

# THE Nation.

FINE ART CULTURE

## Alex Katz's Downtown Dreams

*In a recent show curated by the New York painter and sculptor, as well as a showcase of his new work, his particular artistic psychogeography comes to life.*

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“Downtown” has long had a special place in the psychogeography of New York. It means the opposite of what it means everywhere else. In your average American city, downtown is the central business district. In New York, “downtown” means (or used to mean) the place where new things could develop, free from the implicit restrictions imposed by uptown institutions like museums, opera houses, concert halls, blue-chip galleries, and so on. It was a cultural designation synonymous with somewhat more historically specific terms like “bohemia,” “underground,” and “counterculture”—none of which (I am sorry to say) seem to have any grasp on our 21st-century situation. New York’s downtown, though it was geographically in the southern part of Manhattan (14th Street was considered by some to be the upper boundary; others, more lenient, recognized 34th Street as the dividing line), was never thought to include its southernmost part, that is, the financial district around Wall Street. Finance capital was never the business of downtown, at least in this city’s idea of downtown.

I don’t want to idealize the old downtown. It harbored more than its own share of triviality and confusion, addiction and madness, not to mention unconscious racism, as embodied by Norman Mailer’s “white negro.” The painter Larry Rivers, an exemplary problematic hipster if there ever was one, once reminisced, “In my own underground bohemian period in New York, almost everyone I knew—artists, poets, musicians, dandies and even bums—was either going to or about to go to a psychiatrist to find out why life was somehow a little sad, a little frantic and very unsatisfying.” Someone once said that psychoanalysis is the problem to which it is also the solution; maybe the same could be said of downtown.

When did downtown start to disappear? By 1987, Rivers was ready to declare, “It’s not there anymore,” though it seemed there enough for me at the time, or at least I was sure I had caught its scent. Like romance and the novel, downtown has been declared dead many times over. But by now I’m inclined to believe the reports of its demise: The developer-led transformation that Manhattan has undergone in recent times—you might call it the city’s Bloombergification—and skyrocketing rents have left little room for bohemia.

But there are still those among us who can remember downtown in its heyday, and among them is Alex Katz, a true New Yorker, born in Brooklyn in 1927, raised in Queens, and a graduate of Cooper Union who has been exhibiting his paintings in the city since the early 1950s. His portraits of the 1960s show the true face of downtown; his subjects (poets, artists, dancers, and the varied denizens of their milieu) were what the poet and critic David Antin called “secret celebrities,” renowned within their highly circumscribed purview though obscure to the wider world. “While you are certain you should know them,” Antin said, “it is nearly certain that you don’t.” I somehow find it encouraging that, whether or not downtown still exists somewhere, an observer as savvy as Katz at least recognizes that downtown painting continues—“Downtown Painting” being the title of a reassuringly raucous and surprising group exhibition “presented” (I think that means something like “curated”) by Katz, recently on view at Peter Freeman Inc. in Manhattan. The show included some 80 works, mostly dating from the 1950s through the present, with a distinct emphasis on paintings made in the last few years.

As far as painting goes, Katz attributes his awareness of an uptown/downtown dichotomy to Edwin Denby, the great dance critic and poet and friend of painters, who wrote that downtown was where “everybody drank coffee and nobody had shows.” In the 1940s, Katz recalls, Surrealism (with its tony European pedigree) was the uptown choice in new painting, and Denby would have agreed: “Tchelitchev was the uptown master,” he wrote. The soon-to-be Abstract Expressionists—Pollock, de Kooning, and company—were still haunting the coffee shops and automats of the Village; their successors of the 1950s and early ’60s were recently chronicled in a 2017 exhibition at New York University’s Grey Art Gallery, “Inventing Downtown: Artist-Run Galleries in New York City, 1952–1965,” in which Katz was, of course, also featured.

The latitude with which Katz employs the uptown/downtown distinction eludes geography. Several of the artists in the show were never associated with any part of New York or even with urban life in general. For instance, Marsden Hartley, who is more easily associated with his native Maine, was represented in “Downtown Painting” by *New England Sea View—Fish House*, 1934, one of only two works on view from before the 1950s. The visionary Forrest Bess, whose extraordinary painting in the show was *Untitled (The Black Bitch)*, 1959, was born, lived, and died in remote Bay City, Texas. The Lebanese-born Etel Adnan was included, too, with a typically intensely hued, abstract mountain landscape, dated 2017; she has spent most of her life in California and presently lives in Paris; her muse has always been Mount Tamalpais, north of San Francisco. Distinctly uptown parts of Manhattan were on display as well: Realist landscape painter Rackstraw Downes was represented by a prototypically uptown vista featuring the Upper West Side’s most famous apartment building, *The Dakota From Just East of the Reservoir*, 1966.

But no matter. Katz knows what he means by downtown painting, and he knows it when he sees it. According to a wall text at the gallery, “Uptown represents no problems. Its work is generally commodified and has the weakness of modern Art, the finding of truth. Downtown art is more intuitive and self-indulgent. Franz Kline and Elizabeth Murray are not housebroken, and downtown art is not involved with the truth or modern Art. Downtown art is not product oriented. This show is an homage to artists who remain free in their initial desire to be free.” The criterion is blatantly subjective—one might even say, using Katz’s description, which I am delighted to see him use as a term of approbation, self-indulgent. To my eye, there were some things in the exhibition that seem blatantly permeated by uptown sensibilities—a too blandly handsome blue-and-black abstraction by the Scottish artist Callum Innes (*Untitled Lamp Black No. 4*, 2018), for instance. But I don’t know how we’d ever thrash out that difference of opinion, especially today when almost all art can be considered commodified—a far cry from Denby’s time, when contemporary art was not yet considered an investment and not exhibiting was the norm.

Chances are, “downtown” in Katz’s sense can never really be applied with certainty to any specific work—only to the milieu from which it emerges. And it wouldn’t be surprising if many of the artists he chose for the show have been scratching their heads over his assertion that their work is unconcerned with the search for some kind of truth. Maybe he’s thinking of the kind of truth that can be confirmed by research or underwritten by an academic code of best practice or the consensus of bien-pensant opinion. But the blessed self-indulgence of artists is based, usually, on nothing less than an irrational conviction that they have something irreplaceable to offer the world, whether the world likes it or not, and this they often conceive of as a sense of truth, however unverifiable. I can hardly think of anyone more wedded to this kind of unguaranteed truth than Katz himself, who has always manifested an implacable belief in his own artistic intuition.

That species of unwavering belief has been shared by several of the artists Katz chose. Among them is Judith Bernstein, who has been addressing sexual politics in the rawest possible terms in her paintings for some 50 years, gaining widespread recognition only in the last decade. Her contribution to “Downtown Painting,” *Small Blue Balls (Yellow Ground) 2*, 2019, was a blazingly energetic and happily goofy send-up of phallic domination powered by intensely fluorescent color. Rafael Ferrer, who has been setting his face against art-world complacency since the late 1960s, was represented by *The Jinx*, 2017, an unexpectedly brooding, atmospheric study of a landscape whose verdancy seems far from reassuring; presumably it’s his native Puerto Rico. The painting’s dense facture and gloomy palette, which may surprise those who recall his brightly hued proto-neo-expressionist canvases of the 1980s, reflects his fascination with the painters of the so-called School of London—Frank Auerbach, Lucian Freud, et al.—but its rough yet jewellike glow is all his own. And the way the gnarled tree trunk that holds the painting’s center resembles a monstrous striding figure gives the painting an uncanny sense of animation.

There were plenty more things in the show by some of the painters whose work I follow closely, such as Ellen Berkenblit, Lois Dodd, Merlin James, Nathlie Provosty, Dana Schutz, and Sue Williams. And it’s always great to get a first glimpse of an artist you want to see more from. New to me were, among others, Zach Bruder, Emma McMillan, and Kenny Rivero. But one of the show’s great pleasures was finding that some of the stand-out pieces turned out, when I located them on the checklist, to be by artists I had been sure I wasn’t interested in. Francesco Clemente presented *Politics of Experience*, 2018, a strangely affecting image of one brown head facing off against three differently colored ones—white, red, and blue. This allegory of the dark-skinned citizen confronting three impassive antagonists in the colors of the US flag might sound simplistic and heavy-handed, but the painting itself is quite the opposite. Understated and pensive in color, almost minimalist in composition, it’s got the pictorial substance to support its theme.

Another happy surprise: I’ve generally found Katherine Bernhardt’s paintings to be energetic but superficial, but her contribution to “Downtown Painting” struck me very differently. Appropriately titled *Downtown*, 2019, it’s a representational work whose fluorescent color echoes Bernstein’s, but I’m not sure what it represents, aside from that pair of cigarettes standing, filters up, like sentries at ramrod attention on either side of... what? A something or other that could be a dish (inscribed with a logo reading “cha cha”) of high-piled green sherbet with a couple of spoons stuck into it? Who cares? Maybe even because it’s ambiguous despite its look of blatancy, the painting is funny and memorable.

The show’s major weakness was that African American artists were so strangely underrepresented in it. Keep in mind that “Downtown Painting” included a good many artists I don’t know, but the only works I recognized as being by black painters were a recent work by Cy Gavin, *Untitled (Canyon)*, 2019, and an untitled work from 1962 by Bob Thompson, a quintessential figure of the old New York downtown, right down to the heroin addiction that killed him at 28 years old in 1966. Rivero, an Afro-Dominican artist from Washington Heights, contributed *Uptown Fire (Front Knot)*, 2019. But I was particularly surprised not to see something by Beauford Delaney—a Harlem Renaissance painter who later chose expatriation in Paris and who moved fluently between portraiture and abstraction, but always vibrant color—since I’ve heard Katz mention him on more than one occasion.

It seems the psychogeography that divided cultural Manhattan into uptown and downtown erased the fact that there is an uptown north of the uptown of Carnegie Hall and MOMA, namely Harlem. And yet many of the great black artists of the 1950s through the '80s—from Norman Lewis and Romare Bearden through Jack Whitten and Joe Overstreet to Jean-Michel Basquiat—have been downtown fixtures. And many of the artists who are making painting urgent right now are African American and are downtown by sensibility if not by location. Why didn't Katz tap the likes of Jennifer Packer, Sam Gilliam, Rashid Johnson, Howardena Pindell, Lorna Simpson, Henry Taylor, or Stanley Whitney—to name only a few of the most interesting painters around?

All the more ironic, then, that Katz has an absorbing solo show in Harlem, at Gavin Brown's Enterprise (through August 3). At 92, Katz has not been resting on his laurels. Brown's is a big gallery, with three floors of exhibition space, and Katz has filled it with big paintings, all from 2018 or '19. Moreover, he included several metal sculptures—a medium fairly new to him, since as far as I know, he showed such a work for the first time last year: a sinuous, sharply defined stainless-steel outline of the profile of his wife (and favorite portrait subject), Ada Katz, that was stealthily put into a show at the Paul Kasmin Gallery in Chelsea otherwise devoted to the freestanding painted cutouts he has been doing for decades. The cutouts are sculptural but not sculpture—definitely painting. These new things are different. Flat like his cutouts rather than volumetric, they are still more reminiscent of Roy Lichtenstein's equally planar sculpture, but unlike either of those bodies of work, Alex Katz's sculpture forgoes color in favor of the gleam of stainless steel.

At Brown's there was another steel portrait of Ada Katz, this time a three-quarter view of her face, and it's a kind of object lesson in Alex Katz's method of representation by extreme editing: Her head has no back to it; one eye is outside the face's contour, attached by nothing more than the line of an eyebrow; she lacks a philtrum, so nothing connects her nose and upper lip but air. As a result, there are no closed forms anywhere in the piece, which gives it an incredible sense of lightness. Most of the sculptures, however, are not portraits but studies of female dancers. Here, even more than in the portrait, Katz demonstrates his indifference to the distinction between elegance and grotesquerie. In one study of a pair of dancers, the uplifted arm of one ends not with a hand but with a pair of spikes as the arm's two outlines simply come to a brusque end, while her companion's arm, bent back over her shoulder, presents an elbow that can at first look like, to be frank, the malformed limb of a thalidomide victim, and the curve of her breast has been summarized as a kind of hook. Such strange condensations of corporeal form reminded me of a remark that an artist friend made to me recently and that I didn't quite understand at first: that Katz is a secret expressionist—that (although he would probably deny this) his severe abbreviations of form could be the result only of an emotional extremism, a vehement, almost violent will to deformation. Now I see my friend's point, and suddenly it makes sense to me that the earliest piece in "Downtown Painting" was a 1909 woodcut by the German Expressionist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner.

Reflected in these sculptures' gleaming surfaces were the series of paintings installed around them on the gallery's ground floor, all from a 2018 series titled "Homage to Degas"—more dancers. The nude figures have all been painted against a harsh almost lime bordering on neon green background. I kept thinking that the artist must have wanted to challenge himself, to see if he could give force to his figures by placing them in a chromatic environment that would be as inhospitable as possible to the color of their skin (the dancers are all white women). Each painting shows the same figure in two or more views. As with the sculptures, the figures can be strangely cropped, and not necessarily by the edge of the canvas but simply by some invisible guillotine line within the composition, which sometimes gives the impression that one is seeing a diptych or polyptych—which none of these paintings are. Or you might think momentarily of Eadweard Muybridge's late-19th-century studies of animal locomotion, except that none of Katz's paintings show a single continuous movement. Instead, the iterations of the figure tend to bump up against each other with an abruptness that is only faintly cushioned by any intervening strip of radioactive green background.

On the gallery's second floor a very different group of Katz's paintings was on display: Maine landscapes, mostly nocturnal. Black foliage and branches are the occasion for an understated show of gutsy, imperative brushwork in most of them, while pale horizontal strata of sundown colors shine through from behind. There's a curious resemblance, at times, to some impressive paintings made in the late 1980s by Gregory Botts. But Botts was combining his painterly landscape imagery with geometrical abstraction—a very '80s idea, in retrospect. In these landscapes of Katz's, geometry is consigned to a residual role as an atmospheric background by way of those hazy horizontal bands, while the bravura of his brisk and precise mark-making cloaks itself in a cool darkness. And yet there's a bitter edge to those murky, impetuous brushstrokes, as if they were the painter's way to rage against the dying of the light.

But for me, the standout among the landscapes was *Blue Night*, 2018, which eschews both the calligraphic potential offered by the transcription of leaves and branches and any faint residue of geometry. The dark, unaccountably ominous form of, presumably, a hillside—or it might be a dense stand of trees—looms against a just slightly less dusky sky. You can practically feel yourself squinting as you look at this painting. It's all about the unseen, maybe the unseeable, and it has a spookiness I never encountered in Katz's work before, an eerie quality that's hard to shake even when you've turned away to look somewhere else.

It's reasonable to wonder, seeing Katz's new work after being immersed in the show he organized at Peter Freeman: Can an artist now so well established, so widely honored, still be downtown? Or does success automatically convert everything into uptown fodder—uncomplicated, as Katz says, and straightforwardly a marketable product? An attentive eye will tell you that the answer is that even art that's been accepted by the market can stay downtown if the artist strives to stay free and uncomplacent. That's good news not just for Katz but for all the art that's threatened with becoming a casualty of its own success.