAGA and ARS, New York, and DACS, London; exh. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York).



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Alex Katz: Gathering* at Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2022, showing, on the right, *Ada with Nose*, by Alex Katz. 1969–70. Oil on aluminium, 181.6 by 182.9 cm. (© Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York; photograph Ariel Lone Williams and Midge Wattles).

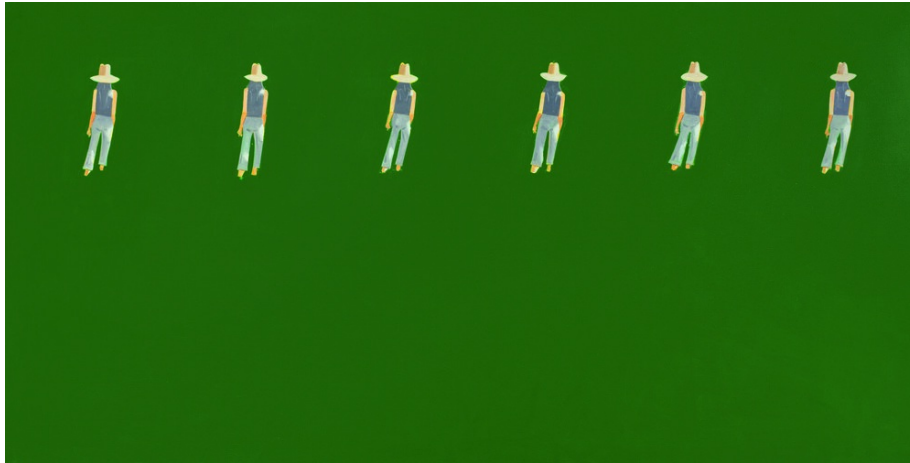


Fig. 6 *Departure (Ada)*, by Alex Katz. 2016. Oil on linen, 182.9 by 365.8 cm. (© The artist; VAGA and ARS, New York, and DACS, London; exh. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York).



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Alex Katz: Gathering* at Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2022, showing, on the left, *Field 1*, by Alex Katz. Oil on linen, 167.6 by 228.6 cm. (© Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York; photograph Ariel Ione Williams and Midge Wattles).

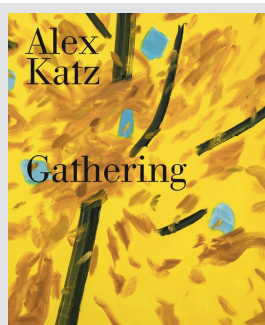
Exhibition details

Alex Katz: Gathering

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New
York

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About this book



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Footnotes

- 1** Catalogue: *Alex Katz: Gathering*. Edited by Katherine Brinson, with contributions by Levi Prombaum, David Breslin, Jennifer Y. Chuong, David Max Horowitz, Arthur Jafa, Katie Kitamura, Wayne Koestenbaum, Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, Kevin Lotery and Prudence Peiffer. 384 pp. incl. numerous col. ills. (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2022), \$69.95. ISBN 978-0-89207-560-7. Emphasis in original.
- 2** See G. Celant: exh. cat. *Mario Merz*, New York (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum) 1989.

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