

11.21.06

Cheever Country

Why do Alex Katz's elegant canvases strike critics as the ultimate in WASP art?

BY SUZANNE SNIDER

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Though currently on exhibit at the **Jewish Museum**, Alex Katz's paintings do little to reveal the religion of their maker. In fact, critics have delicately approached this Jewish artist's decidedly non-Jewish aesthetic with vague appraisals that tiptoe around the problematic discussion of what, exactly, a Jewish aesthetic might be. Ken Johnson, writing in *The New York Times*, compared a gathering in one Katz painting to "a scene from a John Cheever novel," while Holland Cotter suggested, in the same paper, that Katz lent his subjects a "preppy-bohemian glamour." Out of politesse, both critics avoided calling Katz's treatment of his subjects flat-out "waspy," though both imply such a conclusion. The work—frontal portraits manifest in flat colors, with few physical details like wrinkles or blemishes—elicits a sense that it may be easier to identify what is *not* Jewish about a work of art than to identify what *is*. And that maybe God is in the details after all.

Katz's subjects are for the most part free of any obvious ethnic attributes. He leaves the viewer with only a handful of visual cues: the beach, sunglasses, soirees, summer homes, bucolic landscapes. Most upwardly mobile Jews would be hard-pressed to surrender any part of that list as the provenance of non-Jews; in rational terms, those cultural clues are more the marks of class than religion. So, what makes the work Cheever-like? And "preppy-bohemian"? Is it possible that Jews are still identified with struggle—more than parties and boating—in artwork, even if they, themselves, are not struggling? In other words, are Jews addicted to their roles as empaths, identifying with struggle regardless of their specific lots?

Through March 18, 2007, the Jewish Museum hosts "Alex Katz Paints Ada," featuring more than 40 of Katz's portraits of his wife, painted over a half century. With such a venue comes the requisite conflation of Katz's art and Judaism, though the merger rests on the facts of Katz's birth more than on a particular aesthetic or social agenda. On the one hand, both his parents immigrated from Russia at the turn of the century and his mother was a Yiddish actress. On the other, he was born in Sheepshead Bay but raised in St Albans, Queens, "a neighborhood where there was only one other Jewish family," he told me recently, adding that he never had a bar mitzvah. "I'm not religious at all."

In a 2004 interview with Clare Henry of London's *Financial Times*, Katz explains the way his father influenced his own process, "My Russian father was very disorganized. His way of putting tools away was to open the cellar door and throw—then he was furious when he couldn't find them. Although I felt inadequate to him in many ways—he was a charismatic figure—I decided that was inefficient. But I have his explosive energy. It's very Russian to have high energy and work fast." Katz's father was both influence and counter-influence on his son; the painter is ultra-organized and systematic about his approach, and his work is controlled and disciplined, minimal in comparison to his father's chaos.



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For her part, Ada is Mother, Wife, Icon, and Muse. And, according to the artist, not just for Katz. "She becomes a universal type. And other women think they look like Ada, so the painting sort of becomes a symbol—she's a symbol," he observed, of the woman who, like him, came from an immigrant family, though hers was Italian and Catholic. To walk into a room filled with paintings and cut-outs of Ada, painted over almost 50 years, is powerful; you come upon confident, ardent—though unsentimental—love song. Aside from a few early paintings, which are a bit less sure stylistically and, oddly enough, more romantic, Katz's quest to realize Ada in paint begat the realization of his distinctive style, and his self-realization as an artist. 📍

Suzanne Snider is a Brooklyn-based writer, currently at work on a book about a millennialist communal society in southwestern Michigan. She last wrote on [Leonard Cohen](#).

Portrait of Alex Katz, 2002, by Vivien Bittencourt, courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York. Alex and Ada Katz at Marlborough Gallery, 1973, courtesy of Alex Katz.

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COMMENTS

Nancy Brman has just sent this to me---how do I get added to your e-mail list to receive this information regularly? MeraLee Goldman

Posted by Hon. MeraLee Goldman on 11.21.06

I was raised in St. Albans, too. Only Jew in my class. Those were bad times for Jewish people-the Hitler era. Some children weren't allowed to play with me anymore. When we moved to a Jewish neighborhood, I wasn't comfortable there either. At the age of 82, I am now very comfortable. I belong to the YMCA, and do water aerobics with all gentile women. They are my best friends, and I find them kinder than Jewish women.

Posted by Jeanie Laurence on 11.22.06

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FROM THE FILTER

Comic Disagreements
 Though [Art Spiegelman](#) conceived [Masters of American Comics](#), his work **won't appear** in its East Coast incarnation. Splitting it between the Newark Museum and New York's Jewish Museum makes it hard to access and suggests the project is "some sort of **'ethnic' phenomenon**," he wrote in an open letter.
 09.21.06 | [EMAIL](#) | [PERMALINK](#)

The Determined Artist
 One of the first Socialist Realist painters, [Boris Taslitzky](#) was sent to Buchenwald in 1944, where he documented his experience through drawings on stolen papers. "**If I go to hell, I will make sketches**," the artist said right before he died in 2005. "I've already been there and I drew!" His works **are on view** in Paris.
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A Maze of the Subconscious
 With "**an interactive labyrinth** of the key concepts of psychoanalysis," an exhibit on [Freud](#) at Berlin's [Jewish Museum](#) "illustrates how almost everyone—correctly or incorrectly, consciously or unconsciously—employs psychoanalytical concepts today," writes Oliver Bradley.
 08.18.06 | [EMAIL](#) | [PERMALINK](#)

Hanging Together
[Lucian Freud](#) and [Frank Auerbach](#) were both born in Berlin but fled to England, where they met. A joint **exhibit** in London shows their opposition "to abstraction. They are utterly involved with the **thing seen**," writes Richard Cork. Freud's "Eli and David," of his assistant and a dog, is "bound to incite **precedent-spotting**," echoing a Piet, writes co-curator William Feaver. 📍📍📍📍Officials at Brandeis have **removed paintings** by Palestinian teens from a student-curated show for a class on "The Arts of Building Peace."
 05.03.06 | [EMAIL](#) | [PERMALINK](#)

Know Logos
 For a time, the sandal that was ubiquitous in Tel Aviv had its origin in Holland. Its designers called the shoe **the Nimrod** in a nod to the **Biblical hero** and brought their innovation with them when they fled Europe in 1935. *Ha'aretz* compiles bios of various Israeli icons, including the **postal service deer**, **EL Al script**, and **Rummikub**. 📍📍📍📍In a break with tradition, New York's Jewish Museum will remain **open on Saturdays** this summer as it touts **an exhibition of Eva Hesse**; on the Sabbath admission's free.
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