

**The Hollywood Reporter:** ' L.A.'s Most Sought-After Artist Works Out of Warner Bros.' Backlot "Like a Trojan Horse", by Gary Baum 22th January 2016



Spencer Lowell

Alex Israel sells work for more than \$1 million and navigates the intersection of Hollywood and high culture with an unconflicted ease that some criticize but more covet: «People in my generation don't have those hang-ups.»

It's early January and Alex Israel, the buzziest figure in L.A.'s white-hot art scene, is prepping his next show — debuting at Beverly Hills' blue-chip Gagosian Gallery three days before the Oscars — in his small studio steps from Conan O'Brien's production office at the far southern end of Warner Bros.' Burbank backlot. Up until six months ago, he and his designated assistant, Andrew Pike, the studio's last remaining full-time scenic painter (there were 10 a few years ago, before the advent of digital printing), worked out of a sprawling, light-filled space nearby, part of the larger scenic art department complex that churns out backdrops and props for everything from *The Big Bang Theory* to *Shameless*. Then the filmmakers behind Warners' 2017 tentpole *The Justice League Part One* kicked them out. «It's very top-secret,» says Israel of the movie, himself cloaked as though he were any screenwriter in town, sporting several days' stubble and a hoodie-jeans-and-sneakers ensemble. «You need a code to get in.»

A native Angeleno who sold a painting alongside work by Damien Hirst and Richard Prince for more than \$1 million at Christie's in a May 2014 auction and who currently has a solo exhibit up at the Huntington Library in San Marino (his pieces hanging feet away from Thomas Gainsborough's «The Blue Boy»), Israel has emerged as a key L.A. artist, sought after by such collectors as Eli Broad and Maurice Marciano. But unlike those he sees as his local forebears, from Ed Ruscha to Jack Goldstein, who always kept the entertainment industry at a cautious distance, he fully embraces the association. «He has this unadulterated pleasure in the city, one I haven't always shared,» says his Gagosian collaborator, Bret Easton Ellis. Israel's view: «I don't have to worry that because I make art here that I'm not going to be taken seriously,» he says. «People in my generation don't have those hang-ups.»

One person who does not take Israel's work seriously is Los Angeles Times critic Christopher Knight, who argued in a scathing Dec. 14 review of the Huntington show that it traffics in «creaky Hollywood cliches» with «hectoring,» «one-dimensional pop wise-cracks» that leave the artist merely «looking twee.» An unfazed Israel responds: «He talks about superficiality as being negative. It's full of meaning and requires real, painstaking effort to understand.»

Israel's artistic relationship with Hollywood via Warners began in late 2009, when the now 33-year-old was still working toward his master's degree at USC's Roski School of Art and Design and putting together his thesis project: an inquiry into what he calls the «star quality» of props. «It was like casting an ensemble, the ones that had the best chemistry together,» he says of borrowing the studio's pieces, a melange of the esoteric (a fiberglass golden calf) and the mundane (an orange Gatorade cooler) turned into Duchampian ready-mades.



*In Israel's exhibit at the Huntington, a replica of the Maltese Falcon from the 1941 John Huston film sits next to a 17th century Venus and Cupid.*

Soon the budding conceptualist had hired Warners' craftsmen to execute increasingly ambitious paintings and sculpture — as Museum of Contemporary Art director Philippe Vergne puts it, Israel is «trespassing, almost like the Situationists,» those 1950s French avant-garde subversives, into the world of the studio lot. While he doesn't have his own designated space (hence the Justice League bigfooting), he pays for metal shop, staff shop, sign shop and scenic painting department labor and has access «to come as I please» as his works are being made.

Craig McNabb, the head of Warners' Design Studio, describes the relationship as «a win-win,» given the precipitous drop during that same period in traditional assignments that allowed his staff to utilize their old-school trade skill set. This setup has given Israel the ability to act «like a Trojan horse actually inside Warner Bros.,» says Whitney Museum of American Art curator Chrissie Iles. Adds Kevin Salatino, director of the Huntington, «The Warner Bros. Design Studio functions for Alex like a Renaissance artist's workshop. The techniques, the materials, the stunning organization: This is instantly aligned to the history of Western painting. And for him, it's a kind of performative gesture to have that space.»

Israel's varied performative gestures have included probes into such territory as the celebrity brand-extension — a real-life fashion label called Freeway Eyewear, replete with synergistic partnerships that lasso the heat of other artists like John Baldessari («It's actually profitable!») — and a digital talk show («I got really interested in Oprah») called As It LAys, titled after Joan Didion's noirishly remote L.A. novel Play It as It Lays. In deadpan, Israel asks such locals as Jon Peters and Rachel Zoe questions like, «If you were to create the perfect salad, what would be the key ingredients?» He explains, «There's a lot to be learned from the banal.»



*«I have a much darker vision than he does,» says Ellis (right) with his collaborator Israel. «He has this sunshine-y disposition.»*

Notes Duran Duran keyboardist Nick Rhodes, who commissioned Israel to create cover art for the band's 2015 album *Paper Gods*, «I love the idea that he's not afraid to do things that are fun. He's full of fresh ideas.»

Perhaps unsurprisingly, what Israel has really wanted to do is direct. At the moment, he's putting the finishing touches on *SPF-18*, his take on a teen surf movie in which four friends (one of whom is played by 21-year-old Carson Meyer, daughter of Universal chief Ron Meyer) house-sit at the Malibu beach house of Keanu Reeves, who appears in the film, along with Pamela Anderson and Molly Ringwald. The project doesn't need to make a profit — Israel funded it with a foundation grant along with money raised from the sale of limited-edition wet suit hoods made to look like stucco, his favorite L.A. material because it «implies a certain hollowness to things.» But he has no aversion to purposeful commercial choices: He handpicked *Baywatch* co-creator Michael Berk to write the film («There's no irony in *Baywatch*»), *10 Things I Hate About You* writer Kirsten Smith to produce it and *Clueless* costume designer Mona May to frock it. «I've worked with very many directors over the years, and he treats it all like a painting,» says May. «He's a very rare bird.» The content of the expected 80-minute feature, says Israel, who's still editing, is safely «PG-13; it's not meant to be a Larry Clark movie.» Particularly because he intends to take the film to area high schools — following in the wake of the surf classic *Endless Summer*, which was rolled out on a gymnasium roadshow during the 1960s — Israel's only distribution plan thus far. He hopes to use the project as subversive sugar to help contemporary art talk go down easier. «Teenagers aren't included in the dialogue,» he says. «It's only for the people who make it or buy it or write about it.»



*Pike worked on the «sky paintings» that adorn the Huntington mansion's grand staircase. Huntington director Salatino says Israel told him, «They are really backdrops, and anyone who stands in front of it is an actor in front of it.»*

Israel's obsession with his city's iconicity (he lives alone in a one-bedroom midcentury home above Sunset Boulevard, often descending for supper of chicken paillard and frozen yogurt at Tower Bar) is the product of a lifetime spent in its vortex. Born at UCLA Medical Center, he grew up in adjacent Little Holmby alongside two sisters, the son of a wealthy real estate developer. Israel, whose otherwise erudite musings are peppered with a native son's habitual «like,» went to school at the elite industry-favored private prep Harvard-Westlake (followed by a miserable four-year exile at Yale: «I missed L.A., the climate and the sprawl and the driving») and joined a circle of glamorous offspring — his best friend is China Chow, daughter of Mr Chow owner Michael. He since has proved an adroit marketer (an Angelyne devotee, he once erected a giant billboard featuring a graphic rendering of his visage along the Sunset Strip) and shrewd networker. «He paints himself as a brand, and his persona as an artist emulates celebrity,» notes jeweler and friend Lisa Eisner. «We all love and hate Los Angeles, and he is subtle in his editorializing.»

His savvy was only sharpened by a pre-grad-school stint spent as a biennale-hopping salesman for leading international gallery Hauser & Wirth. «A lot of people think an artist has to have a kind of pure vision untarnished by knowledge of the market,» says Israel, a pensive yet buoyant personality encased in a slight frame seemingly forever fighting jet lag. «I absolutely think the opposite. I think that knowledge makes you free.» His early career artistic projects, such as *As It LAys* and *Rough Winds*, a 10-part, dialogue-free video meditation on Southern California-set shows like Laguna Beach and Beverly Hills, 90210, were supported by the likes of Michael Ovitz and A-list manager David Unger.



*Israel with close pal China Chow, host of Bravo's Work of Art, at a 2013 LAXART Ungala event.*

«The stuff he's started doing in this city, the magic he's captured, is going to be legend,» says World Oil Cos. co-CEO Steven Roth, partner in the founding of CAA with Ovitz and an Israel family friend who now collects his work (one of Roth's pieces, a painting of a sunset, is now on view at LACMA). «It's caught on with people. I'm not smart enough to tell you where he's going with all of this, but I love to follow it.»

Israel identifies with the L.A. predecessors he calls his heroes: Midcentury innovators like Larry Bell, Craig Kauffman and John McCracken toyed with the region's aerospace industry-derived resins and plastics, while he plays with more intangible fabrics like reality TV: «I think about stardust as a material.»

Pronouncements like that, of course, are bound to trigger eye rolls, especially when the focus of Israel's efforts is L.A.'s surfaces. But former MOCA board chair Maria Bell, also a collector of Israel's work, takes a broader view. «You can see his work as mocking or cynical, but as with Jeff Koons, there's a deep, deep sincerity.» Ellis, who has worked with Israel on a series of text-based paintings in the tradition of Ruscha and Barbara Kruger (featuring messages like, «Kim glimpsed Kanye during the seated dessert tasting at the Lautner house and wondered: 'How do I fix him?' «) agrees. «In all of Alex's stuff, no matter how ironic it might be to a degree, he likes everything,» says Ellis.

Israel's Huntington show (on view through July 11) is what's known in the art world as «an intervention.» His neo-Pop works are woven among the staid European-derived collection housed in the 19th century railroad magnate Henry Huntington's Georgian-style mansion. «It's surreal, like a movie set,» says Israel on a whirlwind trip through the exhibition during its final installation in early December.



*Israel says «Casting» is «kind of like a sculpture about making sculpture. The reason it's a mold of an Oscar is that you can't make an Oscar.»*

«When you look at it today, you think it's authentic and old, but it was faux and nouveau — so, to me, it's the perfect vessel.»

The exhibit includes props (a replica of the Maltese Falcon perches in a vitrine beside one of the Huntington's bronzes from the early 17th century) and bright gradient «flats» that reference studio productions' fake walls. One is positioned behind the museum's «Diana, Goddess of the Hunt» to highlight the sculpture — says Israel, «I think of her as a precursor to Katniss Everdeen, with her bow and arrow; the flat almost makes her like one of those panels in a comic book.» There also are paintings — his riposte to Parmigianino's 16th century «Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror» is, naturally, «Self-Portrait (Selfie and Studio Floor)» — and moldings, such as the space around an Oscar, titled «Casting.» Israel nervously clarifies: «We were so protective of the trademark; that's why it's the negative space. I used a sanctioned [prop] award they had available at [famed Rome film studio] Cinecitta. Do you think the Academy is going to sue me?»

What Israel's most proud of at the Huntington, however, is the dazzling frescoed paneling in his signature abstract sunset style, which he had his Warners assistant Pike paint on muslin and mount along the winding double staircase in the mansion's massive central hall. The effect has just been completed during The Hollywood Reporter's tour, and Israel is seeing it unveiled for the first time. «I'm so happy,» he says, beaming. «I wanted to convey the true magic of Southern California, the light and the sky. So many of the studios use it, that moment before a movie when their logo comes up, with that pink-tinged sky — Paramount, Fox, Disney, Warner Bros. We know it's a manipulation. But it still resonates.» He keeps gazing, in pure awe. «It's dreamlike, and very specific, and it's full of possibility.»

\*\*\*



«Self-Portrait (Selfie and Studio Floor)» (far left) and «Signature» (far right) are based on Israel's own profile. «Signature,» explains the artist, is about brands. «It's like New Balance, Warner Bros., Lakers. And you have the whole thing kind of framed in the logo for my brand, which is myself.»

## **THE ART OF LIKING EVERYTHING**

### **Conceptual Artist**

Israel's works generally range from the low- to high-six figures but have sold for more than \$1 million. His next gallery show is Feb. 25 at Gagosian, while his Huntington exhibit runs through July 11. He also has shown his work solo at the prestigious Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas and Le Consortium art museum in Dijon, France.

### **Talk Show Host**

Darren Star, Larry Flynt, Melanie Griffith and Molly Ringwald are among the quintessentially L.A. personalities to appear on *As It Lays*, Israel's off-beat digital show created in 2012. It was inspired by his desire to channel Oprah Winfrey and create his own «video portraits.» He plans to produce a second season this year.

### **Fashion Designer**

While Justin Theroux and Jessica Biel wear his eyewear brand Freeway (the \$100 specs «are a metaphor for seeing and framing,» he explains), he's the biggest fan, adopting the shades as a signature look. Special editions have been created with art stars like John Baldessari and Raymond Pettibon. The line is sold at Barneys and Maxfield.

### **Filmmaker**

His directorial debut *SPF-18*, a teen surf drama, is in postproduction. It features cameos by Keanu Reeves and Pamela Anderson as well as costumes by Clueless designer Mona May. He was permitted to use Duran Duran's «Hungry Like the Wolf» in exchange for his work designing the band's *Paper Gods* album cover last year.