

Art in Review

■ A photographer's chronicle of spiritual devotion

■ Alex Katz's great outdoors ■ Colorful boxes.

Thomas Roma

'Come Sunday'

Museum of Modern Art
11 West 53d Street
Manhattan
Through June 18

Thomas Roma's intention in this series of black-and-white photographs was "to make religious pictures for modern times," he said. He began by photographing church facades in Brooklyn, where he lives. But at the encouragement of one of the pastors, he moved his camera inside and spent four years documenting religious services in black congregations throughout the borough.

The 80 works in the show titled "Come Sunday," which was organized at the Modern by John Szarkowski, the former director of the museum's photography department, is an extraordinary chronicle of spiritual transport and communal fervor.

The church interiors are, for the most part, poor, some fitted with wooden pews, others with metal folding chairs. The worshipers are mournful or jubilant; the ministers — men and women — are animated and grave as they perform baptisms and healings.

Healing of one kind or another, in fact, is at the center of much of the worship, whether through a laying on of hands or through the simple opportunity to settle down for a reflective hour or two. In every case, the emotions displayed are so unguarded and intimate as to make the presence of Mr. Roma (who is white)

potentially intrusive, though the position he assumes, somewhere between self-effacing observer and participant, works beautifully.

Religion has been criticized by some as a conservative force in black culture, taking energy away from pragmatic political action. (Henry Louis Gates Jr. addresses this issue in the show's fine catalogue.)

That view assumes, of course, that politics and spirituality are mutually exclusive.

But if "Come Sunday" has a single dominant motif, it is the image of hands raised in the air, a gesture of release but also a sign of a profoundly felt, communally shared belief that speaks of a great force ever ready to be tapped.

HOLLAND COTTER

Alex Katz

Marlborough Gallery
40 West 57th Street
Manhattan
Through May 11

So it turns out, after all these years, that Alex Katz is a landscape painter in his heart of hearts. Increasingly, he has been showing big and impressive landscapes, and now he's back with "May," a rapturous billboard-size close-up of sunlight filtering through apple blossoms.

"Coleman Pond III" is an eerie panorama of moonlit water, the almost-greasy white light it casts silhouetting the feathery black grasses around the pond. Still other pictures are vertiginous views through

trees: Are we on the ground looking up at these trees? Or are we in them, looking across the branches? What gives the views their dizzying appeal is that we can't be sure.

These are stylish, seductive, fundamentally decorative paintings (decorative is not meant pejoratively), and they are also spare, even austere, despite their opulent scale. Mr. Katz has been engaged in a careerlong dialogue with the Abstract Expressionists, so you find yourself put in mind of Pollock, Rothko and Ad Reinhardt.

But it's hard not to think also of Japanese ink paintings when you see the discrete strokes against flat planes that Mr. Katz uses for works like "May" and especially the black-and-white "Poplars." Or at least you think of Whistler (who emulated Japanese art), in the case of works like "10 A.M.," which could be a blowup of one of Whistler's wispy seascapes from Trouville.

The scale of these works is almost life-size, that is, real life, which makes the unreality of Mr. Katz's style of painting more startling. In front of "May," for instance, you have the sense both of standing in nature and at an ironic distance from it.

This partly explains the particular oddness of several images with figures in them. These are the glamorous, vacant types of people Mr. Katz usually paints, but what makes them different is the way they're positioned — in the landscapes, or perhaps in Mr. Katz's studio, standing before his paintings of landscapes.

It's not clear where they are, actually. But either way, the figures and settings don't match up, disturbingly so.

The works are further proof that landscape may be Mr. Katz's truest calling.

MICHAEL KIMMELMAN



Museum of Modern Art

A photograph in Thomas Roma's "Come Sunday," at the Modern.

James Hyde

Paolo Baldacci Gallery
41 East 57th Street
Manhattan
Through May 11

James Hyde's earlier work combined paint and industrial materials to create pictures that symbolically or literally advanced into the real space of the viewer.

Reversing that process, his new pieces look at first like industrial railings or shelving but prove upon inspection to offer arrangements of color, line and texture drawn from the vocabulary of 1950's and 60's abstraction.

A pair of rectilinear "Entrance Handles," almost eight feet high, are painted with bands of black and electric blue, recalling the late work of Ad Reinhardt or Mark Rothko. Some big, padded panels of white and yellow vinyl suggest Ellsworth Kelly gone soft.

Other brightly colored boxes, shelves and hollow railings allude unmistakably to the sculpture of Donald Judd. What's missing are the subtly disturbing proportions and strangely harmonious combinations of materials that made Judd's sculptures into something more than an ideological manifesto.

PEPE KARMEL