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Alex Katz and Etel Adnan at London's Serpentine Gallery

Two venerable American artists on show at the London gallery display 'the happiness to just be'

Jackie Wulschlager | June 3, 2016



Etel Adnan's 'Untitled' (c1995-2000)

Alex Katz says his subjects are “quick things passing”. For nearly seven decades, this great American painter has stylised the human figure and landscape into big, bright, clean billboard-like compositions that both imitate how we see, and arrest a fleeting moment of time. An exhibition of new and recent work, *Alex Katz, Quick Light*, launched this week at London's Serpentine Gallery, includes some of the most memorable works he has ever made, and confirms him as the most persuasive, honest and joyful figurative painter alive.

In the opening gallery, we confront, in just the way the face of a person before us fills our field of vision, a strong, familiar profile. High cheekbones, Roman nose, watchful eyes are outlined in a few careful yet exuberant contours on to a patch of skin tones, offset by a sweep of grey hair, caressed by a warm orange monochrome backdrop. Frontal light eliminates detail and flattens form. Ada, Katz's 89-year-old wife and muse, is

devastatingly glamorous in this simplified 2015 likeness: a contemporary Nefertiti, depicted monumentally but also somehow on our scale.

Katz relates his giant portraits to films: “the movie is life-size, but the faces are actually 20 feet high”. In the 1950s and '60s, Katz would finish work, leave the studio and go straight to the cinema, no matter what was showing, to “look at the pictures to get away from traditional imagery. You'd see a big head on the side of the screen — a big face and a lot of landscape, I hadn't seen that in art.”

Figures in his portraits also move, double, advance, recede, in multiple perspectives suggestive of film sequences and of how “you can't look at any one thing for any length of time, your eye is moving all over the place in continuous motion”.



An installation view of 'Alex Katz: Quick Light' at London's Serpentine Gallery, with 'Anna' (2015) on the right

There are six larger-than-life versions of "Vivien", his daughter-in-law, nonchalant in slacks, shades, straw hat, on one three-metre saturated orange canvas here, and another half-dozen of "Emma", a young gymnast in black swimsuit, this time on a more painterly orange ground of all-over marks rushing in different directions, echoing the girl's dynamic poses — and insisting that it is paint that builds the illusion. Katz says he wants to evoke how "energy passes beyond the edges of a person. When you see them dead, you're always surprised how small they are. When you cut out a photograph, it doesn't go beyond the edge." These paintings fizz with human presence.

Katz has over the years challenged yet absorbed something from every mainstream American movement: Abstract Expressionism's heroic dimensions, Pop's deadpan flatness, Minimalism's austerity. He has appropriated from each, and from film and fashion, to evolve his own leanness of means, stripping form to essentials so that his subjects take on, as his friend Frank O'Hara said of Ada, "a role as abstract as that of Helen of Troy . . . a presence and at the same time a pictorial conceit of style".

An enhanced economy is the chief development of the latest cityscapes and landscapes here of Manhattan and Maine, where Katz spends summers. Some of these — the consummately stylised watery pattern "Reflection", the inky dark moonlit park scene "City Landscape" with its grid of black trunks — approach six metres in width and wrap round the viewer like vast screens. In the weightless paintings "Fog" and "Snow Scene" each branch of a tree is delineated with just one brushstroke; in "West 1", a cross-section of a city office at night reminiscent of Edward Hopper, grainy horizontal windows, slabs of illumination, are depicted with a single swipe of an eight-inch brush.

Flashes of light are really the subject of all these works: a slice of evening sky glimpsed between a window and a building opposite, above roofs and street lamps, in "Untitled Cityscape 4"; a Maine pond fringed with a block of lime green, shimmering through leaves that are jumpy abstract jabs, in "4pm". It was the Maine light, "richer and darker than the light in Impressionist paintings", Katz says, that "helped me separate myself from European painting and find my own eyes." Where his paintings continue the Impressionist mode is as radiant distillations of (American) leisure and pleasure, and of the delight and surprise of looking.

Beautifully installed — the light, symmetrical galleries of this Art Deco former tea pavilion are always sympathetic to painting — the Serpentine's *Quick Light* is twinned across the park at the Serpentine Sackler with an inaugural UK survey of 91-year-old Etel Adnan subtitled "The Weight of the World". The Sackler, with its brick corridors and narrow outer circular gallery, is a harder, edgier space, and Adnan is a slighter talent than Katz, but the contrast is intriguing.

Adnan, born in Beirut to a Syrian father from the Ottoman military and a Greek mother and educated at the Sorbonne, has lived between Lebanon, California and Paris, and is better known as an urgently political poet and novelist. Her paintings here are mostly domestic-scale abstracted American landscapes dating from the 1960s onwards and composed in vivid segments of colour laid on in clear, decisive blocks with a palette knife. Evoking deserts — the ochre plains and red skies of "Arizona" — or seas, beaches, clouds — the gentle pinks and greys of "California Coast" — and most frequently the peaks of Mount Tamalpais, which Adnan saw from her bedroom window in Marin County for decades, they do not develop but are unchanging, quiet, even severe celebrations of nature.

Adnan says that while her writings, which are provocative and tense, are "involved with history as it is made . . . my painting is very much a reflection of my immense love for the world, the happiness to just be". I think the paintings are a bit easy. Adnan's minimalist sensibility on the other hand finds fine expression in wonderfully luminous black resin drawings on alabaster exhibited as huge folding screens, "San Gimignano" (2014), a panorama of the Tuscan town's churches and towers.

These developed from another series, the standouts here, where Adnan manages to combine the visual and literary: ink and watercolour leporellos — accordion-folded books on Japanese paper unravelling to six feet — inscribed with Arabic poems and colourful markings ("Kassaed Bain Chajar", "Mahmoud Darwish"), or abbreviated black-and-white landscape features ("Mountain"). As words become drawings, Adnan not only references Arab calligraphy but the act of recreating language and tradition: a story of unending longing and exile.

To September 11, serpentinegalleries.org
 Photographs: readsreads.info; Sfeir-Semler Gallery,
 Hamburg/Beirut