



7 Alex Katz

1927 – American

Pamela and Perry

oil on board, signed and on verso signed, titled on the gallery label, dated 1977 on a label and stamped with the Robert Miller Gallery and Michael H. Lord gallery stamps
12 x 12 ¼ in, 30.5 x 31.1 cm

PROVENANCE

Robert Miller Gallery, New York
Private Collection, New York
Private Collection, Toronto

ALEX KATZ IS a pre-eminent American figurative painter best known for his portraits whose storied career has spanned more than seven decades, beginning in the 1950s. A lifelong New Yorker, born in Brooklyn and raised in Queens, Katz has lived and worked in the same artists' co-operative in Manhattan's SoHo neighbourhood since 1968. Now well into his 90s, Katz has been the subject of over 200 solo exhibitions and nearly 50 group shows internationally since 1951, including retrospectives at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Brooklyn Museum, the Albertina Museum in Vienna, and most recently at the Guggenheim (2022).

Katz studied art at the prestigious Cooper Union in Manhattan's East Village in the late 1940s, followed by the Skowhegan

School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, where he won two summer scholarships. Returning to New York in 1951, he found an art world inhospitable to figurative realism. Abstract Expressionism had revolutionized painting, led by artists such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, creating a uniquely American movement that broke free of the European modernist traditions of Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse. Influential critics such as Clement Greenberg contended that realism was dead, encrusted as it was with conventions, and that figuration could yield only “minor” art.¹

Undeterred, Katz continued to paint in a figurative vein, developing his own visual language as he attempted to resolve for himself the problem of contemporary realism: Could he make a valid modern painting that was a portrait?² Influenced by Gustave Manet's contour drawing and Matisse's fluid shapes and use of colour, Katz attempted to define what a modern figurative painting would look like, engaging with the two-dimensional picture plane as he moved towards greater realism on the one hand and greater flatness on the other. Katz recalls of this period: “It was pretty lonely for me. It was like being out in the desert.”³

The tide turned for Katz in the 1960s. He had begun producing enormous billboard-style canvases, featuring extreme close-ups of his subjects that experimented with radical cropping, shifts in internal scale, and smooth blocks of colour that emphasized flatness. Katz's individual style was perfectly situated to partake in the paradigm shift that occurred as Abstract Expressionism began to wane; it anticipated and engaged with newly emerging movements such as Pop Art and Hard-edge abstraction that would soon gain recognition. Suddenly, Katz found he commanded the attention of the art world.

Katz is known for what he calls “cool painting,” reflecting the emotional distance he maintains from his subjects. He focuses his attention on capturing appearances: the subject's clothing and hair, the light at a given time of day, a fleeting moment or gesture, rendered in a flat style with smooth surfaces and clean contours. Style is so important to Katz that it comes close to eclipsing representation and imposes itself as the primary subject of each portrait.⁴ He is temperamentally averse to “hot” painting that calls to mind expressionism, and “deep” or “hot” readings of his art, which he finds pretentious.⁵ However, his skill at rendering appearances has invited much speculation on the psychology of his sitters, particularly where multiple subjects appear within a single frame.

Pamela and Perry is a preparatory sketch for a large-scale, similarly titled oil on canvas in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (*Perry and Pamela*, 2006.571). Both works depict the closely cropped faces of a couple, the woman gazing into the eyes of her companion as he stares impassively into the distance. The man's face is cropped so that we see only the essentials of his profile, which is shrouded in shadow when compared to the bright, eager face of the woman facing him. It is as if we have stumbled across a private moment for this couple, a moment captured quickly and fluidly much in the way the eye scans and records the details of a scene. Only the most vital aspects of this interaction have been documented, and yet it feels fundamentally alive. The couple appears to be in motion, in transition between one moment and the next, suggesting a world outside the picture frame.



ALEX KATZ

Perry and Pamela

oil on canvas, 1977

78 x 90 in, 198.1 x 228.6 cm

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Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Not for sale with this lot

Curator Robert Rosenblum has asserted that in Katz's paintings, particularly those drawn from the artist's daily domestic and social life, his subjects are “suddenly wrenched from the cozy intimacy of a European tradition of private portraiture and relocated disconcertingly in a territory whose scale is that of public, urban experience,” that of billboards and commercial advertising. Rosenblum concludes that in this way, Katz “intuitively reflects a constant factor of American life, the collision between the public and the private.”⁶

1. Quoted in Irving Sandler, *Alex Katz: A Retrospective* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998), 152.
2. *Ibid.*, 17.
3. Quoted in Sam Hunter, *Alex Katz* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 31–33.
4. Sandler, *Alex Katz*, 96.
5. *Ibid.*, 19.
6. Quoted in *ibid.*, 42.

ESTIMATE: \$70,000 – 90,000