

ALEX KATZ *Summer in Maine*

This show includes a selection of works by the American artist Alex Katz (b. Brooklyn, 1927), painted in summer 2012 while in Maine. *Once in a Lifetime*, the retrospective of Katz's works that inaugurated this space in late 2010, received overwhelming acclaim from critics and public alike, and this exhibition offers Madrid a fresh opportunity to see the latest work by one of the most important painters of his generation in an incomparable setting.

Summer in Maine brings together examples of two of Katz's most abiding interests, portrait and landscape, and evokes the summer months spent by the artist with family and friends on Penobscot Bay, Maine. Since the 1960s, Katz has developed an innovative style of realism, distinctive for its simplicity of line, shape and colour. His canvases are usually on a large scale and his recurrent subjects are the people and places that he knows best: members of his family and friends, and his surroundings in New York's SoHo and the natural landscapes of coastal Maine. These recent paintings communicate, in their economy of line and subtle use of colour, the firmness and clarity of a vision maintained throughout his career. These are images that are clear, sharp, luminous and essential, combining abstract elements with realism; the palette is limited but intense, sensuous and bold, with light-handed brushwork, placing the subjects within a special, two-dimensional perspective, and creating a style that defies being pigeonholed.

Alex Katz found his place in the American art scene towards the end of the 1950s with an aesthetic that reacted against the dominance of Abstract Expressionism and anticipated Pop Art, marrying abstraction and post-war realism in a figurative style that he called 'totally American'. With the Abstract Expressionists he shared an interest in large-scale formats and their emphasis on the painting's surface plane. In common with Pop Art, he relished the influence of the new media, the use of flat, bright colour and a preference for scenes of daily life without any need for further meaning but, rather than focusing on graphic elements, he chose to explore light as the essential means of modulating the picture's surface. His interest in the creative forms of popular culture—cinema, advertising, comics, photography—brought him close to the plastic sensibility of younger artists on the scene.

Since starting as a painter, he has preferred to express himself through the portrait and his figures—especially the women in his paintings—have truly become contemporary icons. Katz has a very personal slant on the genre, since he does not aim for a faithful verisimilitude in portraying physical features nor does he seek to convey the sitter's hidden psychology—yet they are distinctive, individual and recognisable. Painted from life in a single sitting, despite their dimensions, they communicate a profound intimacy, as the subject looks at the viewer or turns her back on us in a casual manner that implies familiarity and this has come to characterise Katz's capturing of everyday life in the scenes he creates.

Landscape has been the painter's other favourite genre since he studied art in Maine, and he sees the natural world as a meeting of space and light that is constantly changing. In his most recent groups and series, centred on flowers, there is a timeless vitality that was already hinted at in his well-known landscape compositions from the 1990s, where bright patches of colour define the different kinds of flowers and stand out from the flat surfaces, shapes that are about to dissolve into abstraction and merge their hues, a recurrent motif in his stylised images, which he views as more instinctive than descriptive.

Katz is an artist of international renown. In 2010 he showed at the National Portrait Gallery in London and the Albertina in Vienna. In 2012 he has presented *Give me Tomorrow* in Britain, at the Tate St. Ives and the Turner Contemporary in Margate. In 2013 the Haus Konstruktiv in Zurich displayed a selection of his landscapes and the Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts in Lausanne set up a dialogue between his oeuvre and Félix Vallotton's. Through the course of his career he has received numerous awards and his work is now included in around a hundred public collections across the world, from MoMA, the Metropolitan and the Whitney in New York, to the Tate Modern in London, the MMK in Frankfurt, the Albertina in Vienna, the MNCARS in Madrid and the Guggenheim in Bilbao, which acquired *Smiles* (1993 - 94), a series shown as part of the museum's collection.