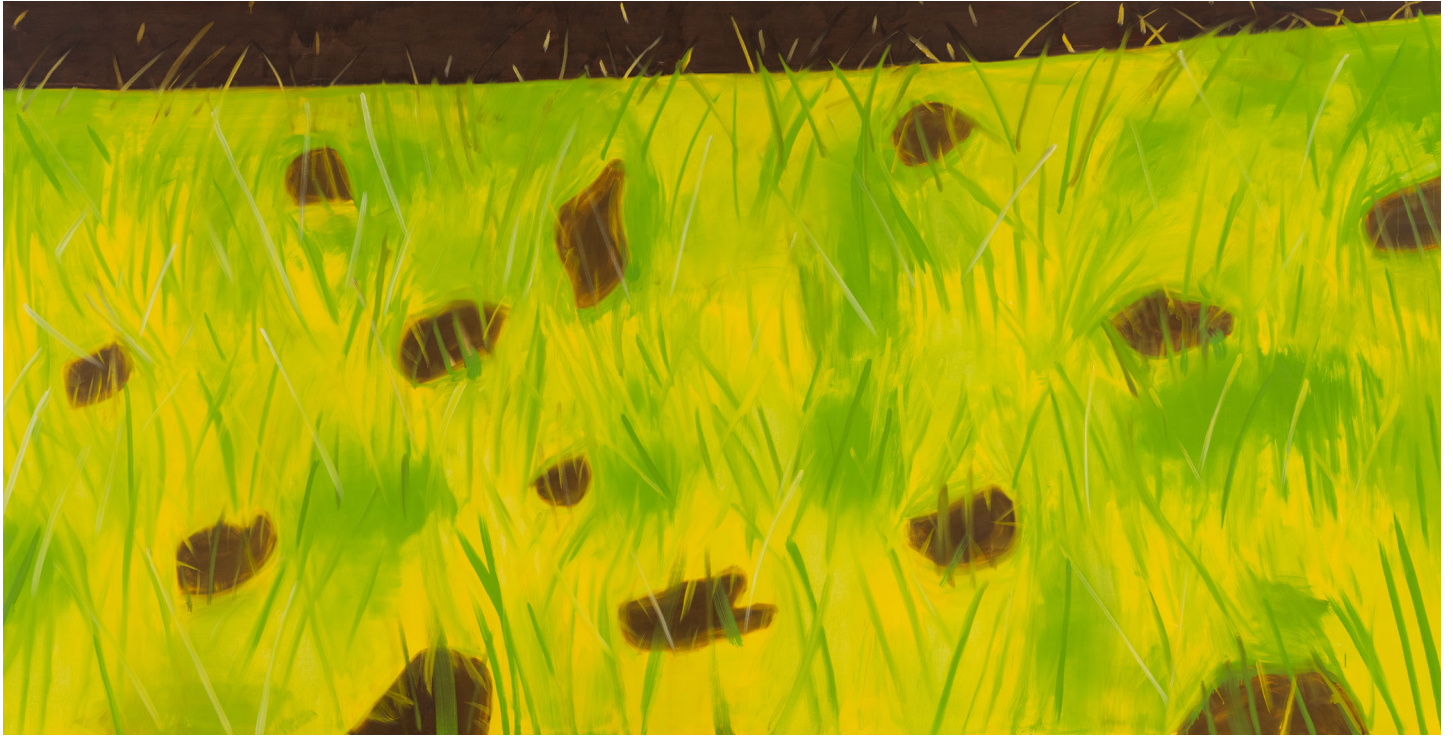


# Alex Katz

## *Claire, Grass and Water*

17 April—29 September 2024  
Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice



Alex Katz, *Grass 3*, 2021.  
Oil on linen. 320 x 609.6 cm (126 x 240 in).  
© Alex Katz. Photo: Charles Duprat.

The Fondazione Giorgio Cini presents *Claire, Grass and Water*, an exhibition of new works by American artist Alex Katz, curated by Luca Massimo Barbero, Director of the Institute of Art History of the Fondazione Giorgio Cini, and supported by Thaddaeus Ropac gallery. The exhibition coincides with the 60th Venice Biennale and follows the artist's recent landmark retrospective at the Guggenheim New York. It is conceived as a site-specific intervention and spans three major groupings of never-before-seen works made between 2021 and 2022 that represent three key facets of Katz's practice, the boundaries of which continue to expand seven decades into his career. Large-scale, close-up depictions of inky-hued oceans and of grassland in tones of greens and yellows are brought together in the Sala Carnelutti, followed in the Piccolo Teatro by a group of paintings based on outfits by mid-century American fashion designer Claire McCardell.

Coming of age as an artist in 1950s New York, Katz developed his unique approach to contemporary representational painting at the height of Abstract Expressionism. Through the late 1980s and 1990s, he focused much of his attention on large-scale landscape paintings that he characterises as 'environmental', the evolution of which can be seen in the new closely cropped, all-encompassing landscapes and waterscapes on view in the exhibition. As the artist says of these new paintings: 'The close-up gives the painting much more power and energy. With the close-ups, I could make a realistic painting that could compete with a de Kooning or a Pollock.' It was not until the 2010s that Katz began painting multiple tightly cropped portraits sequenced across the canvas as if in a strip of film, combining a variety of angles to create the impression of an 'environmental' portrait. For this exhibition, he has renewed this

cinematic compositional logic by applying it to Claire McCardell's celebrated designs, which are represented in the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

*I am trying to make paintings that have some real energy – the here and now. It's like fashion, really.*

— Alex Katz

Luca Massimo Barbero recounts how the exhibition is 'the extraordinary result of two years of work, during which Alex Katz has engaged with the visual power of the City of Water: not only has he drawn from the places of his memory the abyssal oceans and the intense and engaging nature, but he has also resumed the tradition of enormous pictorial canvases. Like a seduction game, Katz has paid homage to Claire McCardell, rekindling the discussion on what simple elegance and sophisticated curiosity mean. A tribute that will not fail to amaze us, opening us up to the discovery of a visionary woman, still little known in Europe.'

Katz has long been interested in fashion design, particularly as it relates to the American vernacular tradition: as early as 1960, he paid homage to the iconic 'little black dress' that marked 20th-century fashion in his renowned *The Black Dress* (Museum Brandhorst, Munich). In the 1980s, his admiration for the work of American designer Norma Kamali, who was herself influenced by McCardell, resulted in the well-known paintings *Pas De Deux* (1983; Colby College Museum of Art, Maine) and *Eleuthera* (1984). In a recent interview, Katz described Claire McCardell's designs as 'unaffected': a quality that harmonises with his pared-back painterly style. Several of the works in the exhibition feature bipartite or even tripartite compositions which blend different perspectives and fragments of McCardell's outfits into impossible and yet captivating images that recall the visual strategies of Cubism and, in particular, Picasso's 1937 *Portrait of Dora Maar* which Katz wrote of his admiration for in his 2012 autobiography *Invented Symbols*. In one work, two models in different dresses, slightly offset, are spliced together at the centre of the canvas to form

a single surprising silhouette, while in another, a female figure seems to lean out from within an outfit sliced down its middle.



Alex Katz, *Claire McCardell 9*, 2022.  
Oil on linen. 213.4 x 182.9 cm (84 x 72 in).  
© Alex Katz. Photo: Charles Duprat.

The crops and close-ups in these works borrow from the dynamics of cinema montage to emulate dramatic camera framings. 'I loved movies,' Katz wrote in his autobiography. 'I loved the way the wide-angle screen was used, the way the rectangle was broken up.' As a visual device, the split screen also resonates with today's digital framework, demonstrating Katz's continued awareness of how contemporary society looks at images. French curator Éric Troncy once wrote: 'The temporal and stylistic permanence of Katz's paintings confront and empathize with the fundamental and structural impermanence of fashion.' In Katz's words: 'Fashion is ephemeral. Any symbol of that thing that is really new in fashion instantly becomes mortal.'

Katz has always defined himself as a painter of 'the immediate present', in his landscapes as much as in his portraits. It was with landscapes that Katz found his voice as a young painter, exploring the lakes and forests of Maine while a student at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. There, he discovered the





Alex Katz, *Ocean 9*, 2022.  
Oil on linen. 274.3 x 365.8 cm (108 x 144 in).  
© Alex Katz. Photo: Charles Duprat.

freedom that comes with working *en plein air*, like the Impressionists, painting quick oil sketches in nature which he then turned into large-scale environmental works in his studio. Cropped and painted larger than life, the paintings of grass on view in the exhibition lend the windswept blades a quiet but powerful beauty. Exemplifying the distinctive relationship between abstraction and figuration that characterises Katz's work, they focus on a small, unmoored slice of life, allowing poetry and abstract thinking to arise from pure perception rather than narrative.

Water has been a recurring element in Katz's paintings since his early formative years, though it first became a subject in its own right in his 1986 retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Starting in the 1980s with his ongoing *Black Brook* series, works from which are held by Tate, London, and the Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris, Katz continued exploring the effects of light and reflection on the surface of water over the course of the decades that followed with works such as *Dark Reflections* (1995;

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York) or *Grey Marine* (2000; Tate, London). This aspect of Katz's practice is highlighted in this exhibition in the City of Water with a new group of oceanscapes, rendered in monochrome with expressive white brushstrokes landing on dark grounds to suggest waves breaking or moonlight catching on the surface of a fathomless sea. It is these fleeting patterns of glinting light on dark, rather than colour, that are most important to Katz. As the artist explains: 'Water is very hard to paint well, because it's moving, it's transparent and it has weight'. Through quick, syncopated brushwork and a wet-on-wet technique, where the entire composition must be finished before the first layer has time to dry, he is able to encapsulate his fleeting impression of the scene. The resulting paintings seek not so much to describe water, but to capture its most elusive qualities: its power and feeling.

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue with a conversation between Katz and Luca Massimo Barbero.

## About the artist

Over the seven decades since his first exhibition in 1954, Alex Katz has produced a celebrated body of work, including paintings, drawings, sculpture and prints. A pre-eminent painter of modern life, he draws inspiration from films, billboard advertising, music, poetry and his close circle of friends and family. Primarily working from life, he produces images in which line and form are expressed through carefully composed strokes and planes of flat colour.

Born in Brooklyn, Katz lives and works in New York. He studied at the Cooper Union School of Art in New York and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine. He has created numerous public art projects throughout his career, including a Times Square billboard (1977), an aluminium mural for Harlem Station (1984), and a more recent installation of 19 large-scale works on glass for the New York subway. His work has been the subject of over 200 solo exhibitions internationally, including at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1974, 1986, 2002); Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (1990); Baltimore Museum of Art (1996); Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin (2007); Sara Hildén Art Museum, Tampere, Finland (2009); National Portrait Gallery, London (2010); Albertina, Vienna (2014, 2023); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2015); Serpentine Galleries, London (2016); Tate Liverpool (2018); Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris (2019); Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid (2022); and Museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar, Netherlands (2023). A major career retrospective was held for the artist at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York in 2022.

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