

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ARTFORUM

Alex Israel and Bret Easton Ellis

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There is a long tradition of artists and writers joining forces—in small journals, limited-edition books, and other printed matter. Yet even when formed on the basis of evident stylistic affinities, these working relationships have rarely been egalitarian; typically, the pictures illustrate the words or else the words caption the pictures. The coproductions of artist Alex Israel and novelist Bret Easton Ellis are something else, not only in that they are singular artworks, made to be hung on the walls of a gallery rather than circulated as publications, but because neither side gains the upper hand. Both Israel and Ellis get to do their by-now patented “things,” converging only on choice of subject matter—the Los Angeles mythos, particularly as it pertains to Hollywood. This terrain, germane to both of these native Angelenos, is one that they treat in separate ways. As might be expected, Israel’s take is mostly sunshine and Ellis’s mostly noir.



Alex Israel and Bret Easton Ellis, *Different Kind of Star*, 2016, inkjet print and acrylic on canvas, 7 × 14'.

Texts penned by Ellis for the occasion, characteristically caustic yet roiling with submerged emotion, hover over Israel’s emblematic views of the city: fog-shrouded canyons, the golden coast, palm fronds against colored stucco, and so on. Sourced from a digital-stock-photograph supplier, retouched and printed on painted grounds, this sort of imagery is a staple of Israel’s work. His ongoing series “Self-Portraits,” 2012–, several of which were on view in the upstairs gallery, features a profile silhouette of the artist filled with precisely such boosterish fare, here meant to be ironically savored as at once all too familiar and

vaguely unreal. When joined with the writer’s words, however, these images take a fatalistic turn: They no longer read as free-floating clichés but rather as the mental projections of make-believe characters who, for their part, believe. The overall effect is cinematic, the images becoming a series of POV shots accompanied by voice-over commentary that alternates between naive optimism and cynicism via moments of soul-crushing distress. Placed atop a nocturnal cityscape, the sentence I’M GOING TO BE A VERY DIFFERENT KIND OF STAR cues the desultory genre: Hollywood films about Hollywood, as we know, never end well. Of course you will not be any different, one wants to answer back; you will be the same kind of star, or, more likely, no star at all, at which point only ignominious fame remains within reach.

In another work, a shot of salmon-tinted terrazzo bears the words IN LOS ANGELES I KNEW SO MANY PEOPLE WHO WERE ASHAMED THAT THEY WERE BORN AND NOT MADE. This kind of prose, which recalls passages from Ellis’s breakout novel, *Less Than Zero* (1985), and his most recent offering, *Imperial Bedrooms* (2010), charges Israel’s poker-faced Pop with sinister subjectivity—which is not to say that some of that wasn’t there to begin with. And reciprocally, in the shock-confessional tone of Ellis’s writing, a culturally predetermined aspect is asserted, reminding us that this also is a kind of textual readymade. The outcome of these modal negotiations, now intense and now subdued, is curiously bittersweet in the end. The very idea of making, or remaking, oneself as a Warholian image already seems somewhat quaint when several generations among us were born that way.

The imposing scale and wide-screen proportions of these works immediately announce their relation to what was once known as “the Industry,” and it is worth noting that the opening of the exhibition was timed to coincide with this year’s Academy Award festivities. Given the gallery’s Beverly Hills location, the conditions were set to maximize the number of celebrities in attendance. This was a promotional coup as well as a conceptual one, enfolding the works in their proper atmosphere of glitz and media buzz while also giving the average viewer a moment of pause. After all, the Hollywood back-lot version of LA on view here can no longer be seen as an accurate representation of the city, if it ever could. When so much of the “real” work of moviemaking presently takes place on the computer terminal, those who still cling to the big picture become characters themselves. IF YOU DON’T LIKE ME UNFOLLOW ME read a billboard advertising the show on Sunset Boulevard—a reminder that this evocation of stardom takes place against a starless expanse.

—Jan Tumlir