

Press Review

Ayla Angelos, "I live a rather monastic lifestyle" Wes Lang on artistic solitude and thriving in lockdown', Exit, January 2021



Lake of Goldin, 2020
Oil on canvas
27x30 x 24x30 cm

WES LANG

Art Wes Lang



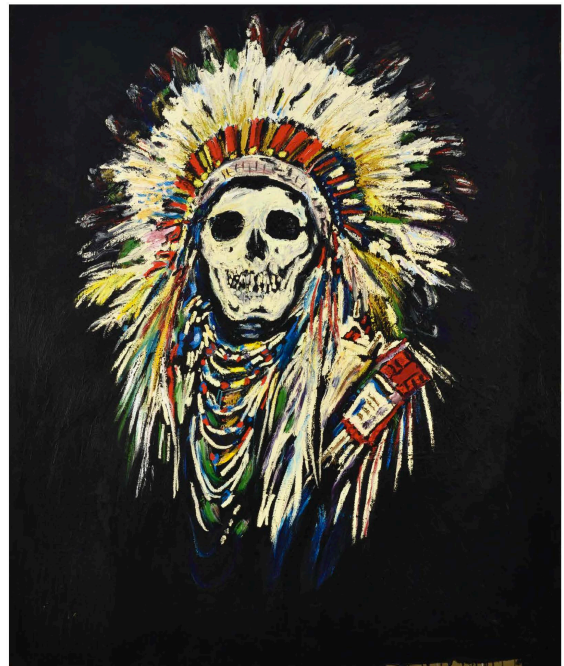
To Tell The Truth, 2020
Oil on canvas
22.9 x 36.5 cm

101



Something Happened To Me Yesterday, 2020
Oil on canvas
274.3 x 248.8 cm

102



Bring Dead Things, 2020
Oil on canvas
182.9 x 152.4 cm

103



My Mingo, 2020
Oil on canvas
22.9 x 30.5 cm

104



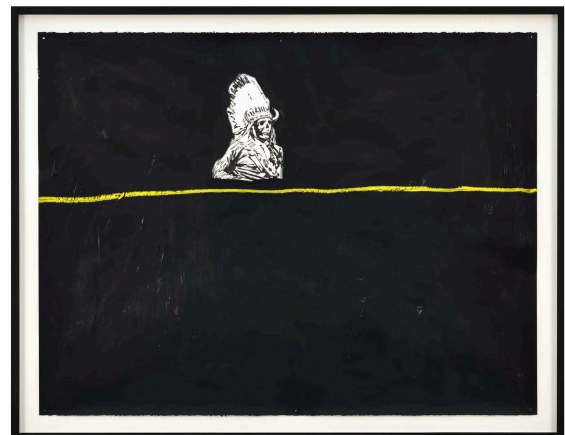
Grand Goshawk, 2020
Oil on canvas
22.9 x 30.5 cm

105



One Winter, 2018
Acrylic and oil stick on paper
96.5 x 127 cm

106



Yo, The River Knows, 2019
Acrylic and India ink on paper
96.5 x 127 cm

107



We Worship The Good, 2018
Oil on canvas
274.3 x 426.7 cm

109



Just Me And You, 2020
Oil on canvas
22.9 x 30.5 cm

110



End Fight, 2020
Oil on canvas
22.9 x 30.5 cm

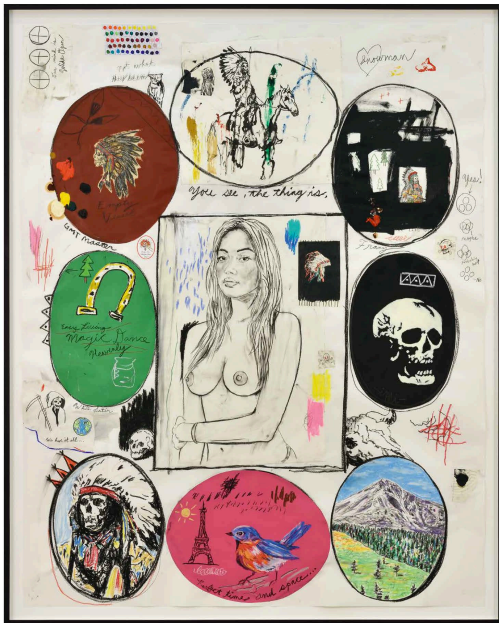
111



A Sort of Madness Part 2, 2020
Oil and acrylic on canvas
152,4 x 121,9 cm



Bring Good Things, 2020
Oil on canvas
182,9 x 151,4 cm



Magi Denor, 2020
Oil, acrylic, india ink, colored pencil, charcoal and collage on paper
213,8 x 187,6 cm



Magi Denor 2, 2020
Oil, acrylic, india ink, colored pencil, charcoal and collage
213,8 x 187,6 cm



Electric Ocean, 2020
Pastel on paper
76.2 x 56.8 cm

All © Wes Lang
Photography Rebecca Fanuele
Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech

“I live a rather monastic lifestyle” Wes Lang on artistic solitude and thriving in lockdown

Words Ayla Angelos

To eat a sandwich and head down to the studio may at first sound like a normal endeavour. But as my conversation with American artist Wes Lang continues, this customary event evolves into something quite compulsive, or obsessive even; the sandwich, in this sense, is the start of his never-ending working day. “I work all of the time; I’m one hundred percent committed to creating every day,” he says, indicating how even in light of recent events, a life in quarantine isn’t too far off from his usual day-to-day of artistic nomadism.

Just moments before the lockdown took hold of most corners of the globe back in March, Wes had just finished up a six-month stretch on his new body of work, scheduled in time for an April exhibition at Almine Rech in Paris. Like many, though, this exhibition was postponed in due course with Wes “not allowed” to attend the rescheduled event in October. But the work within is some of Wes’ strongest – his personal best – and a pure progression from that which came before it. “It’s definitely the work I’m the most proud of ever making,” he tells us. “Now it’s about my life.”

To make sense of Wes’ new pieces, first we must take a quick steer back to his past. Born in Chantham, New Jersey and currently based in LA’s Boyle Heights – where his artfully decorated and constantly evolving studio is based – Wes grew up in a supportive and creative environment, one that nurtured his craft entirely and gave him the confidence to push forwards full-time. “There’s never been anything else I’ve wanted to be since I was a little kid,” he says, recalling a happy childhood with his interior designer mother and his father, a collector and jazz writer. “I grew up in record stores and jazz clothes – I was very lucky to be brought up around creativity.”

This kind of upbringing provided a medley of noteworthy memories, “very specific memories”, like that in secondary school where he’d taken part in drawing competitions with his class. “I just had this burning desire inside to make the best possible thing, and sometimes I didn’t. I would get super frustrated and bummed out, but it just made me work hard around it.” In his eyes, there really was no other option than to pursue a career in the arts – it was a mapped-out and inevitable move.

With a foot now firmly pressed in the industry for over two decades, you’re likely to have come across his creations in some form or another. Whether that’s through his distinctive sculptures or paintings of Native American iconography, motifs of skulls, symbols of death and buffalo heads, or even through his designs with Rolex or the merchandise design collaboration for Kanye West’s Yeesuz Tour – his work has arrived with great prosperity over the last few years.

Yet these works are in the past and, as he puts it firmly, much has changed since then. “There’s a great gap of what you may be able to see of my work on the internet versus what is being made over the last 10 years or so,” he says. “I’ve been very off the grid, and not doing very many exhibitions; I don’t have a website or Instagram or anything like that.”

In this respect, Wes has fulfilled his ambitions of solitude in the most solicited of senses – which, alongside taking part in little interviews and generally carrying out his own vagabond attitude, is inadvertently reciprocated in the current pandemic, a place in which he’s utterly thriving. So much so that he has an abundance of work housed within his studio that no one’s ever laid eyes on: “It’s definitely different than the things you may perceive online,” he reassures me, and he’s not quite wrong either.

His most recent collection takes form of grand, “humungous” oil on canvas paintings, the type that presents an unavoidable dark backdrop for its various skeletal characters – all of which either sport headdresses and subtly varying facial expressions. And despite his previous works pervading with emblems of tattoo culture and American history, this now, supposedly, is very much the contrary.

Like any natural and progressing artist, Wes – a self-professed “giant covered sculpture” – has come to terms with his own evolving style, and simply cannot fathom his work being termed in relation to tattoos or anything in connection with America. “It saddens me when what I do is reduced down to being about tattoos and America, because that’s just not what I have to say. It’s not my agenda,” he states. “I don’t have an agenda per se, but it’s definitely not about tattoos; I have tattoos, I love tattoos, but they’re definitely not what drives me to make artwork.”

Rather, his art is here to help people – his audience, more specifically – to understand what they can achieve from life, provoking them to “take a chance” on themselves. This ethos is taken from Tao Te Ching, a Chinese classic that he uses as a “manual of how to live your life”. A clear mantra no less, he speaks of a piece that emanates with this greatly – the “cornerstone” to the exhibition, titled Glory Be. Devised as a panoramic view, it begins on the left as the imagery starts to detail his own personal quest: “my life’s journey to getting where I want to be,” says Wes, pointing out a landscape on the top right corner that’s representative of a place he’d like to end up one day – “that space of emptiness, beauty and serenity.” It’s an emotive journey that firmly roots Wes as a spiritual man and, quite frankly, someone who accepts his own death. This is because he believes that it’s the only way for humans to become wholly alive in the present. “The entire exhibition is about that – but that painting is a big long map.”

As our talk comes to an end, I take a short moment to pause and reflect on the words that Wes has thoughtfully uttered. Why is it that we, as humankind, fear death so much? The answer, in this case anyway, would be to find acceptance in solitary rituals, much like that which Wes performs on a daily basis. “I live a rather monastic lifestyle, in the sense of just being home in the day where I meditate, relax, clear my mind, get myself ready to go to the studio – I spend the morning emptying myself,” he says in an honest and considered manner. “The thoughts running through my head, to open up my mind and to be able to go to work and create... it’s just a constant cycle. And the exhibition is a product of that. But it is by no means a mark to an end of doing things.”