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ART FAIR AND ART

AN INTERVIEW WITH ALEX KATZ

BY RAJESH PUNJ

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AN INTERVIEW WITH ALEX KATZ

RAJESH PUNJ



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- Alex Katz

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Serpentine Gallery, London
(2 June - 11 September 2016)
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Drawing attention to the foibles of fashion, American Alex Katz sees paintings of the modern period as much a reward to his own practice, as the artists of that moment are his rivals still. Chastising French impressionist Claude Monet for his inability to paint 'solid forms' that 'would turn into cotton candy. Eulogising Paul Cezanne for his ability to decide what we see, explaining "he (Cezanne) makes you see everything through his eyes, and that for me was always the highest thing an artist could do, when you can see things through his eyes, rather than of just making a beautiful painting." And seeing the reductivism of Russian Kazimir Malevich's Black Square (1913) "as good as it gets." Which as social and historical intercourse serves to emphasize Katz's own perspective on everything, from painting multiple figures into space, as Roberto Rossellini might have choreographed

them on film, to the artist's understanding of truth and beauty.

Talking very freely of his histrionics over decades of devotion to a unique painterly process, there is a sense of Katz deserving a place at the table, with the artists that have exasperated and inspired him most; Rembrandt Rijn, Johannes Vermeer, Claude Monet, Paul Cezanne, Pablo Picasso, Willem De Kooning and Jackson Pollack among them. Having created paintings that are fashionably devoid of detail, and as comfortable as the front of a cover of Vogue or the rebranding of a clothing line, Katz has gone from being in and out of fashion, as much as he has more recently prevailed in the minds of those deciding on the current trends and tendencies of modern culture. "Well that is the thing with the truth - it's a variable. And the thing that people can't get through their heads is that paintings are subject



to fashion, and fashion dictates the interest. It isn't better, it isn't worst; it is just different; the idea is to make something new." For Katz painting has always been about involving the figurative as a visual currency with painterly abstraction, that as two movements have allowed him to create a framework from within which to paint more and more freely; because for him abstraction alone leads no way, and beauty is better served by seeing a landscape on the canvas and being able to recognise a figure in a painting as your own. Pairing everything down to its most elementary, much of Katz's painting style is about creating attractive templates that personify a man or a woman, leaning over a table reaching for their cocktail, or holding aloft a coloured beach ball; and it makes for visual gold.

"The original idea was that they should be specific and general, so in other words it's that person you can see. All the people think that they are that person. It is to do with the generalising of the style, and ultimately it is the clothes and the gesture. All of those things make it generalised. And as I said people think they are the people in the paintings." Such visual universality is what gives Katz's paintings their appeal, as these attractive emblems of ourselves in space.

When struggling to discover his own style, Katz saw in photography a reason for painting to exist in and of itself, by divorcing art from reality in order to introduce a softer more painterly approach to his canvases. Saying of the photograph "I think photography is a dominant force in

the way we can see the world. People are convinced a photograph is real, and the photograph is subject to fashion. Photographs don't seem real anymore, and they don't have any style. But photography makes interesting images, really interesting flat images. So throughout my career if I saw a photograph I liked I would take people and pose them as they were in the photograph."

And of making an image Katz explains everything as an elemental exercise. "So you are trying to make an image and at the same time you are trying to have light organise your ideas. It is the light that homogenises the painting. It homogenises everything. And the vision is separate from the image. The vision is 'this is what things look like, and this is what paintings look like,' so you have all of that converging at one time, in one

instance. Basically it is about how much energy you put onto a canvas." Moreover Katz sees reality rooted in the unconscious, by virtue of his will for figuration by abstract means. Saying of his approach "when I put down a stroke, the next stroke is here, one stroke is here, one stroke here. I never think about it, and so the work becomes very spatial. There is no thinking. You learn how to do it and it becomes part of you, of the unconscious. And the vehicle for the unconscious is painting out."

Interview

Rajesh Punj: *This morning whilst looking at associated press, I read some original reviews from the 1950s, including Frank O'Hara and Jimmy Scott.*

Alex Katz: In the 1950s I was on top of the bubble. The late 50s was my time.

RP: *It is difficult not to think of the 1950s without associating it with Abstract Expressionism in America, which leads me to recall your catalogue for your recent Serpentine Gallery exhibition, in which there is a key moment in your interview with Hans Ulrich (Obrist) where you talk about Abstract Expressionism as being relevant to your practice. Can you explain?*

AK: Well, I grew up in that era.

RP: *You chose to work independently of the Abstract Expressionists.*

AK: My wife in 1956 thought that any intelligent young painter would be painting Abstract Expressionism at that time. It was the thing to do.

RP: *So how easy was it for you to refuse to do that?*



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groups of thought; one was uptown which included Clyfford Still, and then there was downtown, with Franz Klein and Willem de Kooning. Uptown Clyfford Still was painting truth. And what happened is that the truth became more uninteresting every year.

RP: More empty.

AK: His paintings from 1948 to 1952 were absolutely fantastic - Clyfford Still's, and you can see them in San Francisco. He was a fabulous painter, but then he kept painting the same things over and over again, and they got less interesting. That had to do with truth being an absolute. It worked for (Piet) Mondrian but it didn't work for (Clifford) Still.

RP: But I guess that a style almost becomes a straightjacket; the idea of absolutism.

AK: Yes absolutely. Well it worked

with Mondrian, but it was another time period. And (Kazimir) Malevich was part of that too, it worked for him, they both did fantastic painting. I think that Malevich's Black Square is as good as it gets.

RP: I mean where do you go from there?

AK: I am from another world; I am playing basketball and I'm dancing.

RP: But I see (Kazimir) Malevich and a work like that as painting yourself into a corner.

AK: Well he did some fantastic paintings, they still look pretty good.

RP: I did see a show of Malevich's recently and I was actually disappointed.

AK: The late works?

RP: Yes and of his actual technique.

AK: Basically I followed my instincts, and my connection to painting was to try to paint what was out there, and that was the reason I was painting and I was not going to change. To change for a career didn't make any sense to me at all. I may as well have gone into another business. I could see it very clearly.

RP: So you could see artists being very strategic.

AK: Oh yes, artists being crushed by bad reviews. It was a very lively time. The only academy in America that we had was Abstract Expressionist. The regular academies didn't matter. The Abstract Expressionist group was a pretty strong academy.

RP: And the idea that you remove reality entirely from painting, that you take everything out so it

becomes something else; how did you negotiate that?

AK: My paintings are basically sketches, and I started painting when I was a student. After finishing regular school Copper Union was a modern art school - Bauhaus, Cubist. And when I went to provincial art school they were having a very difficult time with modern art, because they didn't like what I was doing, which was very stylish. And the people there were a lot of fun, they were all from other provincial art schools. And they used to have a truck that would take you out to paint landscapes. And I tried it, and it was like bingo. Because I connected with the unconscious, and the unconscious was painting the pictures; I had that as my connection to painting. And to become an Abstract Expressionist

didn't seem to have any point to it at all. I already had my connection.

RP: So it was really important for you to hold onto representation.

AK: It was about painting what was out there, and of trying to do something when there is no definition of what you are doing. In other words you are trying to paint something you think is realistic. And then with Modern Art, which I grew up with, everything was absolute. And people thought that way, they thought of truth and beauty as absolute. All Masters are absolute, and what you see is absolute. And people generally think what they see is fixed, but actually it is a variable. And the only problem with variables is that it takes you out of the modern art context. And the Abstract Expressionists had two



AK: Malevich's technique is not bad. I think (Piet) Mondrian's technique is fabulous. But Malevich had a nice easy rhythm. I think (Robert) Ryman comes right out of that. He worked as a guard at the Museum of Modern Art, and spent a lot of time looking at Malevich. He painted with a small brush and a nice rhythm. It is not complicated but it is done well.

RP: *And in terms of your own work, what proves interesting when I read the accompanying catalogue and see the works here in Paris, at (Galerie Thaddaeus) ROPAC, and in London at the Serpentine Gallery, is the nature of the imagery, and of the sense of their being almost weightless works.*

AK: Well I think the early twentieth century painters including (Pablo) Picasso and (Henri) Matisse worked in a restrictive way, concentrating on substance that related to mass and volume; and they used a black line to solidify mass. It was about mass and empty mass. And my idea was an all over light, so the mass and volume disappear. They are there if you look at the drawings. But basically I am not interested in mass, and I am not interested in contenting forms. For me I find (Jackson) Pollock more interesting than Picasso or Matisse.

RP: *There is a lovely moment in your interview with Hans Ulrich (Obrist) where you talk about 'the line that defines a person when they die,' and I am curious to know a little bit more about that as a method or a motive?*

AK: That relates to working with the cutouts that came about by accident. And I got into the thing about life-size and it became all about life-size. Because the people in the painting were life-size, but I cut them out of the painting, and so you say with life-size there is no truth, there is no beauty. There is no life-size, life-size doesn't exist. And I used the coffin, and the person in the coffin as an example of life-sized.

The person in the coffin, you say to yourself 'Gee he is so little, he was so big (when he was alive)', because the energy doesn't go out from the person. So with the early cutouts I painted them first to have the energy come out of them, so that they didn't look like a cutout photograph - the early wooden ones. The later metal ones I did them with an interior painting. The thing of size, when I painted the flowers, it took me six months to paint a flower that didn't look like Mount Rushmore, and then all of a sudden I did a big flower and people perceived it as a regular flower. And that's the way it is with TV and movies. You see twenty-foot heads, but you don't think of them as one hundred and twenty-foot figures, you think of them at your size. And for the cutouts I did in different sizes, one is seven-eighth life-size. Which looks like life-size in the painting, and at a distance away from it you think it is life-size, but when you are up close to it, it is much smaller. So it is all about perception, and it is all about breaking down the idea of the absolutes. In painting it is part of the resistance I had with how things are. People would say 'things don't look like that'. I had people screaming in galleries physically when I started out. In 1975 in Paris they had people screaming in the gallery. They were saying 'this is scrap', and then they would say 'send him back to art school'. It was a violent reaction.

RP: *An aggressive reaction to very placid works.*

AK: The paintings were aggressive, while the subject matter was pedestrian almost. The subject matter is nothing; it is the style that bothers people.

RP: *There is an image of you here in the catalogue from 1965 with a work called 'Cocktail Party' behind you; and you appear to have essentially stayed with that way of working.*

AK: I had very little talent. I got into Copper Union five percent school,

"It was about painting what was out there, and of trying to do something when there is no definition of what you are doing. In other words you are trying to paint something you think is realistic. And then with Modern Art, which I grew up with, everything was absolute. And people thought that way, they thought of truth and beauty as absolute. All Masters are absolute, and what you see is absolute. And people generally think what they see is fixed, but actually it is a variable. And the only problem with variables is that it takes you out of the modern art context. And the Abstract Expressionists had two groups of thought; one was uptown which included Clyfford Still, and then there was downtown, with Franz Klein and Willem de Kooning. Uptown Clyfford Still was painting truth. And what happened is that the truth became more uninteresting every year."

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and that I got interviewed meant that I had a very high aptitude for the test without much talent. So I worked very hard, I drew around the clock. When I was not eating I was in class drawing, and in three years I learnt how to draw. You could see the drawings just getting better. The approach was really flat-out, and I figured if I had that much intellectual talent in a year and a half I would pass everyone. And that is exactly what happened. For a year and a half I was on top, but it had to do with work and application. When I finished three years there I realised I worked for nothing, making stylish painting. And then I said in twenty years maybe I could make something that is really art. And I worked twenty years on the plan.

RP: So you have really had a formula.

AK: Yes I had a formula. I knew what I was going for. And the Abstract Expressionist thing wasn't in my book. And the positions were taken, you can't paint better than Picasso painting Picassos.

RP: And you already mention (Jackson Pollock) as one of the artists you admired.

AK: Pollock did some fantastic paintings. The 'She-Wolf' (1943) is as good as anything in a museum. The She-Wolf is as good as any Leonardo (de Vinci). It is a fantastic painting, and I think Pollock is fantastic but he is not my time period. Another time period and another temperament. These artists are cool, and I am up dancing and playing basketball. Pollock was just a bohemian artist.

RP: And in terms of the subject

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matter of your works, the landscapes and the figures, how do you explain them?

AK: Classic, basically it is like frozen impressionism. They say we only see the good side of life, that's impressionism. People thought of impressionism as being realistic, when actually it was just a rosy side of life, and you paint. The subject matter is important in impressionism. And my paintings are about natural subjects that allow you to explore painting.

RP: It is interesting because when I looked at your works downstairs, if I concentrate on a particular part of the canvas, I feel there is an abstraction to how you paint your way into a figurative world. How do you explain that?

AK: It all comes from the unconscious.

RP: The overlapping of brushstrokes.

AK: I started with a friend of mine, who lived in the same block, who wanted to be a commercial artist,

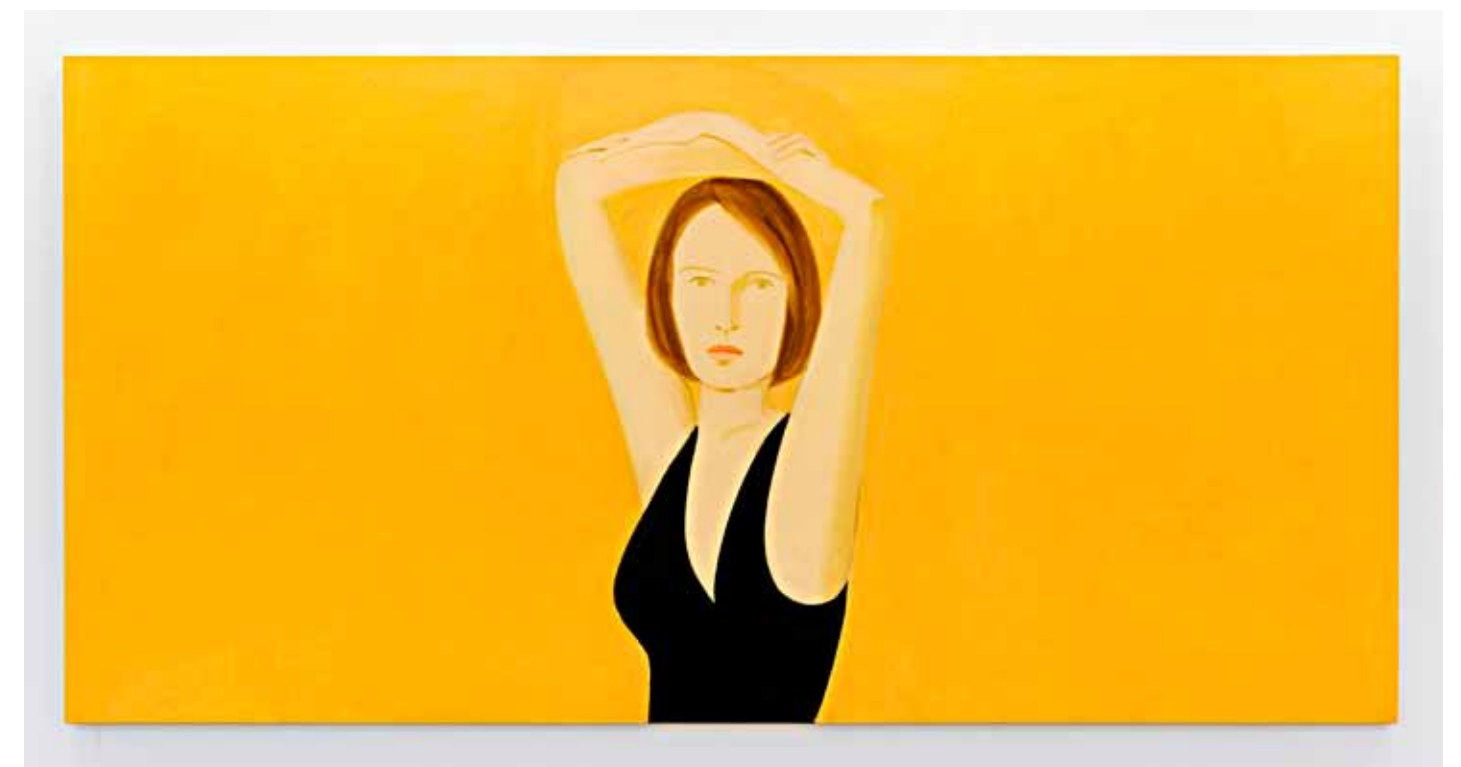
very talented. So he elected to go to trade school where he could do art for half a day. And he said why don't you come, and I was two years younger. And it's like you throw away the world when you go to trade school, because the academics are terrible there. And mostly there are messed up kids who can maybe learn a trade. But anyhow when I got there they had these antique heads, and I liked them, they were beautiful. They had a booth with antique heads in it, with lights fixed. So I started drawing the antique heads, and instead of concentrating on commercial art I was concentrating on antiques. At the end of three years I could draw antique heads as good as anyone. They were absolutely first-class (drawings) in the end, and it was the first time I had ever accomplished anything in my life. So I felt like that the pattern was set. And the antique has a direct link to Cubism, because the teacher I had for antique (drawing) was very good, and he would say sentences that the cubist teacher was saying, the same sentences. He would say 'don't break up your dark values with real lights, don't break

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up light values with real darks, be sure to open up some edges.' He said it and I am listening to this woman say the same thing. I was maybe the best student that she ever had, because of my antique drawings. I had a background for it. But cubism seemed like it was over in a way. It was no longer interesting. The minute I got out of school I dropped it, but it was all in my unconscious. So when I put down a stroke, the next stroke is here, one stroke is here, one stroke here. I never think about it, and so the work becomes very spatial. There is no thinking. You learn how to do it and it becomes part of you, of the unconscious. And the vehicle for the unconscious is painting.

RP: It is baffling because there is a wonderful sense of perspective to your work that appears to be counter-balanced by a fundamental flatness. How do you explain that?

AK: The work is both. It is spatial, which is cubist and it is flat, because that was the way we were going in the 60s. In the 60s the idea was to put it on the surface. And the more successful paintings were with 'doodling', which was not on the surface. (Robert) Rauschenberg and (Jasper) Johns were doodling. I was closer to painting on the surface, and the idea of the spatial was George Sugarman's, who was a fantastic sculptor for about three years. It came from Hegelian thinking. Sugarman was a communist and he was much older. There was the idea of process in painting, which meant no cubism, and Al Held was a friend of Sugarman's. One day Held had a painting and Sugarman looked at it and said 'you overlapped the floor'. You know what that means? It means that you are a cubist, and Held didn't speak to Sugarman for two years after that. And when he said all that about the floor, I said 'Oh my good lord I knew how careful I was not to do it with the figures.'

I was painting a flat figure on a flat

surface. For the first ones I hid the feet in the grass to keep the figure flat. When Sugarman said that, I said 'I have been intimidated too'. So I said 'let's start overlapping everything I can think of'. Which led to the painting 'The Cocktail Party' (1965), and as a painting it is a story of overlapping volumes and space. It was very spatial, it goes back (in terms of perspective) but it is entirely flat.

RP: It is incredible how you create that?

AK: Well it was a composition that no one was doing. It was an open area. The composition was something that Andy Warhol couldn't follow me on, and I had the eighteenth-century to look at. There were the (Pierre-Auguste) Renoir's, and they were hot in terms of great paintings. But that's it. You are investing in the relationship between people, so you are looking at one tone; Rembrandt (Van Rijn) did that very well. For the work 'The Cocktail Party' I was dealing with gestures of my time, which was smoking and drinking. So there was a whole bunch of things coming together for the cocktail party, and then the cocktail party became the flower painting. It's the same idea but the faces are all the same.

RP: And if I think of the works that I have seen here in Paris and in London, do they become more reductive, in the sense that there is less happening in the paintings?

AK: I am going back to the late 50s, and working off of myself in the late 50s, early 60s; and into the 1970s the work was more specific. I did eyelashes and eyeballs, and now the eyes are just a blob. They have changed from the way I painted them before. Now I paint much more reductively, with less moving parts and each part has to do more. So I think if I put a colour down now it has to have a little more substance than the colours I was using in the

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50s. Technically the paintings have more muscle now, and I can get away with things (now) that I couldn't get away with in the 50s.

RP: *Do you feel that by introducing less and less to the painting, that what is present leads to greater possibilities?*

AK: Yes it is more interesting. You work with fear, and I think I wanted change, and that comes back to fear. So you go into stuff you have no experience of, and it's like I have been moving, and you say maybe the stuff you do now isn't as good as the paintings you did before.

RP: *But does that mean you feel you have to be more disciplined about decisions of applying paint to the canvas?*

AK: Well they are pretty disciplined paintings. I couldn't paint big paintings direct, but I wanted to make a big painting. I wanted to make a big investment painting, and I was getting larger with the early stuff, late 50s and early 60s. And I remember painting a six-foot square painting standing in the middle of the road. The cars were coming and I am painting this canvas. It was on a country road and I got the painting done. It painted out pretty good, and I said 'Alex this is not a good idea.' And then I started painting smaller paintings and bringing them up. So the process evolved, and you keep changing to keep yourself alive.

One thing I could do in the early 50s was draw, so I eliminated drawing from the paintings, and I didn't draw

again until 1960. With the drawings I was constraining the paintings, because I wanted to paint more consciously. And at the time I had a review saying 'this guy can't draw, and the paint is too thin.' And I said well you are right. But one of the things was that I could draw, but that was not what I was trying to do. And by the end of the 60s I wanted to make a really complete painting. The drawing got better, the painting got bigger and I got more muscle.

RP: *What interests me from what you say is that in the 1950s and into the 60s, scale becomes a fundamental element to the production of an artwork. Did you see it that way?*

AK: Yes that's where the modernists

were, with the big paintings. The American paintings got around the French painting of (Henri) Matisse and (Pablo) Picasso by going big, and that opened up the door. And I looked at them and I wanted a painting that could hold up next to their paintings. It was an open area and I painted these big heads that came out of the cutouts that were about perception. So I started doing these large paintings, the big flowers and the compositions; and it was an open area because nobody was there that was any good. So that was part of it. You can't beat Picasso with Picasso subject matter and Picasso form, that is all there is to it. You can do what he can't do, he couldn't paint a landscape and he couldn't paint a large painting. To me the sketches are better than the paintings. I love some of his original sketches, but his big paintings never open up. It is like a big graphic, but it doesn't open up as a painting for

me. Even with his *Les Femmes d'Alger* (O.K. Rue) (1911-12), the sketches are better than the painting for me. The painting is hot for its styling but it just doesn't open up.

RP: *Possibly Picasso was preoccupied with creating an abstracted version of figuration, which was to do with his energy at the easel?*

AK: He (Picasso) was basically redoing the casts, he was making doodles out of the casts, and he had unbelievable substance to his work. Picasso's square had real substance, you get a Theo Van Doesburg square and it is like paper. So (Picasso) was a highly developed artist, but there were things that he couldn't do. Those things are interesting.

RP: *It is interesting to look at it that way, of considering how the artist operates.*



AK: All artists are analytical. There isn't an artist who doesn't have a weak spot, period. You just look, and say 'what are the strong spots and what are the weak spots?' And you try and get into the contemporary world and make them look old, right. I was very happy when I saw (Henri) Matisse as an old man, very happy, because he wasn't contemporary anymore.

RP: *It allows for something new.*

AK: Yes, you are there he is not.

RP: *And you have already talked in an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, of how the works are aggressive, and I wanted you to explain that, when we would consider them anything but aggressive?*

AK: They are aggressive. It started with group shows, the first painting I showed for a group show was an art school painting, and my paintings were very stylist at art school. So I got a very nice review in the Sunday Times singling one of my works out as a 'very nice painting'. So I dropped the style and moved in another direction, more traditional. I had a nice little painting in a show, and this guy Beauford Delaney wiped out the whole gallery with his work. And my painting looked like a dishrag and I busted up. I started laughing. My delicate painting is a dishrag, and I said 'this will never happen again'.

RP: *So you chastised yourself.*

AK: Well I was going for broke. I gave up a normal life to go for it. I mean I spent ten years carving frames, two and three days a week. And I lived without heat. I didn't have central heating for twelve years. I was in a country where I had to chop wood if I wanted to have breakfast. So if you think about it I scarified quite a bit, and I lived with someone who was like from Mars. I scarified quite a bit. I had an idea of

what I wanted to do. It was to go for it, 'go for broke, and don't do it in the subject matter' they said, and I thought that was a cheap shot.

RP: *So you saw your attitude towards painting becoming more aggressive, or the paintings themselves as aggressive instruments?*

AK: Yes, they are aggressive, very aggressive. The light is very aggressive. The light of the picture is actually in your face, and the forms now are much more aggressive than in the early paintings. They are aggressive, like a power trip.

RP: *It is like opening a window and letting the light flood in, which some might see as attractive, but you see as aggressive.*

AK: It is a light, in impressionist painting light is like power. You put (impressionist) painting next to other people's painting and they will wipe most of them out of there.

RP: *And you see it that crudely, of light equating to power.*

AK: Well light is used as power in paintings.

RP: *So you are painting light or life?*

AK: Light and time.

RP: *So your figures are subject to the light and time?*

AK: Well you have a lot of things converging; the whole thing of vision, and vision has to do with image. So the image is prime. And for image (Henri) Rousseau is king. His images have more muscle than Matisse's. Matisse is a more skilful painter. So you are trying to make an image and at the same time you are trying to have light organise your ideas. It is the light that homogenises the painting, it homogenises everything. And the vision is separate from the image.

The vision is 'this is what things look like, and this is what paintings look like,' so you have all of that converging at one time, in one instance. So basically it is about how much energy you put onto a canvas.

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