

Press release

Alex Katz

Purple Splits

6 June—29 July 2023
Opening Tuesday 6 June 2023, 6—8pm

Thaddaeus Ropac
Paris Marais
7, rue Debelleye, 75003 Paris



Alex Katz, *Purple Split 7*, 2023. Oil on linen. 152.4 x 213.4 cm (60 x 84 in)

Following Alex Katz's career retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, *Purple Splits* is an exhibition of new paintings by the celebrated American artist, featuring his ongoing series of fragmented portraits. All produced within the past year, the paintings on view at Thaddaeus Ropac Paris Marais demonstrate Katz's enduring ability to innovate, and his curiosity as he continues to expand the boundaries of his practice seven decades into his career.

There has always been something cinematic about Alex Katz's work. His crops and close-ups borrow from the dynamics of montage to emulate dramatic camera framings. 'I loved movies', Katz writes in his autobiography. 'I loved the way the wide-angle screen was used, the way the rectangle was broken up.' In the late 1980s, Katz's work also took on the scale of the cinema screen as he began creating monumental landscapes he describes as 'environmental'. Katz's

Splits represent a further exploration of the moving image, reprising repetition – a formal device he used in his early career – and fusing it with ever-closer details of his sitters on a cinematic scale.

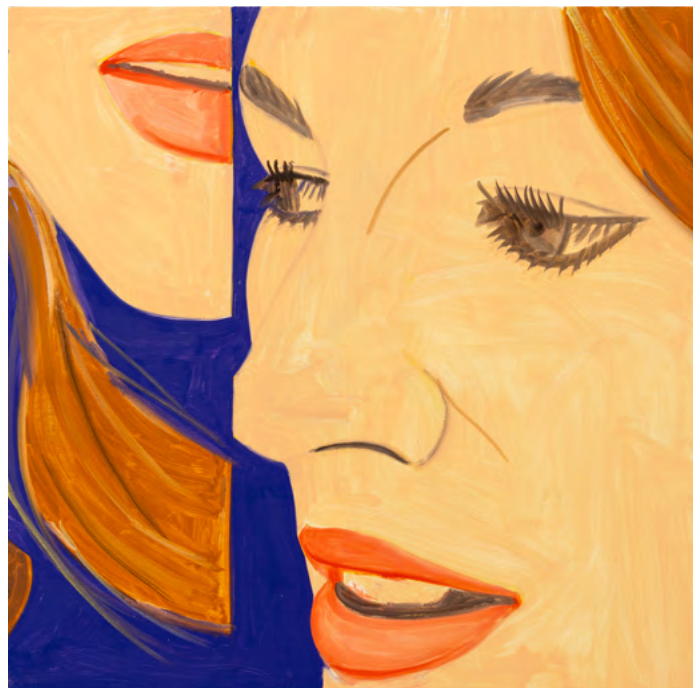
Set against a ground of deep purple, which contrasts with his model's pale skin and brings out her dark features and red lips, the portraits on view in the exhibition capture a sense of motion. The face of Ariel, his sitter, is repeated two or three times in each painting, always with a subtle variation in her expression. The tripartite compositions bring to mind early studies of movement, as well as iconic film sequences such as the mirror maze shooting in Orson Welles's *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947). 'People see my paintings with eyes trained by seeing movies and photographs in magazines', Katz has stated. 'I try to use the way these things alter the way people see as a key to the way I construct my paintings.' As a visual device, the split screen also resonates with today's digital framework, demonstrating Katz's continued awareness of how society looks at images.

...the paintings actually have to do with seeing. It has to do not with what it means but how it appears...

— Alex Katz



Alex Katz, *Purple Split 1*, 2022.
Charcoal and red chalk on kraft paper. 121.9 x 121.9 cm (48 x 48 in)



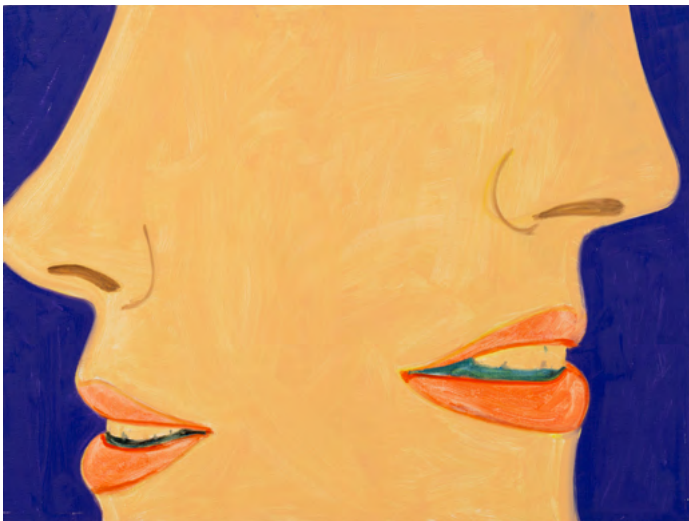
Alex Katz, *Purple Split 1*, 2022.
Oil on linen. 121.9 x 121.9 cm (48 x 48 in)

Repetition has long been a part of Katz's artistic vocabulary. His 1960 painting *The Black Dress* (Museum Brandhorst, Munich, Germany) features six distinct versions of his wife Ada, standing or sitting in the same outfit. The composition has been compared to Pablo Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907), and compelling arguments have recently been made about the influence of early film on Picasso and Georges Braque, who were both avid moviegoers. But it is the combination of repetition with fragmentation in the new works on view in the exhibition, such as *Purple Split 14* and *Purple Split 15* (both 2022), that draws an unprecedented connection between Katz, Cubism and film.

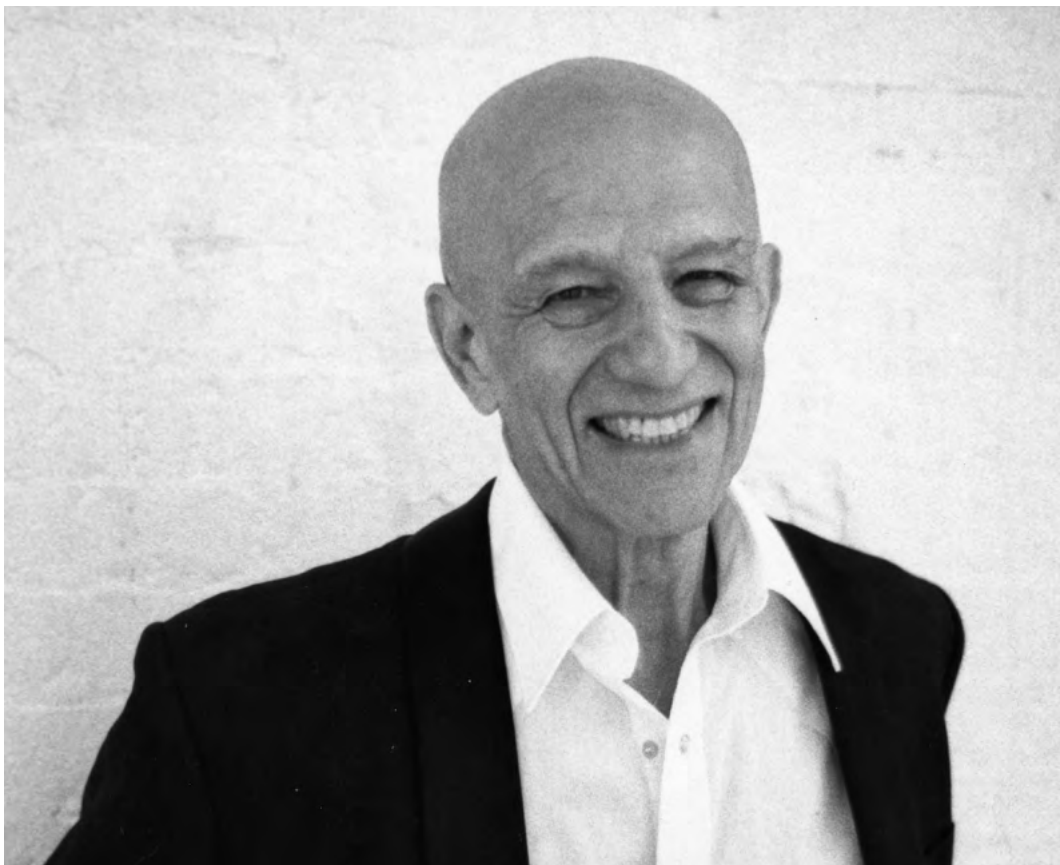
With an eyebrow following on from the corner of an eye or two noses and mouths facing away from each other, the two-way splits recall the visual strategies of Cubism and, in particular, the *Portrait of Dora Maar* (1937) by Picasso. Katz wrote about his admiration for the painting in his 2012 autobiography *Invented Symbols*. His own assemblage of features in the new *Splits* is more drastic than his previous, blending, much like Picasso, different perspectives and fragments of the same face into one impossible and yet captivating image. There is a striking temporal unity in these works, which, as artist and cinematographer Arthur Jafa argues in the Guggenheim exhibition catalogue, sets Katz's work apart from cinema: 'it's not a disavowal of cuts', he writes, 'nor is it like real time.'

Katz has always defined himself as a painter of ‘the immediate present’. His portraits, like his landscapes, capture a moment, not as an exact likeness, but in terms of its single, irreproducible essence. He sketches out his portraits, most often over a single, hour-long sitting, before scaling up the image onto large-scale cartoons whose outlines he transfers through a pouncing technique – the same method employed by Renaissance painters for mapping out frescoes. Also on view in the exhibition, the cartoons will provide visitors with an insight into the artist’s practice, revealing the traditional process that underpins Katz’s sleek and ‘dazzling’ paintings, as they are often described.

At the same time, the sketches form a further doubling of the image and the sitter herself. They demonstrate the primacy of style and technique in Katz’s work, over narrative and content. As Ewa Lajer-Burcharth argues in her essay for the Guggenheim exhibition catalogue: ‘multiplication [suggests] a desire to evacuate all psychic content from the portrait’. Utilising montage as a visual strategy, it is the essence of his sitter Ariel that Katz distils through the many facets of her appearance in the exhibition. This, continues Lajer-Burcharth, is what defines Katz as the preeminent ‘painter of modern life’. She cites Charles Baudelaire: ‘For any “modernity” to be worthy of one day taking its place as “antiquity”, it is necessary for the mysterious beauty which human life accidentally puts into it to be distilled from it.’



Alex Katz, *Purple Split 15*, 2022
Oil on linen. 91.4 x 121.9 cm (36 x 48 in)



Alex Katz

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, 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. 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.

For any enquiries:

Marcus Rothe
Thaddaeus Ropac Paris
marcus.rothe@ropac.net
Telephone +33 1 42 72 99 00
Mobile +33 6 76 77 54 15



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@thaddaeusropac
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