

## **Follow the Light**

David Salle

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Alex Katz took the conventions of realism and merged them with the flatness and scale of Pop Art to paint things seen in the here and now.



Alex Katz: *Blue Umbrella 2*, 1972

### **Reviewed:**

#### **Alex Katz: Gathering**

an exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City, October 21, 2022–February 20, 2023

Catalog of the exhibition edited by Katherine Brinson with Levi Prombaum  
Guggenheim, 383 pp., \$69.95

A painter is like the pilot of a small boat—constantly correcting course, ever alert to changes in the weather, trying not to get swamped by the wakes of larger boats, steering toward the distant shore. A lifetime of painting requires more than just will; agility of mind helps. “Alex Katz: Gathering,” the artist’s long-awaited retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum, was both Olympian in scale and outlook and a hard-charging athletic event, sweeping in scope yet light on its feet. It

started at a trot with a group of sketchbook drawings from the late 1940s and sprinted to a conclusion in the museum’s topmost galleries with several large canvases painted just weeks earlier.

Katz is among the least fickle of artists, and the overall impression at the Guggenheim was one of single-minded, stubborn idealism. This idealism is connected to a belief in social etiquette, of giving your best self. Katz, whom I’ve known for more than forty years, once told me that it’s bad manners to make a lousy painting—it’s rude to bore your friends. As you made your way up the Guggenheim’s spiral ramp, it was one goddamned masterpiece after another, triumphs of point of view, of touch and color and composition. Of image. Of *style*.

The show was also steeped in the glamour, partly nostalgic, of the bohemian life. The people who appear in Katz’s paintings attest to his lifelong commitment to poetry and modern dance, and to a sophistication that has nothing to do with fashion or money. Gathered at a picnic table in Maine or deep in conversation in downtown lofts,



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# David Salle

David Salle is a painter and essayist. The Brant Foundation in Greenwich, Connecticut, presented a forty-year survey of his paintings in 2021. (January 2024)

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