

Press Reviews

Zach Baron 'Meet Wes Lang: Kanye Collaborator, Taste God, and World's Most Badass Artist', GQ Style, August 2016



Meet Wes Lang: Kanye Collaborator, Taste God, and World's Most Badass Artist

Welcome to Wes World, where every aspect of the L.A. painter's universe—the cars, the jewelry, the soaring spaces—is an attempt to make the world more his own. It's as though the real canvas is life itself.

BY ZACH BARON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK MAHANEY

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Wes Lang spends most of his time in his studio, in Boyle Heights, 11,000 square feet amid a warren of low brick and cinder-block warehouses just east of Los Angeles's Arts District, quiet but for the commotion of trucks. He entertains visitors here frequently, with one rule: no photographs.

In part, this is because Lang is a private person—“I’m impossible to find,” he says in his matter-of-fact way. “I really am. You can’t get to me unless you know someone I know.” The other reason the rule exists is thanks to one of Lang’s collectors, Kanye West. In 2013, Kanye licensed images from Lang for his Yeezus tour—skulls wreathed in roses and/or Confederate flags, skeletons on their knees praying to some merciless god—which Kanye turned into T-shirts and which Kanye’s fans promptly turned into collector’s items. Three years later, Lang still sees unauthorized versions of the shirts on the Internet. “I just bought a bootleg one on eBay this morning of one that never came out,” he says. “Now there’s this whole rash of ones in Asia that are other graphics of mine put on the same Yeezus logo. They just find other shit.” This is why he no longer allows visitors to his studio to photograph new work: so it doesn’t end up on a T-shirt or cell-phone case in another country.

At the moment, Lang has four drawings, all in his manic, Cy-Twombly-by-way-of-Basquiat style, tacked up on the east wall—the one he’s finishing now is a gift for a friend. As we talk, he studies the drawing in front of him, then occasionally slides forward on a stool to pick up a colored pencil and draw a lightning bolt or add in new text. The canvas says “California Dreaming” in big letters. In the lower right-hand corner, Lang has written the words “Dean Martin”—a nod to the brassy loop of Sinatra songs he’s been playing in the studio lately. Nearby, he’s also scrawled the words “High Hopes.” Like much of Lang’s work—paintings that feature winsome skulls, skeletons in headdresses astride horses, Playboy Bunnies, dead jazzmen, and Grim Reapers holding up red roses, as if attending their own funerals—the drawing is busy, a little confrontational, and improbably cheerful, a mischievous wink from a bruised eye.




Working (and Reworking) at the Studio | “The five-panel jazz painting is tentatively titled *The Greatest Album of All Time*,” Lang says. “It’s gone on the wall and come down many times. Next time it comes down, it’ll be done.”

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From a distance, his canvases, with their topless girls and scythes dripping blood, can feel like portals to some dark adult world. But to Lang, his primary subject is actually a bygone sort of innocence: It’s about what it felt like to be a certain kind of kid at a certain time. His paintings look like the walls of a teenage bedroom, or like the tattoos

on the guys around him when he was a kid. “A couple guys I knew, their older brothers, who were in high school, were like—this was the '80s, so they'd have some shitty '80s tattoo flash, a Reaper or a rose or whatever,” he says. “And I just thought it was the coolest fucking thing of all time.” He rolls forward and writes the word “Rolex” underneath a Bunny.

Most of the unfinished paintings here—portraits of Thelonious Monk, for whom Lang has a deep and abiding love; a massive canvas with Lang's signature skeletal Native American striding across it on horseback—are destined for a show in London. Mostly, though, Lang just paints, compulsively, “with no real regard for what it's for.” Early in his career, Lang was represented by ZieherSmith in New York, and he has done one-off shows with Partners & Spade and Bill Powers's Half Gallery. He has a show of new paintings opening August 19 at Copenhagen's V1 Gallery. But he currently has no gallery representation in the United States, and he sells his paintings—for which there is a long waiting list—himself, directly out of his studio. Ninety percent of the time, he says, “people have to meet me to get my paintings.”



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This makes Lang a curious figure—adjacent to the art world, which he spent many years working in, but no longer exactly of it. He is rarely reviewed by art critics. Through years of shows in New York, and through Kanye, he's built a large audience, but these days he has little interest in displaying his work publicly. “There's no rebellion against the art world,” he says. “There's no hatred. There's no dismissal of it. I've just kind of created a new thing.” Which, I guess, is Lang's modest way of referring to the lucrative business he now runs out of his studio with minimal help and zero interference. He shrugs his shoulders. “I don't fucking play the game, dude,” he says.



“I treat my spaces the same way I treat making a piece. It's composing a feeling and a visual that balances color, texture, and material. I want it to have a flow.”



He's got a thick stack of rubber-banded \$100 bills and two gold rings laid out on a table next to him. The rings, like the black T-shirt he's wearing, are his own designs. His arms, which are covered in tattoos, look a lot like his studio walls—pinup girls, band memorabilia (scrawled in various places are the names Waylon, Ozzy, Deep Purple, and Loretta), Reapers, diamonds, skulls—which look a lot like his paintings. Later, in his home, he'll serve me coffee in a Stumptown mug featuring a design he drew for the coffee company, whose founder turns out to be an old friend of Lang's.

He is, in short, surrounded at all times by things of his own making. “That is by design,” he says. “There's a line in *The Departed* that I love, where Jack Nicholson says, ‘I don't want to be a product of my environment. I want my environment to be a product of me.’ When that movie started and that came on and that line came out of his mouth, I was just like, ‘Yes!’ I love that I drink out of mugs that are mine and wear fucking T-shirts that I drew. I have socks I made; I have Vans I did. I have a bunch of rings I've designed. I have customized Rolex watches.” He has thought hard about what he'd like the world around him to look like and worked harder to make it a reality. Even his paintings, which are dense with weirdly

cheerful shreds of song lyrics or repurposed lines from the Tao, tend to be a literal record of his life, or what he'd like his life to be: what he's listening to, what he's thinking about, what he's trying to remember.

“If you look at what I'm painting and read it, it's all very much about living the best possible life you can,” Lang says. “That's it. That's the intention that I have. The situation I'm describing is the best possible situation for me. That's what I'm creating through making this stuff, you know?”





Lang and his girlfriend live in a tall, elegant rental on the side of a hill overlooking Laurel Canyon, with a couple of tiers of lavender out front and a lovely high-ceilinged living room piled with books—Bill Ward, Martin Kippenberger, Eric Stanton. The living room, like the rest of the house, is dense with art: paintings by Lang, Danny Fox, and Eddie Martinez; a Medusa

bust; and another bust by Lang, featuring Abraham Lincoln smoking a pipe. Lang had lived in New York for more or less his entire adult life. But a few years ago, he started thinking about leaving. He'd already done a show in L.A., at the Chateau Marmont in 2011, as a nod to Kippenberger—30 drawings done on Chateau stationery that Lang made while staying at the hotel. The show did surprisingly well, and L.A. started to seem like a better place to work undisturbed, away from the noisy, competitive N.Y.C. art world that Lang had always been naturally suspicious of, anyway. Plus, the city, he says, was “just getting fucking vibed out. Even with people I really, really love. I'm not talking shit; it's just true. There's a high level of competition, where this is a much more encouraging place.”

In Los Angeles, the world beyond Lang's studio has gotten smaller, and less obtrusive, while his paintings have gotten bigger, as has his studio, which is now big enough to comfortably house his collection of classic cars—a 1972 Chevy Cheyenne, a 1982 Chevy C10, a 1985 Camaro, a 1967 Pontiac LeMans, and the car he actually drives, a 2016 Mercedes—and still leave room for the 20 or so active canvases and drawings he works on simultaneously.

Cosmically speaking, Lang is a motorcycle guy. But after leaving New York, he gave it up.

“Every time I got on my bike in L.A., I would almost get killed,” he says. “And then I had a string of friends get hit. One really good friend died in Brooklyn. Since that guy died, I haven't touched a bike. Which sucks, but I just can't. My brain's just not in it.”

Death isn't precisely the subject of Lang's work, but it tends to come up a lot. “The Tao is all about dying,” Lang says, “but you look at the skulls and everything that's happening in my painting”—here he points to a large gold canvas of a skeleton clutching a bouquet—“that thing is full-on alive. He could hand you those roses right now. I don't paint with any intention of being morbid. They're definitely celebratory.”



Drawings You Can Wear | “The Reaper ring is based off a drawing from 2010 or 2011. I did it with the guys from The Great Frog. Same with the chieftain. The Rolex is an '07 GMT. My first watch. That was a big fuckin' deal.”

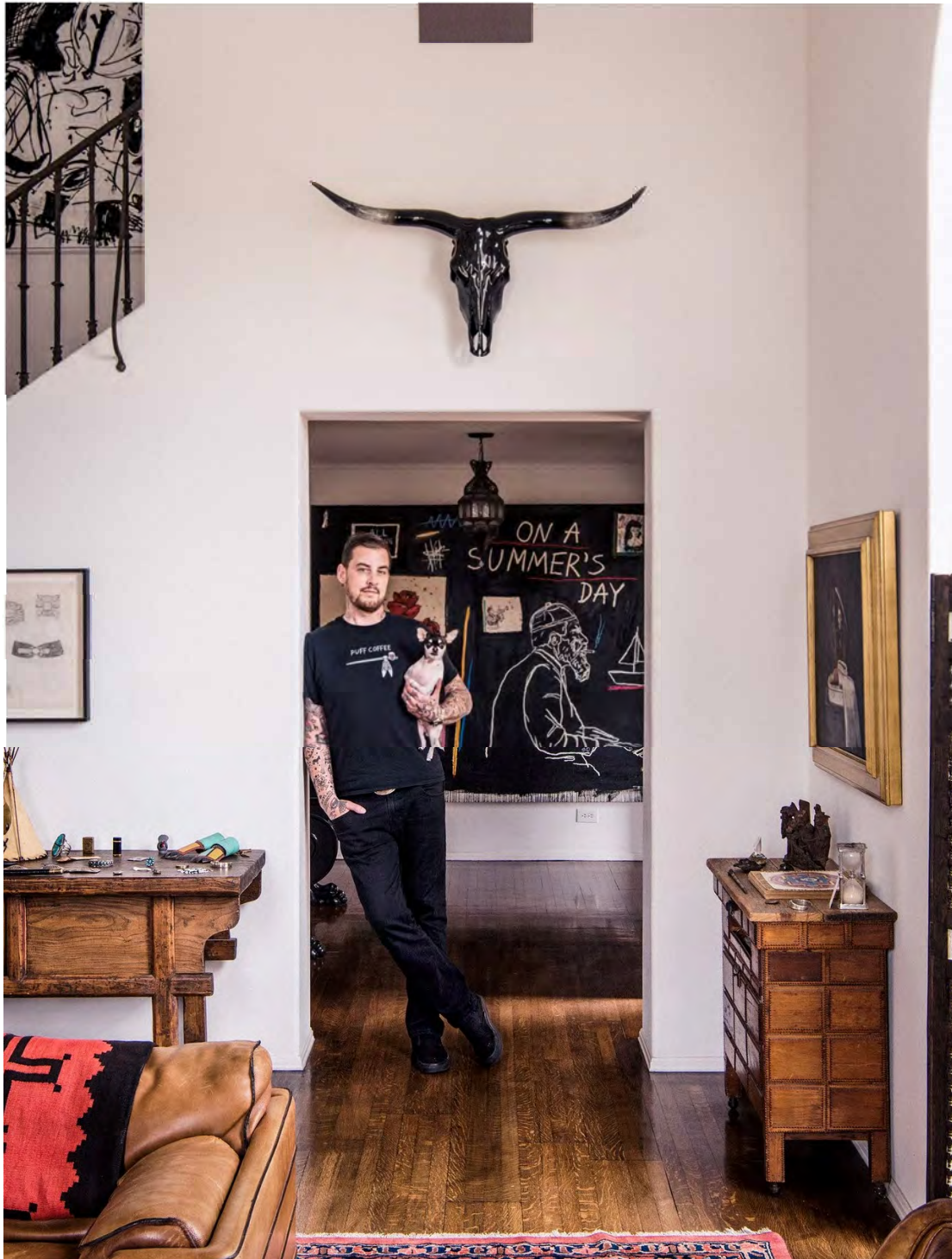
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Lang, who is 43, grew up in Chatham, New Jersey, where his mother would play recordings of lectures by Ram Dass, Deepak Chopra, and Thich Nhat Hanh. He also went to a lot of Grateful Dead concerts. “The practice of repetition, of thinking the same things and doing the same activities for your entire fucking life”— this is something Lang thought a lot about long before he started painting. In the lectures his mom would play, a life philosophy emerged, one that Lang still follows to this day: Picture what you want. Work to achieve it. And it will arrive.

“I just constantly read the Tao and *The Art of War*, and that's what they talk about,” he says. “They give you the strategies as to how to make that happen. And it fucking works. It's not bullshit. There's reasons why those books have been translated 10 billion times over and been published for thousands of years: because they work.”

Lang's career, such as it is, is a monument to this kind of deliberately wishful thinking. He came to art late, in his 20s, but when he did, he arrived with nearly everything he needed to become a painter already in hand. “I have drawings of skulls that I did when I was in elementary school,” he says. “I was obsessed with this shit. I started collecting skulls and headdresses and all that kind of stuff in elementary school, you know?” His parents were uncommonly cosmopolitan for suburban New Jersey; for a while, his dad owned a record store. “They've always been encouraging of what it is that I wanted to do”—even when, after high school, Lang decided not to go to college but to move to New York instead. “I just left the house and just kind of saw what happened, you know? I'm still that way. See what fucking happens.”

In New York, Lang moved and worked in the same loose downtown circles that included, at times, artists Dan Colen, Ryan McGinley, and Dash Snow: “I wasn't part of that. I just knew them, and we'd see each other.” He worked random jobs—sales clerk at a record shop, doing shifts as an art handler at the Guggenheim—and then ended up joining the installation crew at Tony Shafrazi Gallery after seeing a Francis Bacon show there. Lang knew about the gallery because it'd been home to two of his artist heroes, Basquiat and Keith Haring. It was a job that doubled as an opportunity to learn, and when he was offered a spot, he took it.



At Shafrazi, he spent a lot of time looking at art and also found his first real believer: his boss, Mark Pasek, who eventually gave Lang ten blank canvases and the keys to a gallery space on the Lower East Side. “I had two months,” he says. “I fucking lived inside of the storefront, would lock the roll-gate from the inside, slept on the couch in the back, and just sat in there and made shit. And I listened to the first Pedro the Lion record and Leonard Cohen's *Songs from a Room*. That was all I fucking listened to, literally, for two months.” High levels

of repetition with great purpose; the show was a success. On his 30th birthday, Lang quit Shafrazi to become an artist full time.

Unlike many young painters, constantly working to kill their idols, Lang continually leaned ever deeper into his. He'd take elements of a Philip Guston painting, or something by Franz Kline, and throw them right on his own canvases. He wore grooves into his inspirations. "I mean, I can paint like Basquiat because I know it inside and out," he says. "It's like I painted them. Because sometimes I do: I fucking repaint his paintings as a start for a painting. And then I fucking turn it into my own fucking painting. I do that all the time. Unapologetically so. He's dead. There's no more of them. Those experiences in his life and all that stuff was his. But his influences are also mine, from my own experience of life, before I knew who he was."

The directness with which Lang appropriated his influences was one art-world taboo he shredded. Another was in his subject matter, which at various times has included portraits riffing on old African-American stereotypes—in 2007, Jeffrey Deitch pulled two paintings by Lang from a show, reportedly calling them "superficially incendiary"—and the Confederate flag, a motif he still returns to from time to time, most recently in one of the designs he made for Kanye. It was the rare piece of merch that no sensible person could actually walk around in. "You can't wear that outside," Lang admits. He won't say whether the provocation was Kanye's or his, nor will he discuss why either of them thought to put a Confederate flag anywhere near one of the most prominent black artists of his generation: "It's not interesting to me. It is what it is. It's something that happened. It worked. It did what it did."



The fact that Lang occasionally takes on commercial projects is another third rail in the art world, where demand for an artist's work is supposed to far outstrip supply and sales are meant to take place discreetly, behind gallery walls. Lang, by contrast, has designed shirts for Supreme, Rolexes for Bamford Watch Department, art for a box set by the Grateful Dead, a stationery set (with red wax and skull sealing ring) for Marc Jacobs, and the merch for Kanye—a partnership that made Lang wealthy and even, for a time, a weird kind of famous. “My dad got called by, like, TMZ to be, like, ‘Can you please put us in touch with your son?’

We really want to reach him and talk to him.’ And my dad just doesn't know, you know? He gave them my fucking phone number. I got this call, this guy was, like, pressuring.... I'm like, ‘Dude, fuck off. I have nothing to fucking say. Fuck you, that's what I have to say. Fuck you.’ ”

The collaboration with Kanye led to the rapper and some of his friends, like Jay Z, becoming collectors of Lang's work. Kanye, who has spent the past several years making an end-around the fashion industry to sell his clothes directly to the people who love them, can likely relate to Lang on more than just an aesthetic level. And there is a certain kind of logic to the Kanye-Lang connection on a creative level, too: Both use and repurpose samples from other artists, riff and recontextualize and occasionally outright steal from those who have come before. It's made Lang very successful. It's also led certain people in the established art world to take the occasional shot.

Earlier this year, Kanye posted on Twitter a photo of his home one morning, with vases of white flowers in the foreground and a painting in the background. The art critic Jerry Saltz, of New York magazine, promptly replied: “This is weird. I'm @NYMag Art Critic. Love Basquait. LOVE this painting. Looked at ALL my Basquait catalogs. Painting not there?”

The painting, of course, was by Lang.

Lang doesn't look at the Internet much, other than to find new pictures of topless girls or check his e-mail, and so this story, when I tell it, is new to him. “Hahaha,” he says, laughing, utterly unbothered. “It's the new Basquiat, motherfucker.”

Zach Baron is GQ's staff writer.