

The background of the entire page is a painting. It features several large, bright yellow flower petals and green leaves. The petals are rendered with visible brushstrokes, giving them a textured, painterly appearance. The green leaves are also painted with visible strokes, appearing as elongated, pointed shapes. The background is a dark, rich brown color, which makes the yellow and green colors stand out prominently. The overall style is expressive and somewhat abstract, focusing on the shapes and colors of the flowers and leaves.

# Alex Katz

## Flowers

Seoul Fort Hill  
9 December 2021—5 February 2022

**Thaddaeus Ropac**  
London Paris Salzburg Seoul

# Alex Katz

## *Flowers*

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2F, Fort Hill, 122-1, Dokseodang-ro, Yongsan-gu, Seoul

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Thaddaeus Ropac Seoul's second exhibition since the gallery's recent inauguration will centre around the major theme of flower paintings in the oeuvre of American artist Alex Katz. Opening on 9 December 2021, the exhibition will include previously unseen works from three of his flower series spanning the past two decades, as well as new portraits, shown for the first time, whose subjects are depicted in botanical settings. *Alex Katz: Flowers* will be the first exhibition in Asia entirely dedicated to the genre: 'Korea has a great tradition of flower painting,' says the artist, 'and people seem to respond very strongly to my work here.' It follows major surveys of Katz's work at the Lotte Museum of Art, Seoul in 2018, Daegu Art Museum, Daegu in 2019 and Fosun Foundation, Shanghai in 2020.

A preeminent painter of modern American life, Alex Katz (b. 1927) developed his unique figurative style in 1950s New York, where the art scene was dominated by Abstract Expressionist painters such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. Inspired by film, billboard advertising, music, poetry and his close circle of friends and family, Katz disregarded prevailing trends and began painting portraits and landscapes in vivid hues and flat expanses of colour. This in many ways anticipated the formal and conceptual concerns of Pop artists such as Andy Warhol, although Katz's paintings remain painterly and anchored in the observation of reality. Art critic Lee Jin-myung, who curated Katz's solo exhibition at Daegu Art Museum in 2019, notes that it is this ability to transcend the ongoing Western debate between abstraction and figuration that makes Katz 'one of the few living painters among the greats'. Lee's new essay will be published in the forthcoming exhibition catalogue.

### **The origins of the flower paintings**

Katz began painting vases of flowers in the 1950s at his summer home in Maine, USA. 'It was raining,' he recalls, 'and I cut flowers and put them in a vase and started painting them. Years later it's the same process, but this time around, I was more interested in the flowers rather than the vase.' According to the artist, his flower paintings are related to the group portraits he realised throughout the 1960s. Much like figures, flowers are overlapping volumes, allowing him to study the sense of motion that he felt eluded him in the cocktail party scenes he was painting at the time. This can be seen in *Marigolds* (2001), the earliest painting in the exhibition, where the individual flowers scattered over the grass – each slightly different to the others – convey a fleeting impression of nature in movement.

## New flower paintings

The artist painted his most recent series of flowers at the beginning of the 2020 pandemic: 'I thought the world could use some cheering up,' he smiles when asked what prompted him to return to the subject. These works mark a change from his previous paintings, such as *Wildflowers 1* (2010) or *Irises* (2011), in which the flowers are rendered in the carefully composed strokes and planes of flat colour that are characteristic of his style. In works like *Peony* (2020) and *Rhododendron on Orange* (2020), Katz uses more shading, giving the flowers a sculptural presence that is, in his words, 'more descriptive of volume'. Still, he works quickly, adopting a wet-on-wet technique in which the last stroke of paint must be applied before the first one has had time to dry, giving his paintings a sense of immediacy and contributing, as Lee writes, 'to the magic of the absolutely flat application of colour'.

The studies of flowers in the exhibition reveal how Katz first paints his works in nature, in the manner of the French Impressionists, allowing him to directly capture the light and atmosphere that lend the flowers their bright colours, before transposing these scenes onto larger canvases in his studio. 'Flowers are actually some of the most difficult forms to paint, because you have to capture the spatial aspect, their physicality, the surface of the flowers and the colours,' he explains. The colours of the flowers are especially challenging to emulate in oil paint, because in the process of mixing the paint, the vivid pigments become dulled by the oil. The artist then has to carefully counterbalance the colours, using complementary tones to enhance their brightness. 'You hope the whole painting will give the sensation of seeing a flower – the brilliance of that experience.'

## New portraits

In his new portraits, such as *Straw Hat 3* (2021), Katz places his subjects against verdant backgrounds that evoke a similar atmosphere to the flower paintings: a summer stroll through his garden in Maine. The format of the double portrait, in particular, shows the connection between the two facets of the artist's practice, with a wink or slight smile creating a subtle impression of movement. Like the portraits, his flower paintings are cropped and framed in a cinematic close-up that lends a feeling of immediacy to the work, as well as a force that belies the delicate nature of their subject. Painted larger than life, the flowers exude a quiet but powerful beauty, immersing the viewer in what he terms 'the immediate present'. Therein lies the power of Katz's paintings: neither abstract nor realistic, they focus on a small, unmoored slice of life, allowing for poetry and abstract thinking to arise from pure perception rather than narrative.

Katz's works are housed in the collections of major museums worldwide, including the Centre Pompidou, Paris; Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Art Sonje Center in Seoul, Korea; Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, Hiroshima; Iwaki City Art Museum, Iwaki; and Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo. *Alex Katz: Flowers* follows exhibitions of the artist's celebrated portraits and water paintings at Thaddaeus Ropac Paris in 2014 and 2021 respectively, forming part of a programme of retrospective exhibitions celebrating his career.



Alex Katz painting *Straw Hat 3*, 2021. Photo: © Juan Eduardo

### About the artist

Born in Brooklyn in 1927, Alex 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. Over the seven decades since his first exhibition in 1954, he has produced a celebrated body of work, including paintings, drawings, sculpture and prints. 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 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); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2015); Serpentine Galleries, London (2016); Tate Liverpool (2018); Lotte Museum of Art, Seoul (2018); Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris (2019); Daegu Art Museum, Daegu (2019); Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid (2020); and Fosun Foundation, Shanghai (2020), followed by a career retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York in 2022.

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