

## Alex Israel Creates New Dimensions Through Art and Augmented Reality

By Alex Hawgood  
On November 29<sup>th</sup> 2021

Alex Israel explores new realities and reinvents the selfie in his latest art endeavor that merges technology and pop.



*"Self Portrait," 2019*

For the past decade and change, the Los Angeles-based artist Alex Israel has made large-scale paintings and other Hollywood-centric eye candy celebrating the superficiality of contemporary idol worship with a nod and a wink. His elastic and adaptable oeuvre has grown to include billboards on Sunset Boulevard that read “If you don’t like me unfollow me” (a collaboration with the author Bret Easton Ellis, naturally) and an ongoing fragrance series with Louis Vuitton. (The latest scent, “On the Beach,” comes with a limited-edition neon surfboard designed by the artist.) There is also his charmingly odd performance-art webseries, which consists of Israel asking guests like Kris Jenner and Kato Kaelin deadpan questions about the impending global apocalypse and sardonic fluff like “Is home where the heart is?” And who could forget his signature series of self-portrait paintings, which are now so widely disseminated in popular culture that Stella McCartney cited them as the inspiration behind her first menswear collection.

Now 39, Israel continues in his multimedia practice to toy with highs and lows of the art market. A recent solo exhibition at Almine Rech gallery in Paris featured a replica of the iconic red sled from the 1941 film *Citizen Kane* suspended from the ceiling. Ever the art influencer, he is now experimenting with bringing his “’80s porn flicks” aesthetic to the realm of virtual reality. Alex Israel x Snapchat, a collaborative augmented-reality project between the two image makers, is on view at The Bass Museum of Art in Miami through May 1, 2022. Having spent the last several years raiding Snapchat’s toolbox of 3D technologies, Israel has now reinvented his self-portraits into portals for an interactive spectacle of animated dancing avocados, flying pelicans, and swaying palm trees. The best way for audiences to witness Israel’s evolving selfie-hood, the show suggests, is to look beyond the glossy surface.



*"Self-Portrait (Pelican with Fish)," 2019.*

**L’OFFICIEL:** You are partnering with Snapchat to show your paintings through augmented reality technology. How familiar were you with the capabilities of AR?

**ALEX ISRAEL:** I had played Pokémon Go that was sort of what I knew in terms of augmented reality and what it could do. When I began this conversation with Snapchat, I started to do some research. I had some ideas for projects, but my tastes were a little bit ahead of what we were able to do. So after we had been having these conversations for a while, they finally were like, “Okay, we can do this now. Let’s do it.” Technology is always expanding, which is exciting. We’re able to now combine film footage with animation to create AR that’s a bit more layered and complex than what we could have done before. And that has to do with technical things around memory, how big a file can be, and how fast it can load on your phone. And a lot of that just gets better and better as the years pass.

**L’O:** Is there a trick to working with virtual mediums?

**AI:** In terms of the animations, there are both cartoon and photorealistic elements. One piece shows a pelican flying out from one of my self portraits, right? It looks photorealistic, but then the pelican opens its mouth and a cartoon fish jumps out—a Disney type of fish. There was definitely an effort on my part to compare the two styles and put them next to each other. I enjoy collaging them together. If we can bring my paintings to life, in what ways can that be? What can that look like?

That's where I start. I think, Well, you know, what would it be like to break the fourth wall? What would it be like to make the viewer a more active participant? And how would that work? Would it be something that you're doing through your phone? Can it relate to the other things that we do through our phone? And so I guess there's a lot of things that I'm thinking about, and in some cases it does end up becoming a kind of collage of different styles and renderings.



*"Self-Portrait (Drive)," 2019.*

**L'O: The Snapchat works remind me of films that blend liveaction with animation, like Who Framed Roger Rabbit or Cool World.**

**Al:** Of course. One of the pieces is a reference to a scene in the movie *Anchors Aweigh*, which sort of predates both of those movies. The movie is famous for the scene where Gene Kelly dances with Jerry Mouse. I created my own idea of an update of that scene, but it involves the viewer as a participant. When you hold your phone up to the painting, it looks as if it's opening up, and a dancing avocado jumps out of the painting and lands on the floor in the gallery right in front of you. Verbal prompts and music then sort of guide you into a dancing duet. It's almost like a little dance that you would do on social media with this avocado. Another piece is called "Drive," which is kind of like an animated psychedelic landscape of Los Angeles that takes you through different areas of the city, with different monuments becoming more three-dimensional with things coming out of the picture. As it plays, you can imagine the birds and the airplane and the fireworks sort of coming out of the painting and into the gallery space. A different feature is a palm tree coming out of a self portrait.

**L'O: How did you come up with the choreography for the dancing avocado number?**

**Al:** I worked with a choreographer to scour the Internet for dance moves that I thought were really kind of good and universal, but still potentially doable by someone who may not be a good dancer, like myself. The first reference was the old Hollywood films like *Anchors Aweigh*, but I also looked at what kids are doing and what's happening in the culture on social media. And then the avocado is animated to do those dance moves. And then I'll say, "Oh, the avocado's hands are going up too high," or, "The avocado is jumping too high."





Alex Israel in a prep session with Snapchat.

L'O: So if you go to see the show, there will be lots of people dancing around silently with headsets on.

AI: Yes, hopefully. What's exciting is that AR can take our world and create this whole other layer on top of it. To see something static and then be able to watch it become animated right in front of you really expands what we think we know of the world into another dimension. There are an infinite number of uses for AR, but I think we'll see that it becomes much more part of our lives as the technology we're using it with becomes better, like glasses or contact lenses or something like that.

L'O: Augmented reality is part of a new wave of technology like cryptocurrency and non-fungible tokens (NFTs) that some believe will be essential to the next iteration of the Internet. As an artist, how important is it for you to keep up with new technologies?

AI: I try to keep abreast of what's happening in the world of technology, but I'm not always as up-to-date as I probably should be. In terms of technology, I think it's important for me to think about how I make my work, but I have to feel that something is right before I become engaged with it. Pokémon Go helped me to get excited about AR, but I'm still waiting for something to get me really excited about NFTs. But you never know. Snapchat has the capacity to make so many incredible ideas come to life. That's what is so exciting about working with them. To build this 3D model of an experience and then to create a way of activating it for anyone in their phone was something I could never piece together on my own. It's allowed me to think about things I would not necessarily have even thought about in my work.



Alex Israel "Self Portrait (palm)," 2019.

L'O: You're well versed in the semiotics of Hollywood. A recent solo exhibition at Almine Rech gallery in Paris consisted of an almost Duchampian reconstruction of the red wooden sled from the iconic film Citizen Kane. What drew you to that piece of film history?

AI: My replica of "Rosebud" was the only thing in the show. It's hanging from the ceiling in front of a cyclorama that we built into the gallery. It's probably the most famous movie prop, aside from maybe the Maltese Falcon. In my work, there is a lot of recreating or renting movie props. I think of it kind of like building my own props for my movie. A prop house is a world that is interesting to me as an artist because it is part of this Hollywood system that I am always exploring in my work, especially thinking about the relationship of props to sculpture and the ready-made. I'm interested in all the symbolism that comes along with "Rosebud" and how it is surrounded in a kind of network of ideas—everything from Joseph Beuys' "Sled" to that kind of longing for childhood, which in some ways represents the American dream as embodied by this work of fiction. For me, that's what makes it a really interesting object.

L'O: Steven Spielberg bought the original "Rosebud" at a Sotheby's auction in 1982. He recently donated it to the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures in LA.

AI: I had never seen it, until the museum opened a few weeks ago. But I had already finished my piece and sent it to Paris. Still, it was exciting to see it in person and to see how close I got to the real object. I think I'm pretty close, but not perfect. But, you know, close enough.