

Masters of Paint, Time and Intimacy

A presentation at Frieze Masters will focus on the complex relationships that portrait artists have with their models.

By Nina Siegal

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The contemporary artist Alex Katz has painted more than 250 portraits of his wife, Ada. Even though Alex is 92 years old and Ada is 91, he never tires of her as a subject.

“I made four this summer,” he said in a telephone interview recently from his studio in New York. “When we initially started with it, she was much more generic looking. She was a pretty girl. As she got older, she became like an icon.”

The first time Alex painted Ada was in 1957, the year they met, and that painting, “Ada,” is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s collection.

He still recalls exactly what she was wearing the evening they met: “a beige sweater and a gray skirt, and her hair was pulled back — very severe looking.” He said: “She smiled, and I’ve never seen anything like it. It was fantastic.”

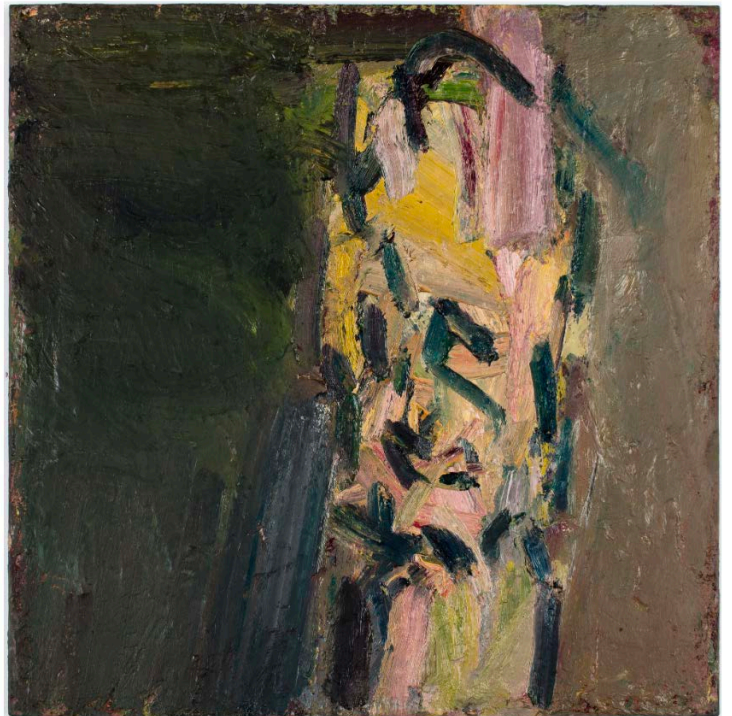
After that, he painted her frequently; sometimes he has painted multiple images of her in the same painting. “She turned out to be the perfect model,” he said. “She was beautiful, and her parents had taken her to a lot of movies; all her movements came out of the movies. She doesn’t make a bad gesture.”

“Ada Smiling,” a Katz painting from 1993, is one of more than a dozen that will be featured in the Marlborough Gallery’s special presentation at Frieze Masters this year, which will focus on the complex relationships between some of contemporary art’s leading portraitists — Lucian Freud, Alice Neel and Celia Paul, among others — and their sitters.

The thematic show, in which all of the works are for sale, will explore how very intimate model-artist relationships, often between family members or close friends, can vary significantly, with dramatically different results.



“Ada Smiling” is one of more than 250 portraits Alex Katz has made of his wife since they met in 1957. Alex Katz/Marlborough Gallery



William Feaver, seen here in a 2017 portrait, sits for Frank Auerbach every Tuesday. Frank Auerbach/Marlborough Gallery

Two of the portraits are by the German-British painter Frank Auerbach, who makes abstracted figurative paintings in thick paints; they are composed over a long period of time and require famously grueling sittings. He has sitters six nights a week at his Camden Town studio in London, including his son, Jake, and a friend, the art critic William Feaver.

Jake, 61, has been sitting for his father since he was 17 years old, he said, every Monday for two hours. “It’s not as if it’s a painting every week,” he explained. “It can take up to two years to make a painting. These things take a long time. At the end of each sitting if the thing doesn’t have a potential to be finished, all the paint gets scraped off.”

Mr. Feaver sits every Tuesday night, also for two hours. “One is slightly like a monkey in a cage,” he said, of sitting still while being painted. “One moves around and the person that is examining you gets some sense of animation. One isn’t a dummy sitting there. He wants to get something fresh each week. Every week, he hopes that it will be done in one week, and of course it never is.”

He estimates that Mr. Auerbach produces two to three portraits of him each year. Jake Auerbach said that it could sometimes take up to two years for his father to produce a single painting of him.

“Even if you scrape the paint off,” he said, “there’s always a ghost of the previous image, and even just the ghosts of the previous image in his head.” His father’s resulting portrait, he explained, is “not an aggregate of many years of paint. The paint for the final portrait will all have been applied in the final sitting.”

Mr. Feaver said he did not think of the final work as a portrait of him, but simply as “a painting of a person.” “There’s curiously no ego involved at all — neither Frank’s nor mine — there’s no desire to prettify it, no pressure to produce a likeness,” he said. “It’s the highest form of portraiture — one human being facing another human being and making something of that person.”

Alex Katz works in a completely different way. He catches a glimpse of Ada, then decides to try to make an image of her at that particular moment.

“Once I saw her in the elevator; she was wearing a red coat and the red hat, and she had black hair,” he said. “It went click. It hit on the eye. You see the image and say, ‘That’s the painting.’ Then you go about trying to create it.”

Mr. Katz will ask his wife to sit for a sketch, which he said takes no more than an hour and a half. From that, he works on the painting, while she is no longer in the studio with him.

His primary interest, he said, is capturing her surface-level appearance.

“I try to eliminate all narrative content,” he said. “Some people think they are empty and cold, or heartless. Narrative slows down the image; my idea is that there is no today, there is no yesterday, there is only now. Eternity exists only exists in total consciousness, the sensation of appearance. That’s what makes them timeless.”