

PERMANENT EVANESCENCE: THE ART OF ALEX KATZ

(Em português p. 222)

Vincent Katz

The painter Alex Katz grew up in New York and came of age in the years following World War II. His parents had emigrated from Russia and given him an introduction to style and aesthetics. He studied art in high school, drawing from plaster casts, and then went on to The Cooper Union in Manhattan, where he received a training in the Modern Art of the time, the models being Miró and Picasso. He received scholarships to study two summers at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, where he first painted outdoors. Later, he would purchase land in Maine and spend every summer there from 1954 on. Soon after art school, he saw several exhibitions which set him on his course. Two of the most important were of Matisse and Bonnard, who were both not considered important artists in the early '50s in New York. Then there were the Vienna and Berlin loan exhibitions, which enabled him to see masterpieces by Velazquez and Rembrandt firsthand. Most immediate was the style of painting that emerged in New York after the war.

Abstract Expressionism, as it was called by some, although I prefer Fairfield Porter's term non-objective painting, was typified by a vitality, style, and scale which Katz emulated. He wanted to be able to bring those elements into representational art. This was not to be casually undertaken, as the artworld was highly polarized at the time. The leading theorists of the abstract painters had declared that "The figure is dead," that art, in order to maintain its linear ascent towards progress, must never "go back" to figurative, representational, depictions.

Katz was not the only artist who objected to the straitjacket of such proselytizing. De Kooning himself, one of the leading abstract painters, started re-introducing the figure in his "Women" series of the future of art. There were other painters in the 1950s who worked with the figure, including Larry Rivers and Porter, but they were a tiny minority.

Katz was also inspired by the American energy of popular, commercial, art. He especially enjoyed

large billboard advertisements and wide-screen movies whose close-ups created huge, cropped, faces. In the late '50s, Katz began painting figures with monochromatic backgrounds. Sometimes referred to as "flat," these background colors are actually carefully composed and painted and give sensations of atmosphere, of depth.

By the mid-'60s, Katz had stepped up his ambition to make art comparable to the non-objective art of the previous generation. He started painting large-scale portraits in the form of faces dramatically, unusually, cropped. He was able to retain in his large canvases the quality of an accurate light that he had developed in the plein air painting he started in the late '40s and continues to this day.

Since he started painting large paintings in the 1960s, Katz adopted a technique based on a Renaissance method of transferring images. He will often start an idea with a pen and ink sketch. He then paints several studies in oils on board. From these he synthesizes the elements he likes best from each – the gesture, the colors, the light. If it is a portrait, he will make a finished pencil drawing. From these studies, he can now make his large-scale cartoon in charcoal on paper. He perforates the cartoon along the charcoal lines and pounces the drawing with red pigment, transferring it to the primed canvas below. When he comes to paint one of his large paintings, he has all the elements prepared – the studies, drawings, and mixed colors. He then executes the painting, usually in one day.

Katz has stated that he believes realism is not in photographic details but in a convincing light that permeates an entire artwork. This gives the vision, or glance, that the artist wishes to impose upon his audience. Although he paints portraits and landscapes, in neither case is his approach traditional. In his landscapes, he presents not views over the land but environments into which the viewer suddenly finds himself incorporated. There is often no horizon line and no sky visible, so that the sensation of an all-encompassing nature is felt. In dealing with the figure, Katz has sometimes worked

in traditional figure and ground relationships, while maintaining light and styling that always keep his images specific. He has also frequently worked with extreme croppings and group relations. His subject matter is drawn from the world around him, his native milieu of poets, dancers, artists, critics, friends, and family. What follows is an account of one of Katz's group portraits.

One Flight Up

Streetlights glow, reflected in puddles and on wet pavement. A chill runs through you, as you hurry up Fifth Avenue. You light another cigarette while waiting for the buzzer. Climb a flight of dingy stairs into a bright loft filled with the smoke of conversation and living. Straight ahead is Frank Lima, boxer turned poet, genius of the fire-escape and "Mom, I'm All Screwed Up." He's without his beautiful wife Sheyla and hangs a little dully, eyes staring forward, pre-occupied. His curly coif signals an entrance to this fête, a watchful Cerberus easily subdued by wit or intellect. No, wait! There's Sheyla, her back to us, leaning to the left as though interested in hearing what someone is saying, her dark brown hair pulled back in a pony tail. She is so elegant – what could one possibly say to her? Let's talk to Sandy instead. Is Ted here? Sandy is refined, glasses and white shirt with red beaded necklace defining her radical intelligence. Ted Berrigan can be made out in the distance barrelling across the room in a red sweater over dark blue shirt to grab Lewis Warsh by the arm or perhaps ask Henry Geldzahler a question. Sheyla is talking to Jane Freilicher while Joe looks the other way, somewhat distantly. Not that Joe is not present. He's just behind Jane, walking over to talk with Yvonne, whose stunning red hair is pulled up so that only select wisps are allowed to cascade by her ears. Her silver dress is the most psychedelic thing here, followed closely by Paul Taylor's shirt and Harry Matthews' tie.

You saunter over to a large painting table which has been given over to bottles of whiskey, wine, vodka, and a case of beer. You pour yourself a tall whiskey and greet your hostess. Ada is some few paces in front of you, wearing a jacket with fur collar over an orange sweater. You chat about the latest Kenneth Koch play, your plans for the summer. There is something odd about this gathering. As you circle it, you realize it is

impenetrable. You can go and talk to anyone you want, just pull someone away and start berating or ask what they think of D'Arcangelo's latest. It's more than that. It forms a closed circle. You are some kind of rude alien, unable to penetrate the calm of these urbane faces. It is socially and physically impossible. Some people have their backs to you, and even the ones facing you seem contained in their own worlds.

Everyone is smoking, from the echoing angles of Al Held's and Irving Sandler's cigars to Christopher Scott's cigarette poised at eye level, required accoutrement for making the precise point that needs being made. There is a pleasing mix of formal and informal. Joe Brainard, Kenward Elmslie, John Ashbery, Ron Padgett, and Harry Matthews (the poets!) in ties; Paul Taylor, John Button, and Scott Burton without. Bill Berkson, poet, critic, and Top Ten Best Dressed List, is wearing a black turtle neck with cashmere jacket and pinky ring. For the women, it is the era of letting their hair down. Their lush tresses flow – Maxine Groffsky's reddish mane, Linda Schjeldahl with purple tassel earrings matching her dress, Patty Padgett alluring in long hair parted down the middle and black shirt with baby Wayne. On the other side of the room, Anne Waldman hangs with Lewis, she in lavender and crimson, he in brown-and-orange striped turtle neck under dark-blue collared shirt.

A typical gathering such as one might find at any of a number of locations on any of many evenings in this city of New York in this year of 1968. It happens to be happening right now, but one can never look at it, when one is in it. One simply cannot step back and say, "Wait a minute! This is the most exciting place in the world at this moment!" They would probably ask to you to lie down for a minute, and perhaps you would do that, taking comfort in the big pile of coats on the bed, mingling in a huge orgy of fabric and style, just as attitudes, stances, demeanors, pitches, and tones of voice are mingling on the other side of the loft.

This is a space where people – a family – live. It is also a space where one's daily occupation is undertaken – fashioning art, or more precisely coming to terms with the aesthetic and technical demands one feels incumbent upon oneself to entertain, each day, for eternity. At the moment, however, it is a very different space, for it is a space

containing the vital energy of a shifting group of personages, a high informal cultural elite. Anyone can enter this company, provided he come accompanied by brilliance and grace. These are the tools-in-trade of the New York art world. You must be able not only to inform or entertain. You must be able to charm.

The painter Alex Katz has decided to have a cocktail party. Instead of having the usual, real, party, he will have the cocktail party of his imagination. He starts inviting people over, one by one, or in pairs, at different times. When they come to his loft on Fifth Avenue and Twenty-third Street, he paints their portraits on thin aluminum sheets. In the first session, he paints their outline in cadmium yellow or orange. Then he cuts the portrait – in this case always a bust-height image – out from the sheet of aluminium. In the next session, he supplies the tones, as he would on a painting.

Little by little, over the winter, the guests accumulate around his studio. Posing for Alex is not a tedious process. He paints quickly and likes to engage his sitters in conversation, so that their faces remain lively, lifelike. Over the course of painting this series of portraits, Alex is having his own private cocktail party, as he gets to interact with each subject personally, telling stories, catching up on what they've been reading.

It is largely a mixture of painters and poets, with a sprinkling of others – a choreographer, a curator, a couple critics – thrown in. Finally, when he decides there's a big enough crowd, Katz assembles the group for their imaginary gathering. He constructs a table four feet high, fifteen feet long, three feet ten inches wide, covered in unpainted stainless steel, with three modern-looking supports. On top of this shiny pedestal, he mounts his guests, each on two two-inch metal pegs.

This last detail is crucial, for it causes the figures to float in space, whereas if they had been mounted directly to the table, the effect would have been much more static. With this breathing room beneath them and the obvious space between the figures, Katz uncannily gives the viewer the impression of visiting a group of people at a party.

They are selected at one particular moment in 1968, but they are not frozen. They are in mid-thought, mid-gesture, mid-word, mid-listen. Their ingenuousness and calm directness are forever on

the cusp of that next moment. The viewer feels as though he has been given some sacred license to go back in time and feel what it was like to be at such a party. One can walk around this group, receiving a constantly shifting relationship of figures, some becoming hidden as others come into view, just as in a real party. One can view the party from each of the two long sides, as every panel is painted on both sides. Although each panel is two-dimensional, the piece as a whole is three-dimensional. One needs to walk around it, to see it in motion, to experience its full effect. There is no front to the piece, no optimum position from which to view it.

It is in the period when Katz has moved from the free brushwork of his paintings of the 1950s (when he also first started making cutouts, painted then on wood) to a "cleaner," more finely-lined style, while maintaining the openness in tone and light he had achieved in his early work.. In these cut-out portraits of a society, like a collection of Roman portrait busts, you are drawn to the precise lines of eyelashes and lips, the delicate way the paint is applied, never congealing as one might expect from such tight painting.

In fact, it is the light, or lights – the varieties of artificial light in which Katz has painted his subjects – that gives this piece its compelling cumulative realism. Each person or couple is painted in an individual, unschematic, light, and is seen by the viewer individually, while composing part of an overall harmony, as in a large-scale painting by Tintoretto.

There are interesting optical plays, particularly in the couples. In the portrait of Anne Waldman and Lewis Warsh, for instance, in the frontal view Lewis is in the foreground, while from behind, he is behind Anne. This is partially dictated by the shapes of the cut-out aluminum, when Katz would come to paint the reverse of an already-painted image. It is also partially a choice, a dislocation, imperceptible at first but which later adds a dynamic to the time-based viewing of the entire piece. In another couple, Henry Geldzahler and Scott are facing each other from one side and are back to back from the other. Philip Pearlstein and his wife Dorothy, on the other hand, are both frontal and then both seen from behind. The busts are arranged so that, at any given moment, the viewer is confronted by a mixture of faces and backs. The Katz glamour effect is at work

in this piece. Everyone looks their best, their most beautiful, most interesting, intelligent, poised, circumspect. No one is intruding on anyone else. In fact, the expected artificiality of conversational poses is avoided. Everyone appears to be floating, self-consciously weighing the situation before making their move. It is this weightless free-float which gives the piece its gesture, its timeless expectancy, its eternal life.

You realize then that someone is missing, someone crucial to this world, the critical link between poets and painters, their center. Frank O'Hara would have been present, no doubt, had this party taken in place in 1966 or '65, but by 1968 he has vanished from the earth's surface, and the crowd here is poised to enter a new decade with its concomitant migrations and changes of scale and color. In fact, this is the last year Alex and Ada will be on Fifth Avenue. By the end of 1968, they will move to Soho.

Thirty years after its creation, some of the people in *One Flight Up* have died, but the majority is still with us. It is unusual in our time as a portrait of a society, particularly a society so close to the center of the artworld. Being a collective portrait of a group, *One Flight Up* brings into focus more sharply than most pieces the evanescence of the moment. At the same time, it causes one to question the very idea of personality as something distinct from façade. You stand back on the street again, fumbling for matches. You can't find any, but fortunately someone passes and gives you a light. It must be 2 a.m. Your head is a little foggy, and in the light rain the colors look even keener, bright green and red reflections on asphalt, neons, and headlights of Checker cabs. You feel stimulated, perhaps over-stimulated. You want to share your impressions with someone. It appears you've left something back at the party, something crucial, irreplaceable. You head for home. There's always tomorrow and the next party.

On January 14, 1998, "Alex Katz: Twenty Five Years Of Painting" will open at the Saatchi Gallery in London. "Alex Katz Under The Stars: American Landscapes 1951-1995" will be on view at P.S. 1, The Institute For Contemporary Art, in New York, starting in April, 1998. An exhibition is planned for his work in Buenos Aires in May, 1998. Vincent Katz, Alex Katz's son, is a poet and critic. He edited

Alex Katz's book of memoirs, *Invented Symbols* (Cantz, Ostfildern, 1997).



Fig. 1 - Sweatshirt 111. Oil in canvas, 1987. 40 1/8" x 96". [This is a self-portrait].



Fig. 2 - Alex Katz, *One Flight Up*. Oil on aluminum, 1968.

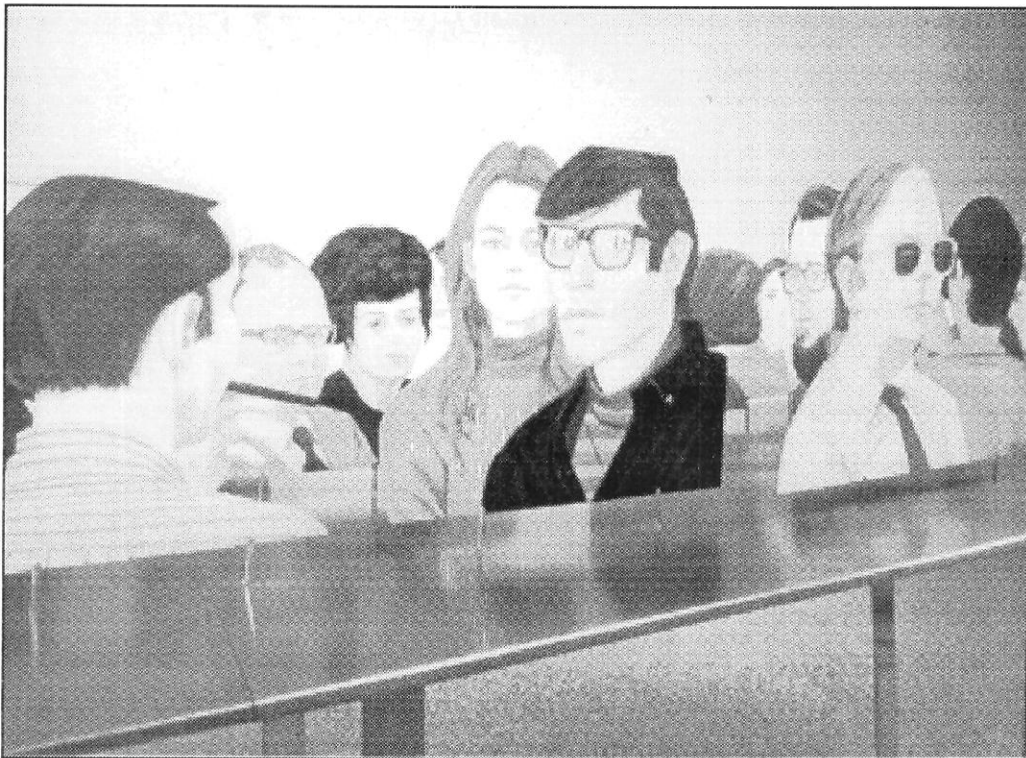


Fig. 3 - Alex Katz, *One Flight Up*. Oil on aluminum, 1968.



Fig. 4 - Alex Katz, *One Flight Up*. Oil on aluminum, 1968.



Fig. 5 - Alex Katz, *One Flight Up*. Oil on aluminum, 1968.



Fig. 6 - Aquatint. Spruce, 1994.

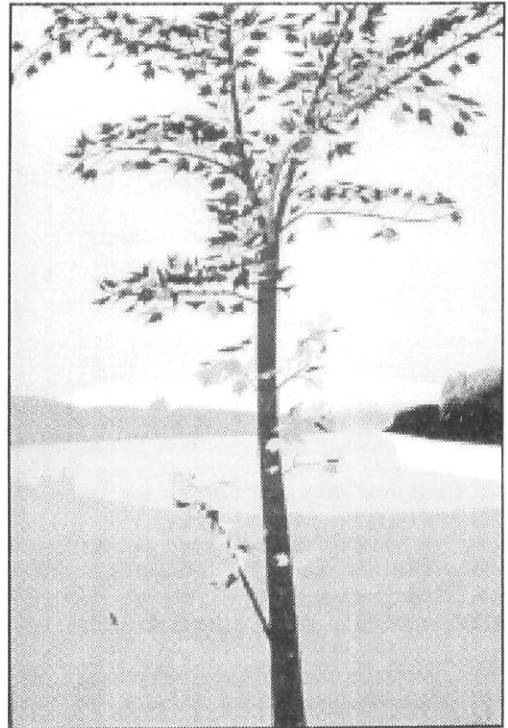


Fig. 7 - Litograph. Swamp Maple II, 1970.

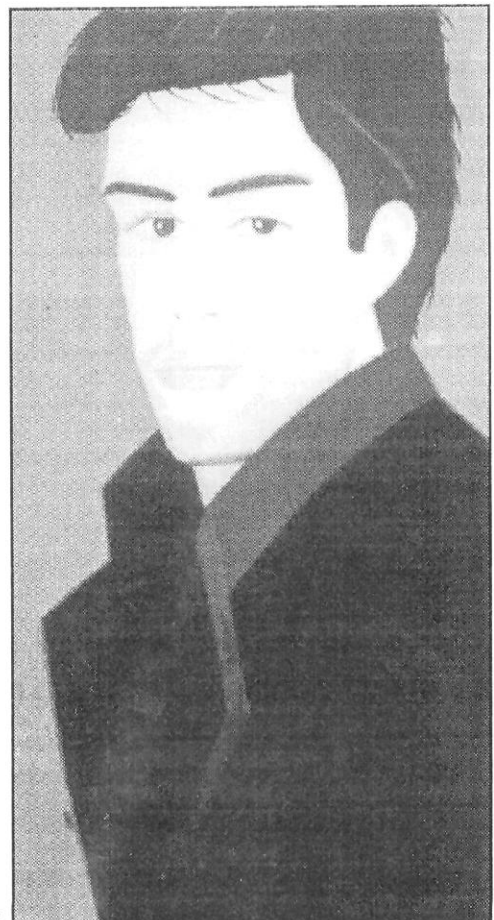


Fig. 8 - Aquatint 37 x 24. Blue coat, 1993.

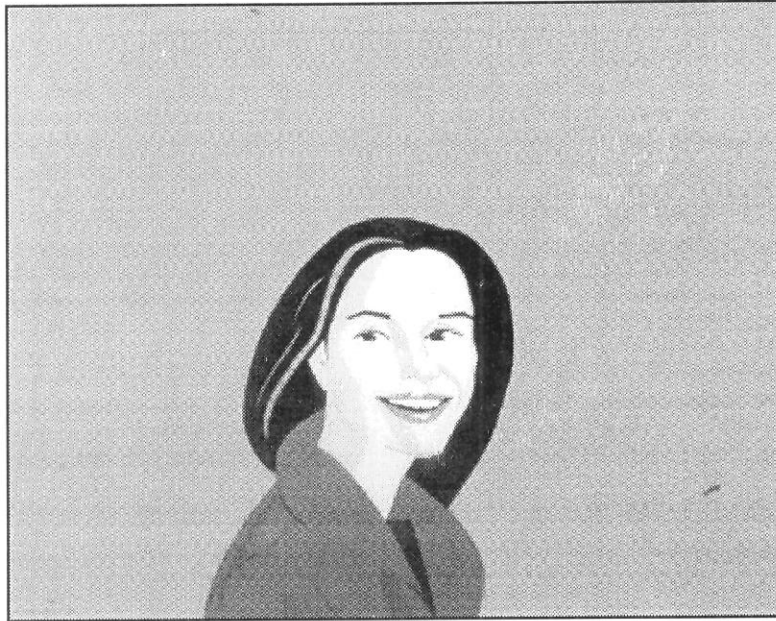


Fig. 9 - Big Red Smile, 1994. Linocut 36 x 45.



Fig. 10 - Vivien, 1994. Aquatint 25½ x 25½.

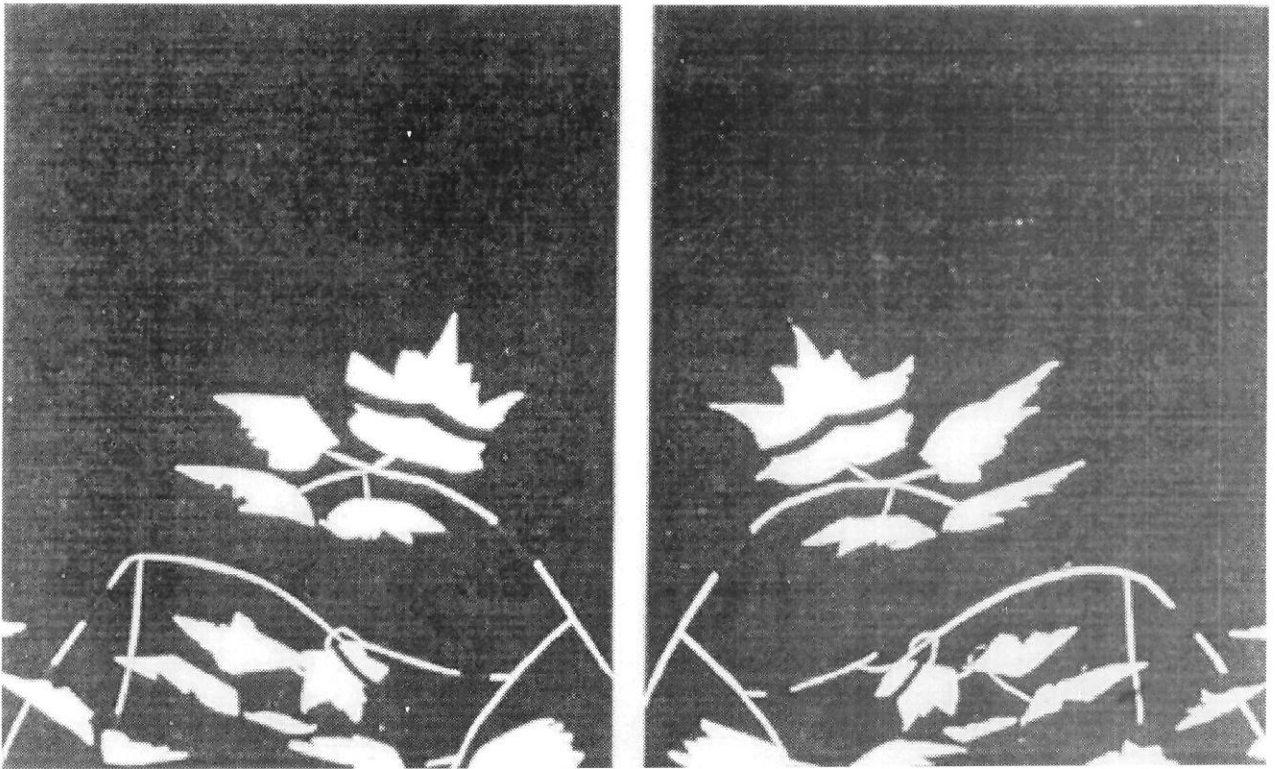


Fig. 11 - Alex Katz, *Black Brook*, 1989. Woodcut 12 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 19 inches.

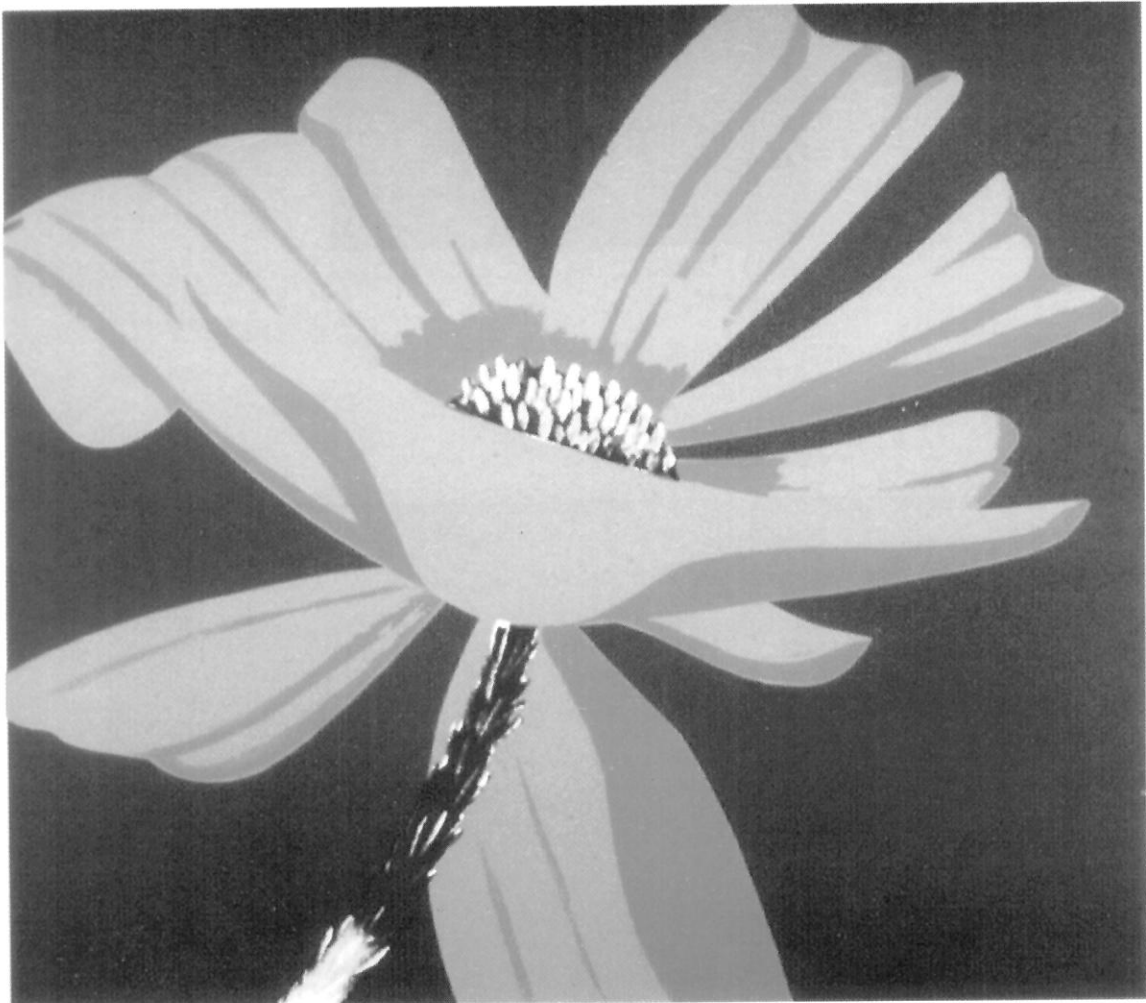


Fig. 12 - Pappy, 1968. Screenprint 25 x 28.

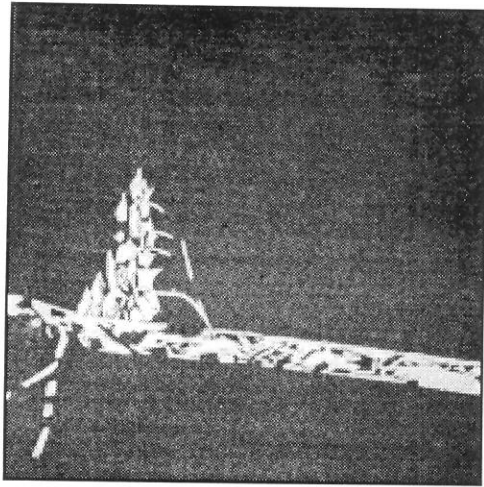


Fig. 13 - Alex Katz, *Tree*, 1990. Woodcut 17½ x 16¾ inches.

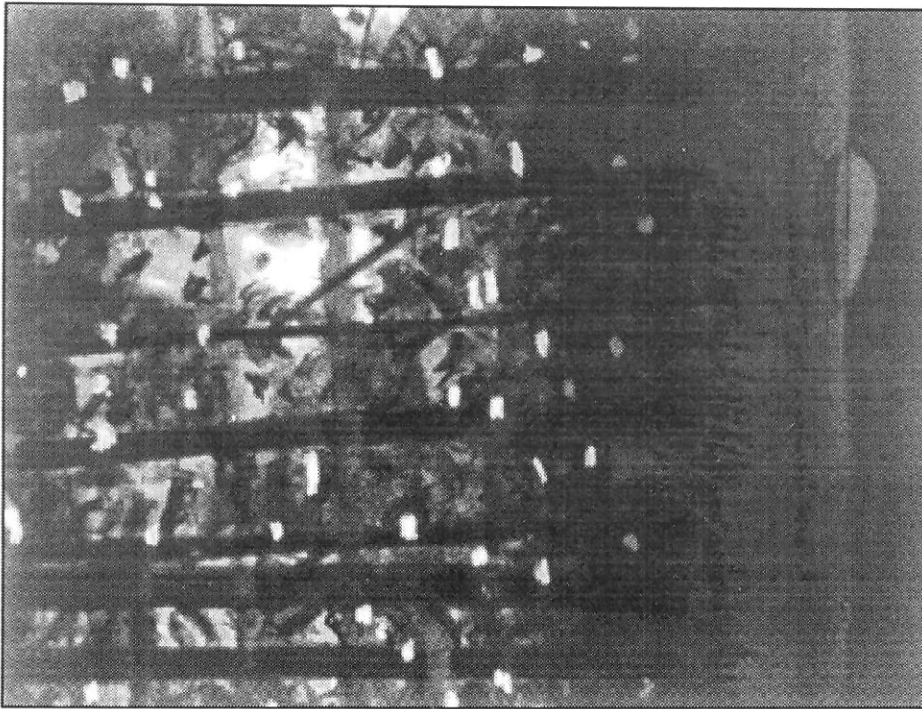


Fig. 14 - Black Brook 10, 1995. Silkscreen 46¾ x 357/8.

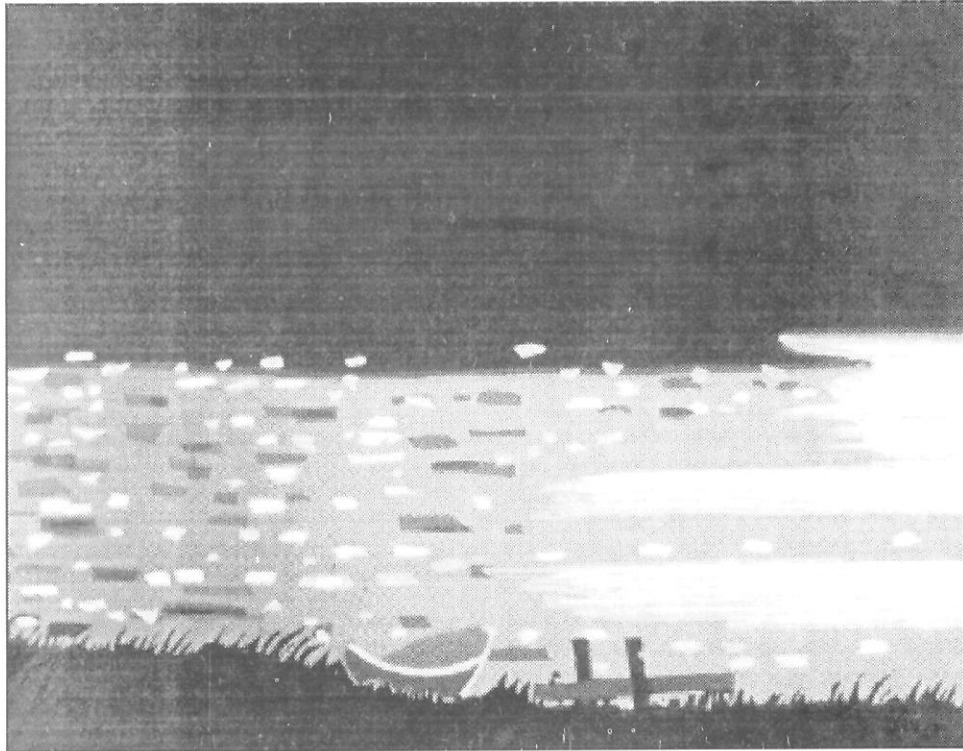


Fig. 15 - View, 1995. Woodcut 18 x 21¼.



Fig. 16 - Alex Katz in front of his painting *Glycidium Orchid*, 1966. [Montage for announcement of Fischback Gallery show, 1966].