

# 10 Things To Know About Wes Lang, the Artist Who Designed Kanye West's Yeezus Tour Merch

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A skull wrapped in a Confederate flag, the Grim Reaper, a praying skeleton, and a dead Native American—these are the images that appear on the merchandise for **Kanye West's Yeezus** tour, and they have unsurprisingly stirred up some controversy among fans. For the loaded graphics, Kanye called upon **Wes Lang**, an edgy artist who is more comfortable on a motorcycle than in a gallery and who has made his career off of charged images. His work is full of skulls, crosses, Native Americans, and even blackface. "I like to take American history and then completely ignore it," **he told *Interview Magazine* in 2009**. "I come at it visually, taking images and telling my own story. It comes out of criticism and great love. There are problems [with America], and we all know that, but I'm attracted to the dark side of things." Now Lang has taken his dark and twisted version of the U.S.A. to Kanye's tour. Both Kanye and Lang have a penchant for shock value, so it's no surprise that the pair have come together. Check out our list of **10 Things To Know About Wes Lang, the Artist Who Designed Kanye West's Yeezus Tour Merch** to find out why Kanye picked Lang to do the art for his tour.

# He taught himself how to draw after working as an art installer at the Guggenheim.

Born in New Jersey, 41-year-old Wes Lang was employed to hang art at the Guggenheim before he was the artist behind Kanye West's Yeezus Tour merchandise. While he worked at the the Upper East Side art museum, Lang began polishing up his own drawing skills. In addition, he was also an art handler at Tony Shafrazi Gallery. Exposed to the works of Francis Bacon, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Donald Baechler, Lang eventually became an acclaimed Brooklyn-based artist, known for badass illustrations of Grim Reapers, skulls, and nude women. Pictured above is his *My idea of Idaho Parts 1&2*, his first sale at his debut solo show "Home At Last" at ZieherSmith Gallery in 2004.

## He also worked at a tattoo parlor.

Not only was Lang an art handler, but he also spent some time painting signs and houses. His most influential gig outside the actual art world was an apprenticeship at a tattoo shop. Evident in most of his work, Lang is heavily influenced by his appreciation for tattoo culture. "I refer a lot to the tattoos, because I'm drawn to the American tattoo, which is such a long-standing tradition of a very set imagery," he told *LODOWN* in December 2012. "There is a great history to [tattoo art], you know, and over the last few years, you know my stretch of doing this, I started to try to bring it past it being just a subversive art form. I'm trying to bring the beauty out of it and make people understand how important it is and that there is a big history to it and that it reflects America."

# For a month, he lived in and made art at the Chateau Marmont Hotel

After working in Brooklyn for a few years, Lang took a leap of faith and moved to L.A. to escape the East Coast city's monotony. "Two years ago, I felt stale in New York—like I was living in a photocopier machine. So I decided to step away from the city and its heavily structured gallery system," **he told GQ.**

He took up residence in room 34 of Hollywood's famed Chateau Marmont Hotel. There, Lang drew and painted 34 detailed illustrations on the hotel's stationery paper, inspired by the hotel's feel and history. In the end, the series of drawings were featured in a one-night exhibition, "Sittin' on a Rainbow," at the hotel on June 23, 2011. "Sittin' on a Rainbow" displayed works that depicted everything from paintings of vibrantly colored birds and flowers to landscape sketches and classic portraits of the hotel's past guests, most of which appeared in Lang's signature dark iconography.

## He also designed merchandise for Grateful Dead.

The artist was tapped to design the artwork for Grateful Dead's *Spring 1990*, an 18-disc box set of concert recordings

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from their spring 1990 tour. Lang, who has been a fan of the band ever since he was a kid, unveiled the cover on his website in August 2012, along with a history of his love for Grateful Dead. "Totally by accident, the first show I ever saw is in the set Nassau Coliseum, 3/30/90. My high school math teacher, Mark Laichtman, was a lifelong Deadhead, and he took me and a couple friends to the show," wrote Lang. "That night changed my life. Mark and I remained great friends until he passed away in 2010. I dedicate what I did for this project to him." The box cover features an intricate skull clad in a colorful Native American headdress, while the individual CD albums and discs contain the artist's detailed renderings of butterflies, birds, and skeletons.

## **He collaborated and released book called *Skulls and Shit* with Donald Barchler.**

Back in 2006, Lang and fellow artist Donald Baechler exhibited a show entitled "Skulls and Shit" at LOYAL Gallery in Sweden. The exhibition centers on the idea of enjoying life while one is still alive. As its name suggests, the show features Lang's realistic pencil drawings of Grim

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Reapers holding hourglasses and skulls smoking cigarettes. On the other hand, Baechler's vinyl paint and paper collages are bolder and more cartoon-like, as if smiling at viewers. The two then released an art book of the same name as their joint exhibition in 2010. It highlights and explores both Lang and Baechler's meditations on the human skull.

## **He teamed up with Bamford Watch Department to create a series of Rolex watches.**

The Yeezus merchandise is not the first time Lang has played around with fashion. For example, Rolex got a little edgier in 2012 after Lang collaborated with Bamford Watch Department to create a series of one-of-a-kind, badass time tellers for the luxury watch company. Lang's hand-engraved watches show off the artist's detailed handiwork of Grim Reapers along with witty phrases or sentences emblazoned on either the face or back of the watch. They also came in a skull and crossbones-embellished box.



# One of his most notable exhibitions, "Life and How to Live It," was shown at V1 Gallery in Denmark.

For his impressive exhibition in 2011 at V1 Gallery, Lang showed varied art that included references that range from Bob Dylan to Cy Twombly to the Grateful Dead, all the way to Chet Baker. Pulling from all over American culture, Lang demonstrated his diverse repertoire and encyclopedic memory for the visual history of America.

The exhibition was hinged on how to live life, as the title suggests. Lang's works dealt with the good and bad sides of survival, navigating how people exist. Besides relying on visual culture, he also introduced themes of American thinkers, especially Walt Whitman. Overall, the exhibition can be seen as Lang's version of Whitman's "Song of Myself."

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## MoMA carries some of his prints in their collection.

Although his prints are not currently on view, Lang's work has made it into the hallowed halls of MoMA. The museum holds a handful of his ink-on-paper prints, minimal sketches that provide insight into the mind of the artist with personal, and sometimes violent, vocabulary and imagery. His work presents important commentaries on American visual culture, so it makes sense that MoMA would house some of his art.

## Deitch Projects pulled Wes Lang's art from their exhibition because it was deemed racially offensive.

Jeffrey Deitch pulled two Wes Lang works from his exhibit at Deitch Projects, "Mail Order Monsters." Apparently, the gallery director **told Lang** that the work was "superficially incendiary" and offensive to the black community. Thus, the works that featured century-old African-American stereotypes were removed from the show. Although the artist was probably trying to bring up the conversation of slavery and black imagery in America, the images were still deemed offensive. This, however, comes as no surprise because Lang has always been known for his loaded images.

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