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by Nancy Durrant

Exhibition: Alex Katz/ Etel Adnan at the Serpentine Gallery, W2



Alex Katz's Red House 3, on show at the Serpentine Gallery. TRISTAN FEWINGS/GETTY

★★★★☆

There are two things you need to know about Alex Katz. One, his paintings look comparatively rubbish in reproduction. Two, they get better given time. So visit this exhibition at the Serpentine of 19 paintings (two date from the mid 1990s, but most from the past three years) by the 88-year-old artist and make sure you have a good hour or so to do it.

Katz is probably best known for his flat, cartoon-like portraits, but there are relatively few of these here. Instead the focus is on landscapes, most of which began life in New York, where Katz lives with his wife, Ada, or in Maine, where he spent summers as a young man and still does.

Still, oddly, the show begins with three portraits — to my mind the weakest three works on display. Of Ada, his daughter-in-law Vivien and Anna, a family friend, respectively, they position the women, in repeated full-length or close-up, on a deep orange background, flattening them like billboard advertisements. I prefer two other portraits, Christy and Emma, in which Katz has added a hint of white to his orange, bringing the figures out and rendering them more human.

Yet it's the landscapes that shine. In person these rapidly made works exhibit an astonishing depth and vividness. Made through plein air sketches, then reworked from memory in the studio, Katz's attempts to capture a moment of seeing succeed by triggering our own such memories, filtered through our eyes and the movie camera.

Stand back from City Landscape and, as they do in a park at night, your eyes adjust and begin to pick out the natural forms in the urban darkness. Looking at Red House you can almost hear the rustle of the wind in the branches. This body of work is an example of what doing the same thing for nearly 70 years will do — it makes you really good at seeing and showing.

At 91, the Lebanese-born Etel Adnan, showing at the Serpentine's Sackler Gallery near by, is even more venerable than Katz. Her career has been shorter, however, if only because

she started — and has continued — as a poet, an interest that links the two artists (Katz has worked with poets).

This survey includes several of her alluring leporellos — hand-made, hand-decorated, concertinaed books of her own or others' Arabic poetry, illustrated or adorned. There are also drawings relating to the Apollo space missions of the 1960s that look (unintentionally) like drone photographs of the desert. Several of her intensely coloured paintings manage to be almost entirely abstract while remaining recognisably landscapes.

I find more joy in her earlier works than her most recent geometric, reduced forms, but the show is immensely cheering and sits very nicely within the formal abundance of Kensington Gardens.

The exhibitions continue to September 11