

Foundations

Allison Katz

with Edna Katz Silver

It was only a matter of time before Allison Katz would realise *Foundations*, an exhibition that brings to the fore her continuous challenge to the myth of the artist and her containment as an autonomous voice. “There is no such thing as a blank canvas”, according to Katz. “Something is always already there, beginning with the unconscious (the ineffable). Then come the building blocks of our DNA, our structural conditions, the bodies of loved ones, the ghosts of those who left, and every painting already painted. All these forces lead one to form tastes, pleasures and fears; a self-portrait made by others. *Foundations* are our beginnings, the roots that lie below ground – and it is the same term (in English at least) for what might happen at the end, with the construction of a legacy.”

To make visible one dimension of this porous network of influences, Katz invites her paternal grandmother, the nonagenarian artist Edna Katz Silver, to present a suite of dynamic needlework as an integral part of the show. She also implicates her long-time gallerist, Gió Marconi, and the story of his family ancestry in the presentation. “Taking a closer look at what has been there all along, I invited my grandmother Edna to share in this ‘solo’ show with me. This was a way to realise a reciprocal exchange that began nearly a decade ago, when I first asked her to make a needlepoint composition based on my signature.” An important motif in many of her paintings, the name Katz is threaded throughout this show, asking which traits of her biographical past have passed on, accidentally or deliberately, into her art.

In turn, through imagery appropriated from scarves and frames crafted by Gió Marconi’s ancestors – a lineage of picture-framers and scarf makers turned art dealers – she raises questions concerning inherited style and vocation. Katz treats the frame and the ornament as more than chance biographical references: they become an opportunity to speak of what is foundational to painting. “The outline of the frame comprises the first four lines of any picture”, she explains. “To frame is to cut off endlessness; to extract the texture of life from the continuum.” The same applies to the arabesque format of the decorative scarf – yet another leitmotif that runs through the exhibition. It is drawn only on its margins or borders, encircling and teasing the centre, or leaving it blank.

Painted, printed, woven and sculpted in sequence – thought not a linear one – the works in this exhibition unfold the stories of numerous chance encounters and their varying consequences. The foundations they lay bare are not solid and durable substructures, but rather capricious, mobile and generative.

—Yuval Etgar

Biography

Edna Katz Silver

Edna Katz Silver was born in Montreal in 1930, the eldest of three daughters. Her parents had eloped and immigrated to Canada from a shtetl in what is now Ukraine. The family lived in a commercial loft, sharing the space with her father David Applebaum's burgeoning business of sewing blankets; this would later develop into a factory production of chenille bedspreads. Her mother Bella sewed and knit clothes for her children. Edna was taught these skills, finding she had both a natural aptitude and a flair for inventive design. Textile, textures and self-fashioning were the foundations of her childhood, and the circumstances of her family's survival.

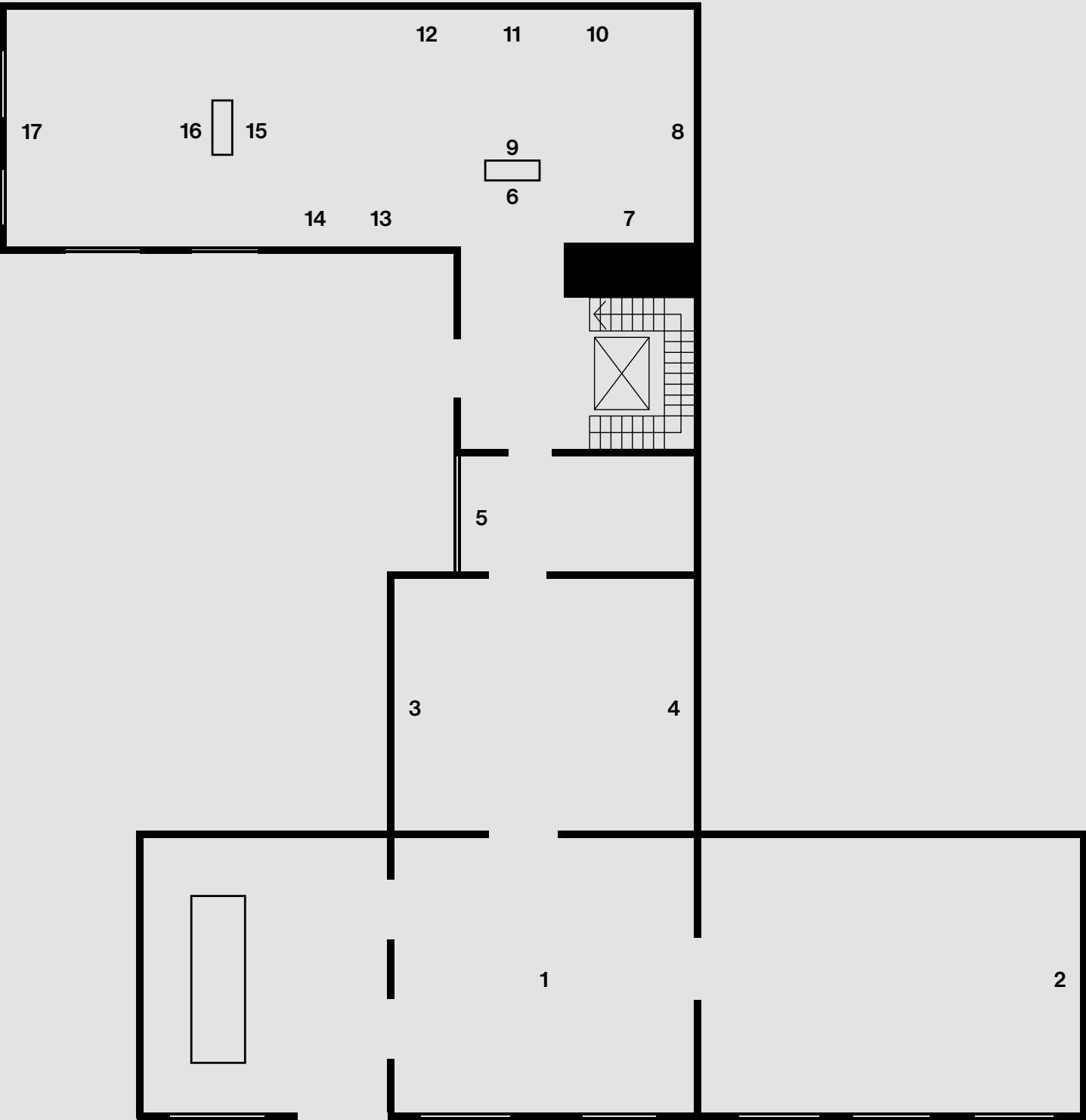
She made her first needlepoint for me when she was eighty-seven. The long arc of her life was not exactly slowing down, but the intensity of her culminated experiences began to revive an interest in a form she had not visited for decades. Edna has worked and exhibited across almost every medium, from painting and printmaking to sculpture and jewellery. She has worn various professional and entrepreneurial hats throughout her life: teaching, founding artist-run galleries, designing furniture, creating sculpture for public buildings, and even film acting late in her career. The needlepoints function like a net, holding personal history – literally, as they're made in part made with the silk threads she saved from her father's workspace – alongside aspects of her varied interests. Geometric forms, architectural lines, embellishment and ornament are all channelled into the most-foundational act of using a needle and thread.

—Allison Katz

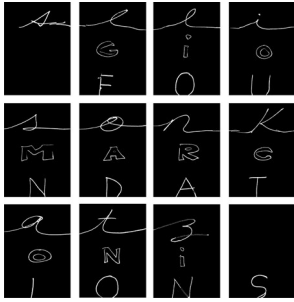
Allison Katz

Allison Katz (b. 1980, Montreal, Canada) lives and works in London. She studied Fine Arts at Concordia University in Montreal and received her MFA from Columbia University in New York. Katz's work investigates the ways in which aesthetic practices link and absorb autobiography, information systems, graphic icons, and art history. Her diverse vocabulary of motifs – including roosters, cabbages, mouths, elevators, noses, and the spelling of her own name – appears as recurring signs that build a constellation of ideas and references, which transmute across the mediums of painting, posters, and installation. Katz has held solo exhibitions at leading international institutions, including the Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto, 2025), Camden Art Centre (London, 2022), Nottingham Contemporary (Nottingham, 2021), MIT List Visual Arts Center (Cambridge, 2018). Forthcoming in 2026, she will present a solo exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Recent group exhibitions include *From Cindy Sherman to Francesco Vezzoli: 80 Contemporary Artists* (Palazzo Reale, Milan, 2025), *In Focus: A Closer Look at Photorealism* (Centraal Museum, Utrecht, 2024), *Capturing the Moment* (Tate Modern, London, 2024), and *The Milk of Dreams*, 59th International Art Exhibition, Venice Biennale (2022). In 2024 she curated and featured in the major group exhibition *In the House of the Trembling Eye* (Aspen Art Museum, 2024). She has received numerous awards, most recently the Gershon Iskowitz Prize at the AGO (2023) and the Pompeii Commitments – Archaeological Matters digital fellowship (2022).

Ground Floor



1

Allison Katz, *Titular Suite 1-12*, 2025**Printed silk posters. Each: 85 × 66 cm, Ed.: 3, II**

Names constitute the most consistent signifiers of an identity. Like credits to a film, which come at the beginning, names – some given, some chosen – are omnipresent in Allison Katz's universe. *Titular Suite 1-12* is a single work printed across twelve silk scarves, threading together text and textile, presenting handwritten letters in three different fonts. The suite spells the artist's name, the name of the gallery and the name of the exhibition.

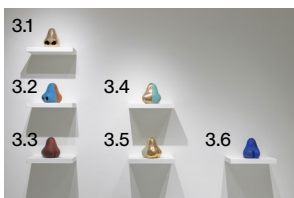
Signing her name is a fundamental attribute of Katz's pictorial language, used as the foundation of her self-portraits (in the 'AKgraph' series), as well as the starting point for her collaboration with the artist Edna Katz Silver, her paternal grandmother, with whom she shares a name and this exhibition. As the artist and publisher Camilla Wills once wrote to Katz, "I noticed on your electricity bill that 'Ms. A. S. Katz' spells MASK. It seems there is no preexisting structure that is innocent or stable."

2

Allison Katz, *Arabesque*, 2025**Acrylic on linen, 220.5 × 170.2 × 3.7 cm**

To make space for *Arabesque*, Katz turns the gallery into an ice rink. It is an unlikely portrait of an estranged paternal grandfather, with whom she still shares a last name. "Originally a photograph, this image was sent to me as a surprise in the mail by my grandfather Harvey, after I called him for the first time in over a decade during lockdown. A simple inscription was written on the back of the print-out: 'Harvey Katz, Prescott Arena, 2016'. That means he was eighty-seven at the time it was taken." For Katz, the iconic arabesque pose – so closely associated with Degas and his young ballerina muses – finds new expression in the athleticism of an old man.

3

Allison Katz, *Arsi-Versi*, 2025**Bronze and patina. Each: 23 × 17.5 × 21.5 cm**

"*Arsi-Versi* is a study in sensuous absurdity... ass-backwards, pear-shaped... inhale-exhale, just ripe", Katz explains. "All at once: perfume, exhaust, profile." These sculptures beg to be turned around, to be seen from every angle, hopelessly suggesting and escaping the act of naming, of assuming a function. Their form first entered Katz's iconic and surreal vocabulary in 2014, in glazed ceramic. Prompted by an invitation from Milan's own historic Battaglia Family Foundry to work in bronze, Katz newly activated the ardour of the first-person arsi of the title (which translates as "I blazed, I have been inflamed"). She finished the surface of the metal with polish or patinas, creating colour with chemical compounds and fire.

3.1

Burning Love Ed.: 6, II

3.2

Drawing a line in the sand

3.3

Dragonfly on a dried rose

3.4

Semi-Precious

3.5

Holding Hands in Taos

3.6

Starry Night

4

Allison Katz, *The Foundry*, 2025
 Oil and acrylic on linen. 80 × 120.5 × 3.7 cm



Edna Katz Silver plays a double role in this exhibition: at once a featured artist and a muse. She is captured here at work in a Montreal foundry over thirty-five years ago, accompanied by two blacksmiths that assist her in the production of one of her large metalwork commissions. For Katz, the scene bears an uncanny resemblance to Goya's *The Forge* (1817) with its circular trio of figures absorbed in labour. She recalls seeing this photograph of Edna at work as a child, wondering about the mysterious atmosphere of a foundry, and how her grandmother was inspired by and capable of transforming such hard materials. After her own first experience working in a foundry, and a chance revisiting of the photograph, Katz merges the two references through painting, adding a personal reading of the composition.



Francisco Goya,
The Blacksmith, 1815-20

5.1

Edna Katz Silver, *Collage 1*, c.1970
 Wool on tapestry canvas, 45 × 51.6 × 2 cm



These are the earliest existing needlepoints by Edna Katz Silver, stitched at least fifty years ago. *Collage 1* and 2 bring together disparate imagery within a single plane, refusing to acknowledge hierarchy between styles, subjects or genres. Allison Katz found the works in 2016 and brought them back to London with her – they become the foundation upon which this exhibition was built.

5.2

Edna Katz Silver, *Collage 2*, c.1970
 Wool on tapestry canvas, 37 × 46.5 × 2 cm



6

Allison Katz, *Elevator V (Gió Marconi)*, 2025
 Acrylic on linen, 200.5 × 170 × 3.7 cm



This is the fifth elevator painting in an ongoing series dedicated to the seemingly shallow but profoundly suggestive space of a lift, which Katz transforms into an allegory of painting itself. Using basic perspectival drawing and a one-to-one scale, Katz opens a seemingly three-dimensional space, and projects a less visible part of the gallery onto its main display area. Marked by its cubic appearance and a white neon light hung horizontally at the back, the work is a nod to – as well as a provocation of – the minimalist propositions of Donald Judd and Dan Flavin. But Marconi's lift also has a history of its own. Originally painted yellow by Giorgio Sr., it served as the favourite backdrop for many group and solo photographs of the gallerist, his family and his artists.



Giorgio Marconi and his
 artists in the gallery
 elevator on Via Tadino 15,
 1984

7

Edna Katz Silver, *AK (Move over)*, 2022
Wool and silk on tapestry canvas with beads and
handmade pewter bear charm, 42.5 × 65.2 × 2 cm



There are four needlepoint works by Edna Katz Silver in this room. Each composition is built around her granddaughter Allison Katz's initials. Perhaps the most intuitive medium for Katz Silver, needlepoint is her natural form of expression, one she learnt at home as a child and has referred to as "painting with thread" ever since. Stitched with a freehand, these works often capture grids, patterns and lettering as motifs, though they never submit to a rigid rule. Each needlepoint assumes the outlines of the process itself: uneven, durational and unexpected.

Dynamic and in motion, the "A" and the "K" appear to engage in a duel for the limited space available within the frame. The work bears links to a metal wall piece Katz Silver made thirty five years ago, whose production is captured in the painting *The Foundry*. This needlepoint acknowledges the unconscious return of a motif that manages to persist across different materials and multiple decades – like an automatic form of handwriting.

8

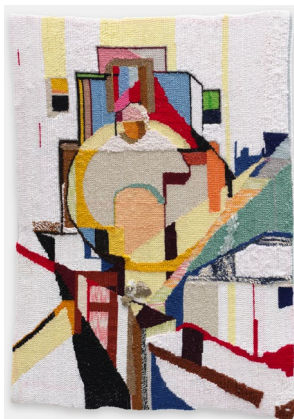
Allison Katz, *The Big ASK*, 2025
Oil, acrylic and rice on canvas, 2 parts
Each. 170.5 × 60 × 4 cm
Total: 170.5 × 120 × 4 cm



Cocks and rice are ubiquitous motifs in Katz' work. The first diptych in this cycle of paintings, *The Big ASK* is composed of hieroglyphs and calligrams. The animal's crown spells "the" in red and her initials ASK (Allison Sarah Katz) form a body, tail and legs in full movement. "A big ask" refers to something difficult and demanding... inconvenient, excessive and hard to fulfil", Katz explains. "I joke that this is my definition of painting." The diptych stages a binary structure, mimicking the format of a Q&A session, only in this case, the question and presumed answer are one and the same.

9

Edna Katz Silver, *AK (EKS in bed)*, 2023
Wool and silk on tapestry canvas with found
metal scrap and beads, 78.4 × 54.5 × 2 cm



For *AK (EKS in bed)*, Edna Katz Silver based her design on a photographic portrait of herself lying in bed – the same one that Allison Katz selected to reproduce on the billboard in the gallery's courtyard. She represents herself as a figure in a pearl hat, set against an abstracted version of the headboard she designed and two wall sconces.

"A" and "K" are embedded in the lower half of the composition, surrounded by perspectival lines that criss-cross through an archway. Katz Silver calls this "a dream-scape, with multiple temporalities and stories happening at the same time, the way memories travel in and out of my mind over the years". By integrating her self-portrait with her granddaughter's initials, she also speaks to the merging and overlapping of generations.

10

Allison Katz, *Fonts*, 2025**Oil and acrylic on canvas, 180.5 × 180 × 3.7 cm**

A typeface, or font family, is what determines the shape language takes in writing. It marks the bends and curves of each letter, and to what extent these establish or evade meaning. The word itself – “font” – originates from the French *fondre*, which means “to melt” or to lose shape. The border of the painting is inspired by a scarf by Bellotti, the design house run by Gió Marconi’s maternal ancestors. The obscure pattern envelopes eight fish skeletons, at once ancient and comic. As always, with Katz, poetry and archaeology are woven under the surface as she indicates that “fish bone and wave become one entity. Water becomes sculpture. Wave and handwriting stretch along the same continuum. The origins of ornament, adornment, signature. Spine, strength of character. The letter.”

11

Edna Katz Silver, *AK (The Doors)*, 2022**Wool on tapestry canvas with gold hoop earring, charms, found metal scrap, and hand made pewter bear charm, 43.6 × 60 × 2 cm**

Edna Katz Silver has always worked with an abstracted and geometric vocabulary, interested in the way forms become three-dimensional within a flat space. Keen to capture transformation, Allison Katz recalls her grandmother wisely positing that: “One door closes, but another opens”. That saying seems to be realised here, with both actions visualised in succession.

12

Allison Katz, *Player*, 2025**Oil on printed canvas with fabric collage, 180.5 × 220.2 × 3.7 cm**

Agile and colourful, hovering over a pattern of frogs and snakes – our primordial ancestors – *Player* fends off an arrangement of cutout squares pasted on the canvas, each depicting a different variation of an ornate perfume bottle. This is Katz’ first collage; an inverted painting where the canvas’ stretcher comes to the fore, and every element conceals or reveals another. The *arlecchino* at the centre of the composition, drawn from a Bellotti silk scarf, is a traditional character in Italian folklore, a familiar image from any deck of cards, but also an emblem for Edna Silver Katz, a defiant trickster in her ninth decade and “a jack-of-all-trades, and master of some” according to herself. Posture is key in Katz’ paintings, as the figure assumes the shape of an A, easily inverted to K, and back again.

13

Allison Katz, *Two Gentlemen*, 2024
 Gouache on paper with 2025 artist's frame by Allison Katz and Andy Katz
 37.8 × 28.2 cm, 49 × 39.8 × 3.8 cm (framed)



At the origin of Gió Marconi gallery and Fondazione Marconi is a family-run, picture-framing company. Inspired by this history, Katz asked her father Andy Katz, a builder and joiner, to work with her to make her own frame. Using the decorative structure to replicate and breakdown the work at the centre, a dialogue emerges between inside and outside, content and container. “To be framed –” Katz wrote in a poem recently, “the dream of any painter”.

14

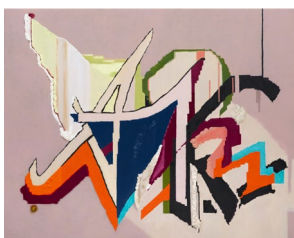
Allison Katz, *Naviglio*, 2025
 Oil on linen, 95.4 × 90.3 × 3.7 cm



In the past, Katz has painted two canals that travel along her family history: one in Nottingham, one in Montreal. Upon learning that Milan itself was once criss-crossed with canals – including a rumoured one under the gallery's very own foundations on Via Tadino – she applied the motif to the generations of Marconi and Bellotti Milanese ancestors, who run like waterways under the city.

15

Allison Katz, *Lost and Found (after EKS)*, 2025
 Oil on linen, 150 × 190.5 × 3.7 cm



A precursor to the needlepoint compositions based on the initials “A” and “K”, this painting is a reproduction of a work now lost. The story begins in 2017, soon after Katz found the two “Collage” needlepoints by her grandmother, and initiated a collaboration based on their shared interests. Katz signed her name on a piece of paper and asked Katz Silver to interpret the signature using needle and thread. She set to work, and after months of labour, produced a colourful, near-abstract piece, adorned with a single jingle bell in the bottom left corner, resembling a graffiti tag as much as an expressionist picture, a strange collision of today's street art with the zeitgeist of the 1950s, when she started painting. By the time the idea of an exhibition gained momentum, this first needlepoint was lost. Here it is recreated or found, if you will. Found, for Katz, is working your way to painting through someone or something else. “It could be in someone else's hand, in chance or in the object itself (the readymade) made strange by painting's inherent intimacy.”

16

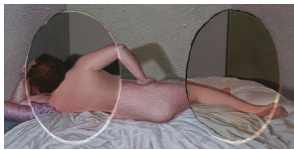
Edna Katz Silver, *AK (Conception)*, 2025
 Wool and silk on tapestry canvas with beads, charms
 and a pearl earring, 78 × 101.5 × 3 cm



The largest and most ambitious needlepoint by Edna Katz Silver, *AK (Conception)* was completed in August of this year, the outcome of nine months of work. Katz Silver calls this work her “swan song” and declares it will be the last needlepoint she will ever make. The work’s title, however, points to a new beginning.

17

Allison Katz, *Diptych*, 2025
 Oil, acrylic and sand on linen, 90.5 × 180 × 4 cm



“The egg is a motif that is relished by those who love beginnings, new cycles, and inner meanings”, writes Katz. In 2016, for her first exhibition with Gió Marconi, she presented a perplexing picture depicting a whole egg on raw canvas. The symbol of conception soon became integrated into her vocabulary, as a hieroglyph, a suggestive metaphor, a lens and a mirror. In *Diptych*, according to Katz, a doubling of the egg motif emerges as “a perceptual mask”; two portals that frame a male nude seen from the back, turned away. Classically, a diptych refers to a painting in two parts, hinged to close like a book. In this case, the definition is inverted, allowing such doubling to exist in one plane. For Katz, painting two views simultaneously presents a “pleasurable dilemma”: focusing on the slippage between reality and desire, foreground and background. In thinking of this tension, Katz quotes curator and writer James Meyers: “the art of the double causes us to see ourselves seeing”.



Diego Velázquez, *The Rokeby Venus*, 1647-51

