

Stories Project. ACC 54.
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.

Alex Katz (b. 1927) is an American figurative artist known for his portraits and landscapes. In 1959, Katz painted a portrait of Robert Rauschenberg.

Transcription of phone interview with Katz conducted by David White, Senior Curator, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, on November 16, 2023. Reviewed and edited by the speakers.

Alex Katz [AK]: Hello.

David White [DW]: Alex, it's David again. . . . I would love to get your recollections of what prompted you to paint the double Rauschenberg painting in the first place. Do you have a recollection of that?



Alex Katz, *Double Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg*, 1959. Oil on canvas, 66 x 85 ½ inches (167.6 x 217.2 cm).
Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville. © Alex Katz/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

AK: Yeah.

DW: It's interesting that Rauschenberg often did a lot of doubling in his own work, and I didn't know if there was something about his work that had prompted the painting or—

AK: No.

DW: Aha. Just a—

AK: No, Bob was a very lively, avant-garde modern artist.

DW: Right. And had you had much contact or interaction with him prior to making the painting?

AK: Huh? What?

DW: Had you had much contact or interaction with Bob?

AK: No. Well, I had a show in the Tanager Gallery [*Alex Katz*, Tanager Gallery, New York. Jan. 16–Feb. 6, 1959] and Bob called up and took me out to dinner. And I think the double portrait was three or four, two or three years later. I don't know what the date is. [*Double Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg* was painted in 1959.] We were friends for a while and then we're really going into . . . We really both thought of new painting, post-abstract expressionists, and there weren't very many of us. So we were friends for a while, but we were really going in different directions.

DW: Right. So you stayed being friendly for a bit and then . . .

AK: Yeah.

DW: And then everyone kind of goes their separate ways?

AK: We drifted apart. We were going in . . . We were in a similar situation, we were friends for a while, and then we sort of like drifted apart. You know?

DW: Yeah. Well, I know in the late sixties he bought his property in Captiva, Florida and left the city [New York City].

AK: Yeah, he left, and we both were doing . . . He was doing the dance sets for Merce [Cunningham] and I started with Paul Taylor. We were in the same social milieu.

DW: Sure.

AK: I replaced him with Paul Taylor, besides.

DW: Oh, oh. That's interesting. I had not been aware of that.

AK: Yeah. He did a piece for Paul and it was a still life on Paul's back. And Paul said, "I'm not dancing with that." And then they needed . . . I guess Bob said, "How can you say no to such a good idea?" And Paul said, "It's easy." And he was going up in two weeks, and Edwin Denby, dance critic, said, "I think Alex can do sets." So I made a set for Paul. And I did another one, and Bob came over and said, "You show Paul as he really is." I don't know what that meant.

DW: Well it's funny, he often made those kind of enigmatic remarks, which you're not quite sure . . .

AK: Yeah.

DW: What they . . .

AK: Yeah. We were at dinner at Nico [Nicolas] Calas's with Barney [Barnett] Newman, and Nico says, "Alex and Bob both do sets for dance." And that was not a very sensitive remark. Bob was, from where I was sitting, the best costume and set man living. And I had just started doing a couple of pieces. And Barney said, "Isn't that nice that they do that?" And he went in the bathroom, and when he came out, Bob just flipped. He told Barney, "I saw your show with Betty Parsons. I went out in the hallway and puked."

DW: Oh, wow.

AK: And that was the nicest thing [Rauschenberg] said to him. He went on for about five minutes. I couldn't believe it.

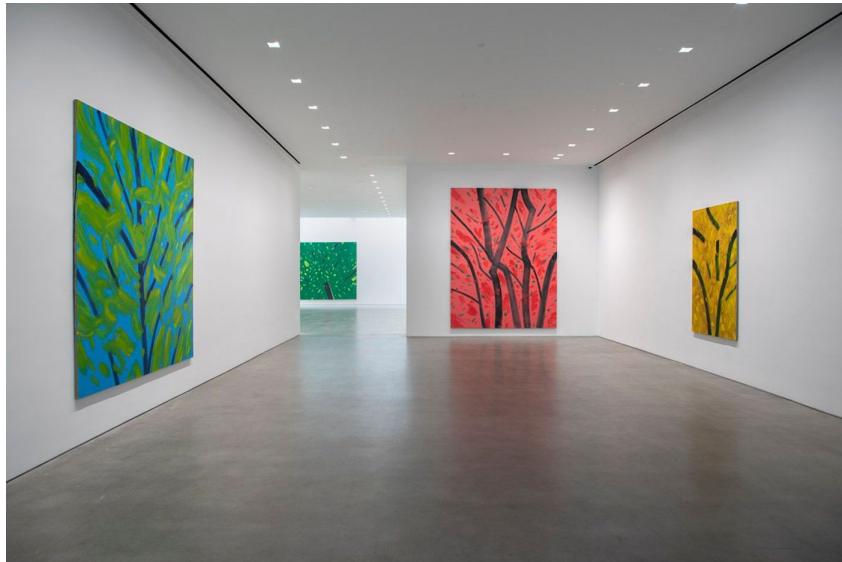
DW: Wow.

AK: He had a short fuse.

DW: Yeah. But I always understood that he was very admiring of Barney's work, and Barney as a person too. But I—

AK: I had no idea. But Barney's remark to us was, I thought, insensitive. And once I was on the radio with about five other artists, and Bob called me up saying, "You spoke like an artist." So he had an idea of art as a community activity. He was socially impeccable.

DW: —very embracing of the community. Socially impeccable. That's a very nice expression, Alex. Well, I did see your most recent show at Gladstone Gallery [*Alex Katz*, Gladstone Gallery, New York, Nov. 8, 2023–Jan. 6, 2024]. It was really wonderful to see it.



Installation view of *Alex Katz* at Gladstone Gallery, New York, 2023. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery.
Photo: David Regen

AK: Oh, thank you.

DW: The abstractness of some of the tree paintings. It's just . . .

AK: Well, I'm glad you enjoyed, I'm glad you liked them.

DW: And I've had the pleasure of working with your son Vincent [Katz] a bit with—

AK: I beg your pardon?

DW: I've had the pleasure of working with your son Vincent.

AK: Oh, Vincent, yeah. Very cool.

DW: When he had curated a Black Mountain exhibition. [*Black Mountain College: Una aventura americana*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Oct. 28, 2002–Jan. 13, 2003].

AK: Yeah. He did the Black Mountain thing. And he and his wife, Vivien, stayed at the Rauschenberg Foundation, she was doing photographs.

DW: I've not met her, but she sounds very nice from the little contact I've had. So you have a nice family there. Well, this is all interesting. So have you done any other double portraits of . . .

AK: Yeah, I did one of Ada [Katz] before that, one with Toby [unidentified]. And I did—my first double portrait was Ada, Ada. And that was in 1959. You know?



Alex Katz, *Ada Ada*, 1959. Oil on canvas, 49 1/2 x 50 inches (125.73 x 127 cm). Grey Art Gallery, New York University Art Collection. © Alex Katz. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Golden

DW: Oh, okay. So—

AK: Before this, yeah. A couple of her. And I did one of Bill [William] King too and that was . . . He destroyed it.

DW: Oh!

AK: That's the way it goes.

DW: Yeah. The art world's a complicated, fascinating place, I must say. Well, I've enjoyed talking to you very much, and this is—

AK: Great. I'm glad I can be some help. Okay.

DW: Very much so. . . . So, many, many, many thanks.

AK: Okay.

DW: Okay. Bye.