

THING OF BEAUTY | RICHARD LORD

## Cool, calm and collectable

*Figurative artist Alex Katz is known both for portraits and landscapes such as *City Landscape* (1995), executed in a rich, smooth, flat style, with influences from pop culture and advertising. United States-born, Hong Kong-raised Ernest Chang, contemporary artist and founder of Hong Kong gallery The Stallery, explains how it changed his life.*



I was maybe 16 and I was taking a break from school because I was going through my first drug rehab. My mom wanted to visit my sister, who was studying in Munich, Germany, so I went with her. She was living near the museums, I didn't have a lot to do, and one day I just strolled into (contemporary art museum) the Brandhorst. I remember there was a room where there was a lot of Alex Katz's work.

I was going through a lot at that time. I was looking for something to keep me calm because I had a lot of anxiety from withdrawal. I'd just finished my detox, and it was a tumultuous time for me, both mentally and physically.

This piece struck me because it was really big and immersive. It's something like four to six metres wide and two to three metres high. It was transcendent, in a way – it made me really calm. There was a bench in front of it, and I sat there for about three hours. I secretly wanted that painting to be my state of mind. The length of time I sat there: I don't think I've ever done that at any other time. The sheer massiveness and grandeur of the painting: it took me away from the room. I've never felt such depth from another work, not even the *Mona Lisa*.

When we see an artwork, we think that what we see is what we get, but it's never that. When you buy a piece of art, you're buying the whole process and experience of the artist. For me, this work represented how intense that feeling in Alex Katz was. I guess I was lucky to meet it early in life.

It's a work that I constantly recall as a reference point for how to convey emotion in my work. My work is very bright and pop, and a lot of people think it's not emotional – that work has to be bleak to convey emotion. But that piece was simple: it didn't have pain or anger or any real surface emotion. That's what I try to create in my work: yes, there's this surface simplicity, but you end up with the feeling I put into the work.

I saw it at a time when I was trying to find my voice, experiencing a lot of solitude, trying to get agency over my feelings. To spend hours ignoring everything and just sitting there was a pivotal moment. That painting immediately gave me the space, atmosphere and depth to take back the agency I lost when I was using.



Above: *City Landscape* (1995), by Alex Katz.

Left: Ernest Chang, contemporary artist and founder of The Stallery.