

# GUGGENHEIM BILBAO

Press release



The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents on October 23, 2015

**Alex Katz. This Is Now**

## *Alex Katz. This Is Now*

- Curators: Michael Rooks, Wieland Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, and Petra Joos, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao
- Dates: October 23, 2015–February 7, 2016
- The exhibition features 35 landscapes in which Katz utilizes a “grammar of abstraction,” which includes the expansive all-over treatment of his canvases, to capture what he calls “the present tense,” or the simultaneity of vision and awareness. Katz describes this moment as an explosive “flash” just before an image comes into focus.
- The show aims to reveal the fundamental but often unacknowledged role that landscape has played in Katz’s long career. Katz’s monumental landscapes are immersive, contemplative paintings that prompt conversations about the confluence of perception and awareness, the relationship between art and nature, and the nature of the sublime in this contemporary moment.
- The paintings *Sunset* and *Twilight* exemplify Katz’s aim to seize upon a “flash of perception.” In *Sunset*, Katz conveys the heat of a late summer afternoon by silhouetting the tops of tall pines against a deep red sky, and in *Twilight*, Katz captures the silvery, evanescent light of the moon as it pierces a stand of pine trees late in the evening.
- Works in the *Black Brook* series range in scale from small and intimate to monumental and enveloping. Their subject is a modest stream that runs across Katz’s property in Maine. They often seem to describe thick forest panoramas but actually represent the reflection of surrounding landscapes on the water’s surface. By focusing on the flat, inverted image projected on the surface of the water, Katz obliquely refers to the science of perception in his attempt to capture the “present tense” or “flash of perception” in his work.

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao is pleased to present *Alex Katz. This Is Now*, a show that explores the development of landscape in the artist’s career over the last 25 years.

Organized by the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, in collaboration with the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, the exhibition features 35 works in which Katz sought to convey the appearance of things as they are both felt and perceived in the “present tense,” the now.

Alex Katz (b. 1927, Brooklyn) is a painter whose work is both fixed in the canon of postwar American art and in the avant garde of painting today. He emerged in the 1950s as a figurative painter in an age of abstraction, challenging critics who shunned imagery in art, especially figuration. Although he rejected Abstract Expressionism’s abandonment of imagery, Katz did embrace its energy and formal logic. He developed a fast, physically active painting inspired by the action art of Jackson Pollock, whose all-over compositions were a revelation. Katz described his goal as the pursuit of capturing “quick things passing” in his work.

Using a shallow pictorial space and lean, reductive, but acutely descriptive lines, Katz aims to initiate a conversation about the confluence of perception and awareness, as well as the relationship between art and nature and the nature of the sublime in this contemporary moment. Although best known for his portraits, Katz has painted landscapes both inside the studio and out-of-doors since the beginning of his career.

### **The Figure and the Landscape**

Maine's landscape has remained a touchstone of Katz's work since 1949, and the disciple of plein-air painting he learned there in the summer months led him to paint outside during the fall, winter, and spring months in Manhattan. City Hall Park in Lower Manhattan is the subject of his work *January 3*.

Katz's wife, Ada, whose portrait appears in the center of this tripartite image, has been one of his most enduring subjects since they met in 1957. The bright colors of her hat and lipstick are set against a cool, wintry image of City Hall Park. Her enlarged and cropped image appears in the work like a jump-cut in film, disrupting the linear flow of time and the pictorial space of the painting.

### **The Present Tense**

Katz is interested in seizing the instant moment of perception in painting rather than faithfully rendering images. He describes this moment as an explosive "flash" just before the image comes into focus and calls it "the present tense." In the painting *10:30 am*, for example, Katz transforms the instant moment of seeing a stand of birch trees animated by dappled sunlight into an enveloping, epic experience.

Katz's formal economy is essential to his notion of the present moment. The contours of his lines and juxtaposition of forms are exactly deliberate and the result of modifying compositions while enlarging them several times over in the studio. By refining and calibrating the original composition over the course of months, Katz arrives at a direct, abbreviated, and concentrated image.

However, the artist describes his style as having roots in abstraction. Indeed, his paintings are characterized by all-over compositions that appear to be spontaneous, recalling the gestural painting style generally associated with artists like Jackson Pollock. But Katz predetermines the composition of his paintings, giving him the freedom to use paint in a rapid, physical manner in pursuit of that "present tense."

### **Flower Paintings**

In a 1968 interview, Katz described his paintings of flowers as an extension of the cocktail party scenes he often painted. He remarked that the flowers are "all overlapping volumes," like the individuals in his figure groupings, which overlap one another as they advance into the pictorial space. Indeed, the fundamental subjects of Katz's landscape paintings are form, surface, space, and light as they are subsumed in nature.

There is a physically dynamic sense of movement in Katz's landscape paintings akin to dance, inviting the viewer to adapt to the pace of the work according to his or her own frame of mind and emotional bearing. Light and form provide an unexpected syncopation of movement across the surface of his flower paintings. Painted rapidly and assuredly, wet into wet, the flowers oscillate between states of awkwardness and grace typically associated with the human body. Katz's roses, with their fleshy petals and serrated leaves, are aggressive and fierce, belying the congenial association that flowers typically summon.

### **"5 Hours"**

The video *5 Hours*—filmed and directed by Katz's son, poet and art critic Vincent Katz, and his daughter-in-law, photographer and filmmaker Vivien Bittencourt—documents the creation of the painting *January 3*, included in this exhibition. It shows the artist at work on this large landscape painting, divided into three sections: a portrait of his wife, Ada, fills the central section and is flanked on each side by winter scenes.

The film documents Katz's athletic manner of painting. He begins with a canvas onto which a full-scale drawing, or cartoon, has been transferred—a technique developed during the Italian Renaissance that fixes the final composition and allows Katz to paint swiftly. As the film's title suggests, the entire painting is finished in a mere five hours.

### ***Black Brook* Paintings**

For more than 20 years during summers in Maine, Katz has returned to paint a modest stream near his studio and home. Works from the *Black Brook* series vary in scale, from the small and intimate to the monumental and enveloping. Many of them show the cropped reflection of the neighboring landscape on the brook's surface, thus inverting its image. Through this spatially ambiguous motif, Katz effectively refers to the phenomenon of perception, whereby images are inverted as they pass through the cornea but perceived right-side up by the brain.

The extreme horizontality of *Black Brook 16* is broken by a series of staccato strokes painted vertically across the canvas, along with bubbles that seem to be either floating on or reflected in the water's surface. The fat but faint brushstrokes representing tree trunks along the banks of the brook seem like apparitions, markers of memory that punctuate the work's impenetrable darkness.

### **My Mother's Dream**

This immense painting summarizes Katz's formal and poetic language. Consisting of four views of the same scene at different but non-consecutive moments during twilight, the painting suggests a jump backward or forward in time. This composition creates a structural logic, similar to a poetic meter or musical rhythm, while establishing a sequence of spatial expansion and compression across the canvas's surface. Despite these temporal and formal intervals, the pictorial field of *My Mother's Dream* feels limitless. This, combined with the painting's sheer architectural enormity, invites reflection, association, and memory, absorbing the viewer emotionally. Katz summons the breadth of his technical virtuosity and keen powers of perception, expressing them powerfully and evocatively through the confluence of perception and memory.

## Sunset and Twilight

The paintings *Sunset* and *Twilight*, both covered in black with passages of fiery red and turquoise, respectively, exemplify Katz's superlative handling of color relationships. Painted with confident bravado, *Twilight* captures the fleeting moment of the moon shining through the canopy of a pine forest.

In *Sunset 1* and *Sunset 3*, Katz strives to capture a precise moment when the continually changing and evanescent light of the setting sun passes behind a stand of pine trees. The subtle differences between the paintings which share the same composition lie in the gradient bands of color, and the downward movement of the heavy tree branches silhouetted against the sky, underscoring both the immediacy and mutability of perception.

## ALEX KATZ DIDAKTIKA: *IN FOCUS*

The Didaktika program for the monographic exhibitions held in Gallery 105 will provide deeper insights into each artist's oeuvre under the name *In Focus*. For this exhibition, the program includes a **curator's talk** and guided **visits** led by artists who also work on the relation between art and nature. Usual activities and services such as *Shared Reflections* and gallery hosts will complement *In Focus*.

### Alex Katz in Depth (Wednesday October 21, 6:30 pm)

Michael Rooks, curator of the Alex Katz exhibition and Wieland Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, will talk about Alex Katz's oeuvre on the occasion of the artist's exhibition in gallery 105.

Venue: Museum Auditorium; free tickets available at the Museum admissions desk and website

### Visits: Thoughts on Alex Katz

The following artists will share their views on Katz's work:

- Juana García-Pozuelo, Thursday November 19
- Lucía Onzain, Thursday November 23
- Juan Pérez Agirregoikoa, Thursday December 10

Meeting point: Zero Espazioa. Hour: 6:30–7:30 pm.

Tickets: 2 € Museum Members / 3 € General Public (price of admission not included; advance reservations via website required). Minimum of 8 people per group

### Shared Reflections

- Curatorial Vision: Wednesday November 4. Petra Joos, exhibition curator
- Key Concepts: Wednesday November 11. Marta Arzak, Associate Director of Education and Interpretation

Meeting point: Information Desk.

Tickets: € 2 for Museum Members, € 3 for non-members (price of admission not included; advance reservations via website required). Minimum of 8 people per group

\*Sponsored by Fundación Vizcaína Aguirre

## Gallery Hosts

If you want to know more about the works on view, ask our gallery hosts. The Museum offers this free service daily from 11 am to 2 pm.

**Cover image:**

Alex Katz

*Sunset 1*, 2008

Oil on linen

274.3 x 213.4 cm

Courtesy of the artist

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**For further information:**

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**Complete information about the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao is available at [www.guggenheim-bilbao.es](http://www.guggenheim-bilbao.es) (press room).**

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*Alex Katz: This is now*  
Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

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For further information, please contact the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao Press Department: tel. +34 944 35 90 08 and email: [media@guggenheim-bilbao.es](mailto:media@guggenheim-bilbao.es).

Alex Katz  
*Black Brook 11*, 1990  
Oil on linen  
274.3 x 365.8 cm  
Courtesy of Peter Blum, New York, NY  
© VEGAP, Bilbao, 2015.



Alex Katz  
*My Mother's Dream (7:45 pm Monday; 7:45pm Tuesday; 7:45 pm Wednesday; 7:45 pm Thursday)*, 1998  
Oil on linen  
320 x 868.7 cm  
Courtesy of the artist  
© VEGAP, Bilbao, 2015.



Alex Katz  
*January 3*, 1993  
Oil on linen  
199.4 x 393.7 cm  
Private collection, London  
© VEGAP, Bilbao, 2015.



Alex Katz  
*10:30 am*, 2006  
Oil on linen  
365.8 x 487.7 cm  
Courtesy of the artist  
© VEGAP, Bilbao, 2015.



Alex Katz  
*Reflection 7*, 2008  
Oil on linen  
274.3 x 548.6 cm  
Courtesy of the artist  
© VEGAP, Bilbao, 2015.



Alex Katz  
*Sunset 1*, 2008  
Oil on linen  
274.3 x 213.4 cm  
Courtesy of the artist  
© VEGAP, Bilbao, 2015.



Alex Katz  
*White Roses 9*, 2012  
Oil on linen  
274.3 x 548.6 cm  
Courtesy of the artist  
© VEGAP, Bilbao, 2015.



Alex Katz  
*Study for Black Brook*, 1988  
Oil on board  
22.9 x 30.5 cm  
Courtesy of the artist  
© VEGAP, Bilbao, 2015.



Portrait of Alex Katz, 2011.  
Photo by Vivien Bittencourt.

