

ART

COOL FOR KATZ

A painter turns critic.

BY DAVID SALLE



THE IDEA FOR THIS COLUMN IS TO WRITE ABOUT SHOWS I like in the language that artists use to talk about art among themselves. Willem de Kooning, who in addition to being de Kooning had a genius for the English language, once likened a Larry Rivers painting to “pressing your face in wet grass.” Alex Katz is another master describer. A near-miss painting might be diagnosed as having “no inside energy”; a grandiose painter is “a first-class decorator”; another makes “pizza parlor art.” Of course, not all artists are so gifted verbally, but most I know are pretty good talkers—except on panel discussions, when their fear of seeming insufficiently educated can make them sound like idiots. I have done it myself.

“A genuine and ordinary reaction to paintings and sculpture, like one’s first impression of a new person, is usually very much to the point.” So wrote the painter and luminous critic Fairfield Porter in 1958, and it’s still valid. We often describe certain paintings as old friends, for good reason. What is this thing about art that speaks to us? It has to do with something you can intuit, as you would with any person you meet. One way to look at a painting—I use that word as shorthand for visual art in general—is to notice, as you take its measure, what it is you actually find yourself thinking about, which might differ from what you imagine you are meant to be thinking. The wall label might inform you that a work is about the artist’s investigation into the semiotics of performative strategies, while you find yourself wondering if the cafeteria food is any good. I suppose that’s another way of saying don’t believe everything you read, unless you read it here.

The art world today is like a canyon cut by a swift river—the striations of sequential developments are exposed all at once. Things are not so mutually exclusive; it’s possible to express talent in any number of styles. I can remember a time

when you might get into fisticuffs over whether you could paint figuratively. These days there is a lot of idle talk about the obsolescence of the gallery system—with the hard-partying atmosphere of the art fair as its replacement. For this writer the reverse is true: If you ignore the auctions and the art fairs and the smudged lens of theory, the art itself cuts through the nonsense and silences the chatter.

A forceful illustration of this phenomenon can be found in a trio of European museum shows of the protean artist Alex Katz happening this spring. Lausanne, Zurich, and Salzburg all open this month. You could, dear reader, go on a nice little alpine jaunt and see them in the space of a few days, picking some edelweiss along the way. Now 85, Katz seems to be only gaining in energy in recent years. (I’ll have whatever he’s having.) Each of the shows has a different focus, and one interestingly juxtaposes Katz with the early 20th-century Swiss painter Félix Vallotton. Katz is very, very good at the *what*—that is to say, he is always on the lookout for a great image—but the enduring

MADE IN THE SHADE

Left: *Black Hat 2*, by Alex Katz, 2010.
Below: *Untitled*, by Wade Guyton, 2004.



Marie Kupperberg, „Kindliches Lächeln nach dem Baden.“ 1965.
Foto: Gerd Kippenhauer





MATERIAL GIRL

Training (2012), a loom painting by Rosemarie Trockel.
Below: *Sunset 5*, by Alex Katz, 2008.

part of his art lies in the *how*. He can paint a piece of landscape—a white pine seen against a late afternoon sky, its sweeping horizontal branches made with a very wide brush arching upward to finish in satisfying, meaty points—dozens of times, with different results because of the specific physical energy in each case. His ease with a big brush, the way it arrives at the image, is akin to how Miguel Cabrera's bat finds the baseball. Katz is also a great colorist. In painting, as in ophthalmology, color is relational: one color seen against another, those two against a third, and so on. What counts most are the intervals, accurately chosen. In *Black Hat 2*, for example, the colors of the face and background—pinks, tans, oranges, and yellows in close proximity—form an assertive counterpoint to the *jump* the eye takes to the dense black of the hat and sunglasses. It's the visual equivalent of a tenor reaching for a high note.

That rare alloy of sensibility and materiality is, I think, what enables some artists to make gold out of dross. Katz is joined in this gift by two younger artists, themselves 20 years apart, whose work was recently featured in retrospectives in New York City. In October the Whitney Museum's energetic young curator, Scott Rothkopf, mounted the first museum survey of Wade Guyton's terse and glamorous paintings. Walking through the show I was reminded of the feeling I had as a teenager wandering through a particular Wichita haberdashery. Long before Ralph Lauren, college towns all across America had stores that outfitted the college man, or the boy about to go off to become one. Gentry Ltd. (!) was a deeply sensual shrine to masculine correctness expressed through craftsmanship, expensive detailing, cordovan leather, gray flannel—you knew that anything purchased there would be the unassailable right thing.

Wade Guyton's work has the same inevitability. Guyton rejects the paintbrush in favor of the humble but sturdy Epson digital printer, feeding canvas through the machine, often

multiple times, to create handsome monochromatic fields, X's, bands, and grids that conjure the romance and longing that boys once experienced poring over books of the great midcentury architects. The feeling is elating. Guyton's paintings are not acts of homage—that would be dull—but they take as their starting point an identification with the glamour of an earlier time; the achievements of that heroic generation of form-givers hover in the background.

Also in the fall, a lilting retrospective of the esteemed German artist Rosemarie Trockel, now 60, transformed the New Museum into a series of tableaux on the theme of wonder. Trockel's career was launched in the '80s, with works made on a commercial knitting loom. Motifs like the familiar Delft china sailboat were woven into a grid using two or three colors of wool and stretched on wood supports like paintings. Outwardly jaunty, inwardly layered, they were funny, tartly feminist, and unassailable. In addition to wool, she works with a dozen other materials and has near-perfect pitch with all of them. Yellow-green vinyl, yarn, watercolor, photo-silkscreen, and magnificently glazed ceramic: materials are used for their own intimacies and associative range. She draws like an angel. Aptly titled "A Cosmos," the show was inclusive and expansive; the imagination behind it embraces the margins of human experience. As with the pure of heart in Gothic literature, every creature speaks to her—and she shared the stage with many of them, giving pride of place to several paintings made by an orangutan. Trockel has an almost aching sensitivity to context; a subtle misalignment can bring an object into startling relief. She is our Emily Dickinson. She transforms the everyday into bits of visual poetry that unexpectedly pierce your heart.

As with diction and line breaks in poetry, the humanity of the artist is found in the syntax. As a painter Katz embodies David Mamet's dictum to get into the scene late and leave early. Once asked to name his favorite artists of all time, Katz started his list with Jackson Pollock and the guy who made Nefertiti. The feeling Katz gives is one of reality refreshed; the ingredients are always firsthand and immediate. He works fast and keeps it unfussy. His paint surface is thin, at times almost delicate, but it rests on a firm foundation. I once asked Katz, a serious devotee of modern dance, what he admired about a certain dancer's work: "He doesn't wobble." •

