

G L A D S T O N E

Jonathan Goodman, "Alex Katz," *The Brooklyn Rail*, December 21, 2021

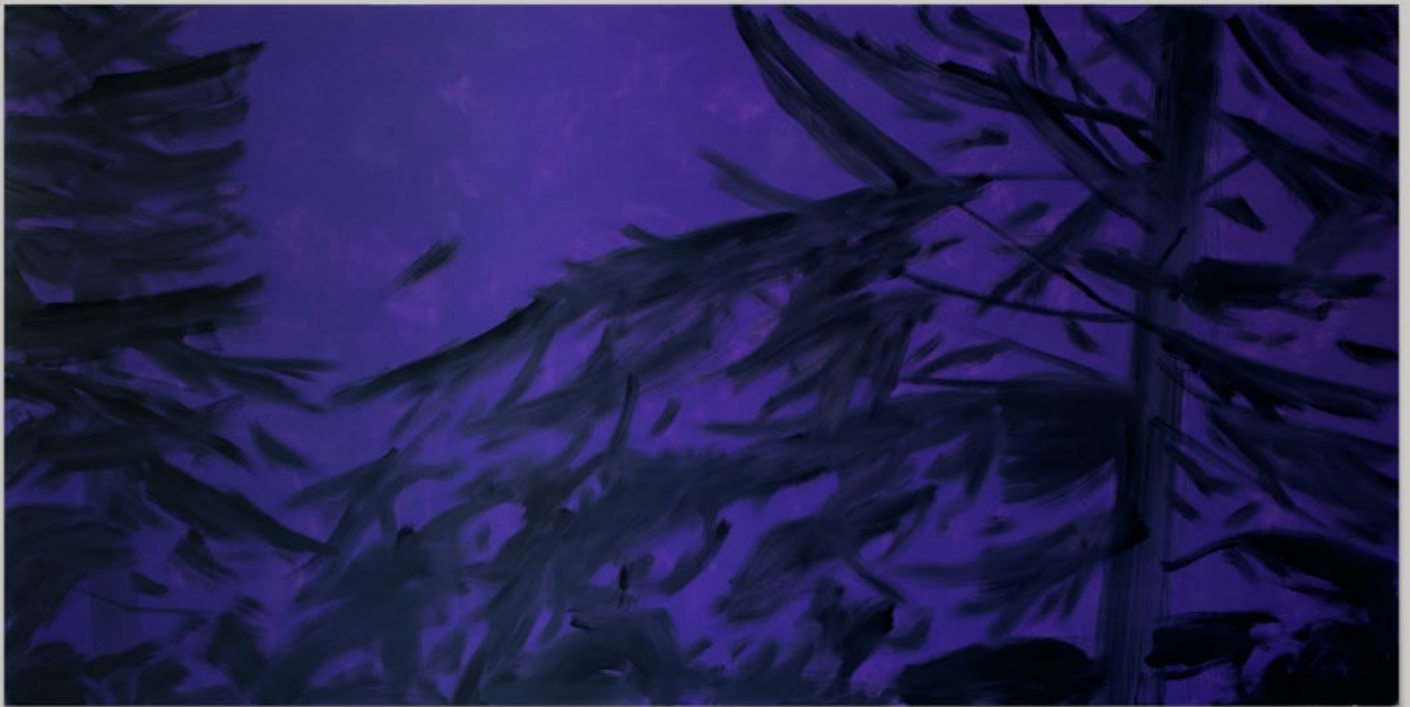


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Alex Katz

DEC 21-JAN 22

By Jonathan Goodman



Alex Katz, *Purple Landscape*, 2020. Oil on linen, 108 x 216 inches. © Alex Katz / VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

New York, NY

Gladstone Gallery

November 12 – December 18, 2021

Alex Katz continues his foray into the lyric appreciation of the world outside us. Leaves and trees abound in this show, and are as technically accomplished as ever. The works, begun either in Pennsylvania or Maine during the quarantine, were completed at the artist's studio on West Broadway. Katz's sense of color remains highly original and highly effective, as does his understanding of what takes place in the span of a composition. Now in his mid-'90s, the artist shows no sign of slowing down; the paintings are as energetic and as vibrant as ever. Katz from the start of his career has been associated with downtown New York. Truly a product of this city, Katz studied at Cooper Union from 1946 to 1949. Maybe the most engaging aspect of his production is the paintings' seamless combination of accessible content—the artist has painted many works devoted to his wife and poet son, as well as studies of the luminaries of the New York art world—and an openly poetic presentation that reports on nature and people in a graceful manner.

This show emphasizes nature. *Purple Landscape* (2020), a large work of art, shows a quiet mastery of composition. It consists of two dark evergreens, one with short, even branches on the left, and on the right another with extended branches of different lengths, which extend to the left beyond the center from the trunk close to the right edge of the painting. The brushwork is so expressive as to suggest the influence of the Abstract Expressionists, but there is a marvelous control, too. The branches fill the dark purple space behind them without overloading the composition. While Katz is a painter who belongs to the aesthetic history of this city, sometimes his audience senses a bit of Asian influence in the fluid gracefulness of his painterly arrangements. In *From the Bridge 5* (2021), another large, horizontally aligned work, Katz has painted black leaves, a dense group on the lower left and another thick bunch on the upper right. They are connected in the center by smaller leaves, bits and pieces of foliage that look like they are suspended in open air. Behind them is a blue sky, with just enough darkness in it to suggest twilight. Both these paintings are free of people; nature has the upper hand.



Alex Katz, *From the Bridge 5*, 2021. Oil on linen, 60 x 120 inches. © Alex Katz / VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

Gray Tree (2020) consists of a dark gray set of leafless branches which move outward from the upper left corner, while a fully-leaved tree appears in the lower right. The bare branches seem to indicate that the tree is dead; its skeletal outline suggests no living foliage, in contrast to the full set of thick green leaves on the other side of the painting. In between there is nothing but gray sky. The work offers a muted melancholy, and as simple as its construction may be, it is balanced compositionally by the forms diagonally opposed to each other. *Solebury* (2020) takes its title from a Pennsylvania town. It is more complicated than *Gray Tree*, although it too portrays trees in darker light. Three thin trunks rise upward from the bottom to the top of the painting; branches move horizontally across the top two-thirds of the work. Behind them we find, on the lower end, a constellation of either shrubs or trees, above which there is a slate-blue sky with a band of light cutting across it. The painting is lyrical and otherworldly in the same moment.



Alex Katz, *Yellow House*, 2020. Oil on linen, 84 x 72 inches. © Alex Katz / VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

The painting *Yellow House* (2020) suggests the presence of people, even if no one is visible. The image consists of a bright yellow house, with part of an angled roof and a small portion of sky on the upper left. The wall of the home is dotted with irregular ovals of slightly brighter yellow, while on the right a tree rises, with small leaves hovering without seeming to fall. *Yellow House*, like the rest of the works in the show, is direct but also emotionally rich. The paintings announce themselves quietly, in a way that emphasizes overall design. Katz, whose skills and grasp of implied emotion are fully established, is someone for whom the act of painting may start with craft but consistently moves into metaphysical suggestion. In his depiction of nature, his unusual ability is linked to an imagery suggestive of something mysterious, perhaps elegiac. It is rare, now, to find a painter at once so accurate in his presentation and so thoughtful in his theme. His natural realism is accompanied by an acute sense of otherness, not necessarily found in this world.

