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Hearne Pardee, "Alex Katz," *The Brooklyn Rail*, November 2025.

BROOKLYN RAIL

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Alex Katz

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In a stream of consciousness text posted at the entrance to his current show of immersive landscapes at Gladstone, Alex Katz recalls a thrilling moment of self-discovery in the Maine landscape: "I was painting from my unconscious into my subconscious. And that state of painting was euphoria for me." In its ambitious scope, the installation of eleven physically imposing canvases is reminiscent of a Renaissance fresco cycle. Recreating the road he's known and depicted for more than seventy years and conflating it with the spatial color of Henri Matisse's *Red Studio* (1911), Katz not only pays homage but also takes liberties. He dispels any trace of nostalgia by replacing Matisse's red with his own "cooler" orange (because orange is "dissonant" and less tasteful, "not Park Avenue", as he states in the press release), and situates himself in the open, American landscape, on a road, exposed to subconscious memories of place and rich connections to the local, which enable him to claim, with justifiable pride: "I've never seen a painting like that before."

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Alex Katz, *Road 28*, 2024. Oil on linen, 132 × 84 inches. © Alex Katz / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery. Photo: David Regen.

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Katz insists that Matisse's red depicts the "flash" of an afterimage, the physical response of the retina to an excess of green—a very American take on Matisse's Symbolist color, consistent with Katz's emphasis on "fast seeing" and in line with his efforts to "leave out the thing and just paint the sensation." One can test this effect by looking at the orange field of *Road 33* (both 2024) for two minutes and then at the predominantly white *Road 26*, to observe that the sky and water assume a bluish tint. Even if the history of Matisse's painting is more complicated (recent research shows that it started out in blue), the emphasis on retinal physiology aligns with the tendency toward monochrome abstraction in Katz's recent landscapes, epitomized by the white-on-white of *White Reflection* (2020) shown in his recent Guggenheim retrospective.



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Installation view: *Alex Katz*, Gladstone Gallery, New York, 2025. © Alex Katz / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery. Photo: David Regen.

But the new paintings return to the everyday world of the road and to the vertical composition of *Road 1* from 2021. In a departure from his usual reliance on drawing, Katz used photographs and memories to generate small studies of this view, and progressively enlarged them to stand more than 10 feet tall with his wet-on-wet, one-shot painting process. Composing these like a comic or a cinematic montage around the gallery, he conflates the enclosure of the wood-shrouded road with Matisse's subjectively charged interior. The revelatory "flash" weaves through the eleven paintings, in shadows on the ground and foliage broken by bursts of light, transfiguring them into an interplay of illumination and darkness. Orange and white shift roles, setting images in motion and extending the strategies of fragmentation and juxtaposition he's developed in figure paintings to compress time and space. Merciless in his editing (*Road 28* [2024] shows evidence of modifications made after the initial attempt), Katz resists the entropic pull of generic overall fields and finds imagery there. The paintings remind us of how much we infer from slight details, how glimpses of light activate an innate visual ecology.

Although neighboring panels link across diagonals, suggesting the stream of consciousness of his text and recalling the circle of Matisse's *Dance* (1910), the images tend to repeat a centralized view based on one-point perspective, like that of the seventeenth-century Dutch painter Meindert Hobbema, rooting us in the center. The view into the gallery through the lobby door provides an architectural anchor, framing the dynamic,

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angular *Road 21* (2024), while the view back provides a counter-shot of the door framed by dramatically contrasted compositions: to the right, *Road 26* (2024), a unique horizontal composition, dramatically isolates a high orange horizon line on a white ground; it's answered to the left by the unique, elongated vertical of *Road 28* (2024), a primarily orange field, to establish overall parameters. Given Katz's long interest in film, it's tempting to find allusions here to iconic avant-garde works of the 1950s and '60s: the centralized view through the door evokes the relentless zoom of Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1966–67), while the flickering lights of overall compositions like *Road 28* evoke the nocturnal reveries of Stan Brakhage's *Anticipation of the Night* (1958) since its orange resonates with the filmmaker's "closed-eye vision." In his statement, Katz connects the flicker of lights and darks to colors he remembers his father painted in his childhood crib.

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Katz's own studio figures in the show indirectly in the form of a three-channel color video, *Drawing Restraint 28* (2024), made in collaboration with sculptor and filmmaker Matthew Barney, which is projected above the door. Barney's video brings in the amplified sounds and intimate details of his studio; as the camera focuses in on his face or hand it enacts the cropping of his paintings. Video situates the color in time and physicality as he "performs" his painting. Katz is undoubtedly aware of photographs of the aging Matisse, who seems monumental, perched on a bench and drawing with charcoal on the end of a pole for his 1932–33 Barnes Foundation mural. Barney adds special effects with periodic dissolves into pure color—orange,

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and its complement, blue—as though to enact the “flash.” All come together in this psychologically driven installation, reminding us that painting today exists in constant transaction with virtual reality’s memories, fantasies, and computer simulations—just as in the 1960s, when Katz called attention to the way film and billboard advertising shaped our visual culture.