

A Seasoned Eye: Alex Katz Explains His Idea of Painting Eternity

On a recent warm morning, my colleague Naeem Douglas and I visited Alex Katz in his downtown New York City studio, just days before he decamped to Maine for the summer. Katz was up on a rolling ladder painting when we first arrived, and he finished applying a dark brown coat of paint before climbing down to say hello. A stack of wooden frames awaiting canvas rested against the wall nearby. There was a palpable, almost feverish energy around the work that needed to be done. (Asked about his current routine, Katz replied that it was just “paint and sleep” with a laugh. He turns 97 this month.) On the occasion of a group of his monumental Seasons paintings going on view in MoMA’s atrium this summer, we spoke about making art for eight decades; his idea of eternity; a favorite line from his friend, the poet Frank O’Hara, which he took as inspiration; and what makes a painting a “dog” or a thing of indescribable elegance. He needs his paintings, Katz explained, to have “the feeling I have when I see things.” As Naeem and I emerged from the studio onto a busy sidewalk, we looked up at some trees in full bloom, trying to figure out which had been the model for the artist’s Winter painting at MoMA. I realized we were already trying to have a little more of Katz’s seasoned eye.

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