

Press release

# Alex Katz

## *Flower Journals*

5 October—21 December 2024  
Opening Saturday 5 October 2024, 6—9pm

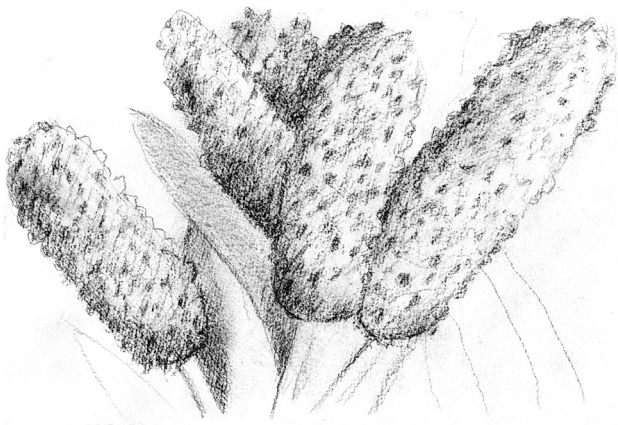
Thaddaeus Ropac  
Salzburg Villa Kast  
Mirabellplatz 2, 5020 Salzburg



Alex Katz, *Drawing for Lily (3)*, 2022.  
Charcoal on paper. 29.2 x 39.4 cm (11.5 x 15.5 in).

Thaddaeus Ropac Salzburg presents an exhibition of recent drawings by American artist Alex Katz, each featuring a single type of flower delicately drawn in charcoal on paper. Exhibited in Salzburg for the first time, the series was created in homage to Katz's friend and fellow artist and writer Joe Brainard (1941–94); in a posthumous collaboration, Katz

embellished a selection of Brainard's journal entries written between 1971 and 1972. A celebration of their long friendship, the poetic accounts of their life in New York City were republished in 2023, under the title, *Flowers Journals*, by Karma Books, New York, alongside Katz's drawings.



Alex Katz, *Drawing for Hyacinth 2*, 2022.  
Charcoal on paper. 27.9 x 38.7 cm (11 x 15.25 in).

Katz and Brainard were closely associated with the New York School, a group of American poets, painters, dancers, and musicians active in the 1950s and 1960s in New York City, and both artists often worked together on publications, book covers or artist books. The accounts in Brainard's journal reflect this collaborative artistic environment. He recorded conversations and accounts of expeditions with his friends including Michael Brownstein, Anne Waldman, Pat and Ron Padgett – as well as their shared appreciation for Katz's art. Brainard writes: 'We talked a lot about how "logical" Alex's development as a painter is: a straight line to clarity. [...] How Alex has remained so pure all these years is beyond me.' A popular motif in Brainard's own art, Katz's close-up drawings of flowers match the serene clarity of Brainard's prose.

Flowers have featured in Katz's work for decades. At first, they were part of his idyllic scenes and group paintings, 'becoming one more layer of decoration to that [countryside] view,' as Prudence Peiffer observes in the catalogue accompanying Katz's recent retrospective at the Guggenheim New York (2022–23). In 1966, for the first time, they became the main subject of a monumental series of paintings, and since then, Katz has continuously returned to this motif in his work. 'It started in the rain,' the artist has stated. '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.'

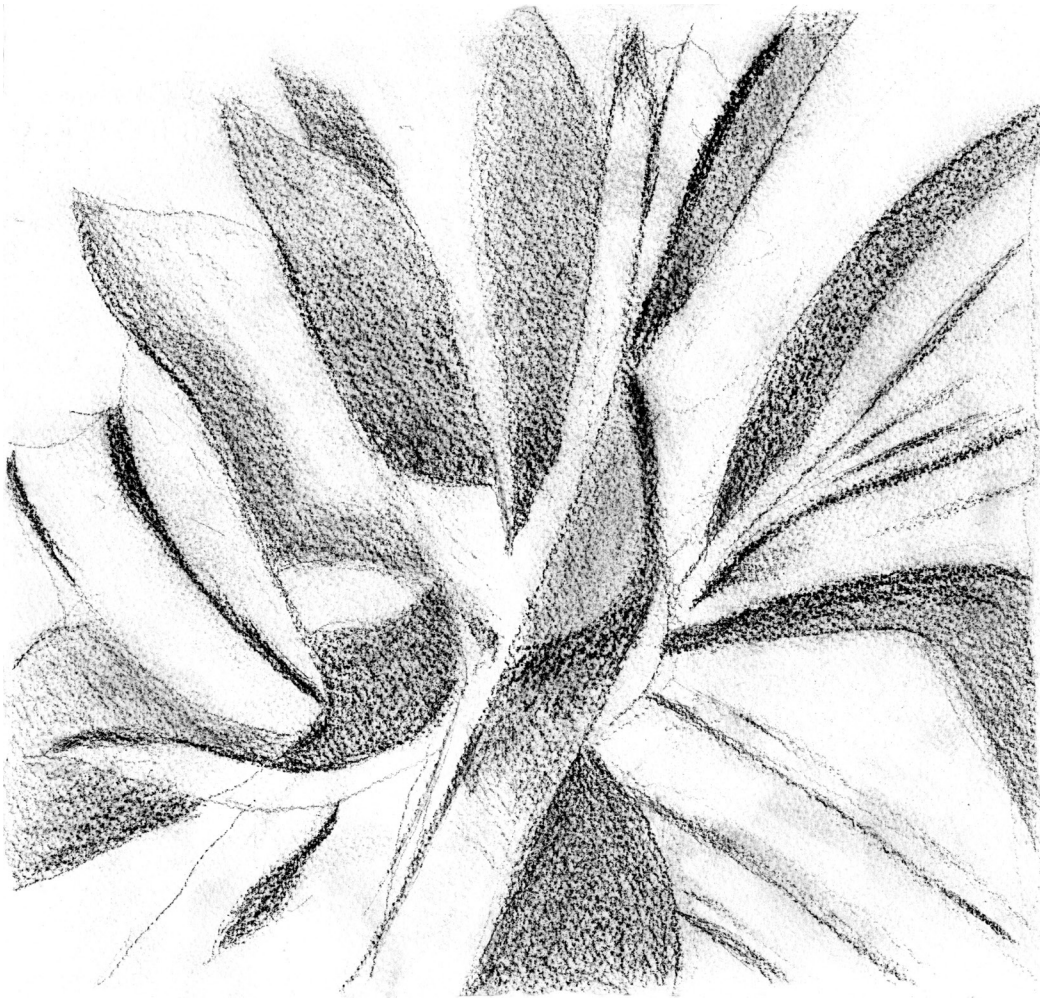
In their simplicity and precision, the flowers in this series of drawings are faintly reminiscent of illustrations in historical botany books. Yet, this latent realism is melded with Katz's sustained exploration of abstraction. Subtle and sparing, Katz shifts the scales, distilling the flower to a few rhythmically arranged areas of charcoal hatching and lines – and reducing the motif to its essence.

When framed as cinematic close-ups, Katz's flowers convey a striking feeling of immediacy. According to the artist, the depiction of flowers is related to his portrait practice. Much like the figures in his group paintings – an arrangement of bodies within the pictorial space – his flowers are depicted as overlapping volumes, creating dynamic compositions that appear as snapshots of an ongoing movement. Whilst he is known for his striking use of colour, here, Katz emphasises the anatomical parts of the blossoms even further by restricting his palette to black and white through his chosen medium.



Alex Katz, *Drawing for Carnations 1, 2 and 3 (1)*, 2022.  
Charcoal on paper. 39.4 x 30.5 cm (15.5 x 12 in).





Alex Katz, *Drawing for Red Lily 3*, 2022.  
Charcoal on paper. 30.5 x 30.5 cm (12 x 12 in).

Early accounts of his childhood in Queens reveal that drawing was the first medium Katz started working with as an artist. He has explained: 'I started drawing with my father. I also remember drawing all over the staircase wall, and my parents never said anything. The drawing stayed there for years.' Drawing continued to be an important means of expression during Katz's studies at art school, but after his return to New York City in 1950, he started to concentrate on painting, not returning to the medium until several years later. In 1970, he discovered that he 'could draw better than [he] could in art school, which was

surprising, as [he] hadn't done any drawing since then.' From that point on, drawing became essential to his practice, 'playing a mediating role between the idea of a picture and the final painting,' as art historian Zdenek Felix observes.

In this series of drawings, the flowers take on a distinctly sculptural presence, emerging voluminously against the flat background, dis-embedded from their environment. As Peiffer writes: 'All of the features central to Katz's signature art are worked out to their most unexpected degree in his flowers.'



### About the artist

Coming of age as an artist in 1950s New York, Alex Katz developed his unique approach to contemporary representational painting at the height of Abstract Expressionism. Over the seven decades since his first exhibition in 1954, he has produced a celebrated body of work, including paintings, drawings, sculptures 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. His great admiration for Henri Matisse's sense of colour, composition and economy of means is evident in Katz's work, as is his interest in the American vernacular tradition.

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 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); Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris (2019); and Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid (2020); followed by a career retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, in 2022.

The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, organised a travelling exhibition of Katz's prints in 1974, and holds an important collection of his prints, spanning lithographs, screenprints, aquatints and woodcuts. The Brooklyn Museum, New York, presented a retrospective of the artist's printmaking practice in 1988 and also holds a collection of his prints. Further exhibitions dedicated to Katz's prints have been held at the Albertina, Vienna (2010); the Kunsthalle Würth, Schwäbisch Hall, Germany (2010); the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (2012); and the Ludwig Museum, Koblenz, Germany (2019).

Coinciding with the 60th Venice Biennale, an exhibition of Katz's works spanning three series is currently on view at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini until 29 September 2024, and a solo presentation of four of his monumental paintings is on view at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, until September.

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