



Colby College Museum Of Art To Present Survey Of Early Work By Alex Katz

WATERVILLE, MAINE — The early work of artist Alex Katz (b 1927) is the subject of a new exhibition at the Colby College Museum of Art, on view July 11–October 18. “Brand-New & Terrific: Alex Katz in the 1950s” explores the first decade of the artist’s career, a period charac-

terized by fierce experimentation and innovation from which Katz’s signature style emerged. The exhibition is the first museum survey to focus on the artist’s output from this formative decade.

Curated by Diana Tuite, Katz curator at the Colby Museum,

the exhibition draws from the museum’s collection of artworks by Katz and will include many rarely seen loans from the artist and other public and private collections.

Installed chronologically in the museum’s 8,000-square-foot Paul J. Schupf Wing for the Works of Alex Katz, the exhibition includes more than 60 paintings, collages and cutouts that trace Katz’s technical and stylistic evolution over the course of the decade.

“We’ve borrowed the title from Alex Katz’s 1961 manifesto ‘Brand-New & Terrific,’ which affirmed his intentions to find the contemporary in the traditional form of painting,” stated Tuite. “What is especially significant about this work is how much it enriches our understanding of the fluid and adaptive exchanges taking place in the 1950s between New York School painters and artists like Katz who were working within a more figurative tradition.”

Born and raised in New York, Katz studied at the Cooper Union in the late 1940s and then attended Maine’s Skowhe-



“Bather” by Alex Katz (American, b 1927), 1959, oil on linen, 48 by 72 inches. Paul J. Schupf L.L.D. ‘06, Hamilton, N.Y. Lifetime Trust, Gregory O. Koerner Trustee. ©Alex Katz/Licensed by VAGA, New York City.

gan School of Painting and Sculpture in 1949 and 1950. There, the artist first began to paint from life and found the subjects that he would depict for years to come — the Maine landscape, his circle of friends and domestic interiors. Within the same period Katz also turned to found photographs as a source for paintings, such as “Group Portrait II,” circa 1950. With faceless sitters and backgrounds reduced to bands of color, he found the essence of composition by paring it down to its most fundamental elements.

By 1954, inspired in part by the cut paper constructions of Henri Matisse, Katz began to make collages from pieces of watercolored paper. Intimate in scale and delicate in construction, these works were often created at the kitchen table of the Lincolnville, Maine, farmhouse where he still spends his summers. Collages such as “Wildflowers in Vase,” (circa 1954–55, a small bouquet of bright flowers, explore the economy of line and form and the proportionality of color.

These early works helped to lay the foundation for Katz’s mature style — the vibrant palette, use of repetition and the graphic placement of a figure against a solid ground — that emerged toward the end of the decade. In spite of their small size, paintings like “Blueberry Field,” 1955, and “Goldenrod,”

1955, rehearse the immersive experience of nature for which Katz has become so well-known. Katz’s portraits, often full-length depictions of friends and, after 1957, his wife Ada, primarily appear before chromatic backgrounds. In “Ada,” 1959, Katz’s wife is rendered in blue against a brilliant green backdrop. Another example of work from this period is “Irving and Lucy,” 1958, a portrait of art historian Irving Sandler and his wife set into a vigorously painted but neutral-colored ground.

In 1959 Katz began to experiment with repetitions of the same figure within a single composition. These so-called “reduplicative portraits” include “Ada Ada,” 1959, a painting with two images of his wife in a blue housecoat with arms crossed, and the equally conceptually sophisticated “Double Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg,” 1959, in which the artist appears twice, almost mirrored across the center of the canvas. Multiplied but not identical, these figures inspire close examination, raising questions about copies and originals, reproduction and representation. Also created in 1959, Katz’s first cutouts are freestanding or wall-mounted figures liberated from any ground whatsoever.

The Colby College Museum of Art is at 4353 Mayflower Hill. For information, 207-859-4353 or www.colby.edu.