

'rak'rüm (noun);
the back room of an art gallery
where artists and art lovers hang

Alex Israel



Alex Israel, *installation view*
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Alex Israel was born in Los Angeles, CA in 1982. He received his BA from Yale University in 2003, and his MFA from USC's Roski School of Fine Art in 2010. Alex Israel's work has recently been included in the 2010 California Biennial, at the Orange County Museum of Art, and in New York as part of the monumental group exhibition Greater LA. Israel is the founder of Freeway Eyewear, a Los Angeles-inspired...[\[more\]](#)



Interview with Alex Israel

Berlin, Sept. 2011- Several days before Alex Israel's first European solo show, I sat down with the Los Angeles based artist in the gallery to discuss his city, his various projects and current show. This self-titled exhibition is a combination of sculptural works and wall hangings. *Property*, 2011, is a collection of rented movie house props (acting as temporary sculptural readymades before being returned back into the industry's cycle of use and re-use) gathered from various rental shops in Berlin and Babelsberg. Juxtaposed with the objects are vertical flats, stucco coated and brightly painted architecturally inspired wall hangings that visually frame the pedestalled objects. The objects and color fields weave complex narratives that reference art history, the film industry and Israel's thought process while simultaneously creating a unique relationship to the sculptural object.

Born and raised in LA, Israel's work has a southern California edge seen in both its content and palette. His 2010 work *Rough Winds* is a ten-part fictional webseries that follows the lives of disenchanted members of the upper echelons of LA's rich. Mixing reality and industry produced stereotypes, Israel uses his insightful wit to depict notions of regional aesthetics by way of the familiar medium of entertainment and advertising. At twenty-eight, Israel's artistic voice is remarkably mature and his demeanor thoughtful. His show, *Alex Israel*, runs from September 10th to November 5th, 2011 at Peres Projects Kreuzberg.



Devon Caranicas: *Having lived the majority of your life in LA how would you say the city influences your work?*

Alex Israel: I would say Los Angeles is one of if not the main subject of my work.

DC: *I recently watched the movie Less Than Zero and I couldn't help but draw direct comparisons to your video work Rough Winds. Can you talk about the inspiration and rationale behind that web series?*

AI: *Rough Winds* was definitely inspired by a tradition--an entertainment tradition--that looks at disaffected affluent youth in Los Angeles. My referencing begins with the writing of Bret Easton Ellis, the author of the novel *Less Than Zero*, and continues on to *Beverly Hills 90210* and MTV's *The Hills*. I decided to work within this popular and oft-associated-with-LA genre as a means to creating a kind of landscape of the city. I wanted my version to include things that I was interested in and wanted to look at or acknowledge as key to my understanding of my native region. Another objective of *Rough Winds* was to examine how comfortable I had become with the visual tropes and cues of television to the point where I didn't need dialogue to follow a narrative. Making *Rough Winds*, it seemed right to just eliminate all speaking. The project came to its apex when the *Rough Winds* trailer screened all summer long in 2010 on the videotron on Sunset Boulevard.

DC: *That's perfect.*

AI: Yes, it was perfect.

DC: *But the series wasn't created with that large scale presentation in mind?*

AI: No, it was made for the Internet. When we found out that there was a possibility of showing the work publicly in that context, the curator of LAXART, Lauri Firstenberg, and I had a meeting with the West Hollywood Public Art Commission. Our request was granted, and for that entire summer *Rough Winds* occupied that prime swatch of moving, illuminated advertising space. And of course it wasn't an ad *per se*. In some regards *Rough Winds* followed an expanded model of advertising as a vehicle for product placement. I used it to put my sunglass brand, Freeway Eyewear into context. Freeway Eyewear was developed at the same time as *Rough Winds* so the sunglasses prototypes are featured in the video, on all of the actors.

DC: *It's funny you mention Lauri Firstenberg because I have something she said about your work. She described it as "an examination of the slippages between art and commerce, executed with cutting critique, wry wit and 1980s graphics." I'm most interested in this aesthetic of 1980's southern California that is so specific and so apparent in your work. Could you talk about that choice?*

AI: It's what I grew up with. The logo for *Rough Winds* was inspired by the logos for *Baywatch* and *The Big Chill*, which is a frozen yogurt place that my dad opened on Westwood Boulevard in 1987.

DC: *And this relationship in your work between art and commerce? With something like your sunglasses line, is that an extension of your art practice?*

AI: Of course, both the brand and my art come out of me and my thinking about LA, and in that sense they are related. There is quite a bit of overlap between the two. But finally, when I'm making sunglasses, that's what they are and I don't feel any need to categorize them as art.

DC: *But you are making a pair in conjunction with this solo show and you don't see it as part of this work?*

AI: No, the glasses are not a work in the show. In fact, Freeway Eyewear is doing two collaborations right now. There is the one with Peres Projects that we are releasing in conjunction with my show: *Autobahn* by Freeway, available in Berlin at No. 74 on Torstrasse, and another with John Baldessari, which will come out in LA and NY in October.



DC: Which one in this show is site-specific to this installation?

AI: I've been walking to the gallery everyday from my apartment in Neuköln, and everyday I see beautiful swans in the canal. I really wanted to bring a swan into the gallery. The swan also refers to this American narrative about the ugly duckling; it's awkward and ugly and doesn't fit in and then all of a sudden it grows up to be a beautiful swan. The swan in my show is entitled *Transformation*.

The unicycle, which I titled *Cycle*, is central to the show. I positioned it between two figures, one female, *Eve*, and one male, *Adam*, both made out of wire. They are three individual works, but I'm really seeing them work together, both as a very basic narrative idea: man, woman and the circle of life, and also as linear figures in front of the color field grounds of the flats. They enact a narrative and a figure/ground relationship. The wheel, of course, is also a reference to Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*, a readymade sculpture, which is essentially what my sculptures all are.

DC: But then there is this notion that these are ready-mades that go back into circulation for another use. These objects are rented and then returned, so their status as art object basically disappears.

AI: Exactly, and that is another reason why the wheel is interesting to me. It represents this kind of cycling and circulation of the props through films, television shows, the prophouses and the gallery. You see this symbolic wheel in two other works in the show: the motor, *Libido*, and the hamster wheel, *Eternity*.

DC: For me, the separated installation at the entrance of the gallery is the most literal representation of the flat's being a frame and I think also references this idea of hollywood, television and the screen.

AI: In the entrance gallery you have the directors chair, entitled *Storyteller*, which refers to filmmaking, the camera, *Lens*, to photography, and then there is the hospital room divider frame, *Frame*, that is separating the camera from the faux ancient bust, *Minerva*. Finally, you have the flat hanging on the wall. You have all these different mediums for creating art represented in sequence, and I wanted to literally create a space in which I could walk around them, and think about them and their relationships to each other as objects and as ideas. You can also see through the open back of the director's chair, through the camera, through the divider frame and even through the eyes of the bust. You see through one thing to the next, always seeing more than one thing at a time.

DC: I love this. Looking through the camera you are lost in the this constructed reality in cinema - that color and saturation and bust - that is reality. But by stepping back and removing yourself from the camera's role you see the context and the trickery. It will be interesting to see how a city that isn't so saturated by the entertainment business will respond. How do you see your work translating to a European audience?

AI: I guess we'll just have to wait and see. If I've done my job correctly the installation will convey a certain sense or feeling of Los Angeles. The colors of the flats come from the LA sky, and the shape I've chosen for the flats come from Spanish revival architecture that was popular during the Golden Age in Hollywood. There are even certain props that have been selected that refer to romantic narratives of the American West.



DC: Like the guitar?

AI: Yes, like the guitar, titled *Desperado*.

DC: What's next after this show?

AI: I go back to LA, finish up *As It Lays*, and prepare for my show in New York at Reena Spaulings Fine Art in the Spring.

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~Devon Caranicas, a writer living in Berlin.

(Images: Installation View; Courtesy Peres Projects, Berlin)