

## ***Alex Israel's "Summer"***

ALMINE RECH GALLERY, Paris

June 13–July 27, 2015

"Summer," Alex Israel's second solo show with Almine Rech, imports the artist's signature California cool vernacular—sunglasses, surfboards, convertibles—to an eighteenth-century mansion in Paris. Describing the physical, cultural, and industrial landscape of his hometown, the LA native's recent paintings and sculptures are all about plastic, airbrushing, and plenty of sunshine.

In the gallery's largest room, three eight-foot-tall sunglass lenses from Israel's "Lens" series (2013–2015) lean nonchalantly against the walls. Translucent yellow, orange, and purple, these oversized plastic teardrops are unmistakably representational, but recall minimalist works by the Light and Space artists who pioneered the appropriation of industrial plastics for large-scale sculptures in LA in the 1960s. Evoking DeWain Valentine's candy-colored polyester resin discs (a group of these "Circles" made in 1971 was shown in Paris for the first time at Almine Rech in 2014), Israel's shiny convex surfaces revive the "fetish finish" aesthetic associated with Valentine and his contemporaries including Larry Bell and John McCracken. Elegantly bowed with beveled edges, the lenses glisten from the front and cast tinted halos onto the white walls behind them. Their sunset spectrum conjures the particularly Southern Californian combination of sun, sea, and smog that inspired the Light and Space artists half a century ago.

While paying homage to a previous generation of Angeleno artists, Israel's works and practice are undeniably of and about the here and now. Whereas his predecessors mined California's then-burgeoning automobile and aerospace industries for synthetic materials, Israel found higher-quality materials and better production values overseas. Another sign of the times is the overlap between Israel's artistic practice and commercial enterprise. Since founding Freeway Eyewear in 2010, Israel has designed and sold trendy sunglasses in boutiques and online. Considered in this context, the "Lens" sculptures—made from the same UV-coated plastic as Freeway frames—are also billboards. Riding the zeitgeist for artist/luxury brand collaborations (Takashi Murakami for Louis Vuitton, Sterling Ruby for Christian Dior, Damien Hirst for Alexander McQueen, and the list goes on...), Freeway sunglasses are on sale at the gallery (95 euros a pair). What makes Israel's project more interesting than, say, the Vuitton pop-up boutique inside Murakami's 2008 retrospective (Brooklyn and LA), is that the brand is his own.

Two large-scale self-portraits painted on fiberglass supports underscore Israel's unabashed artist-as-brand identification. Originally conceived for the title sequence of "As It Lays" (2012)—a YouTube series in which the artist interviews past-their-prime Hollywood personalities ranging from Molly Ringwald and Melanie Griffith to Kato Kaelin and Vidal Sassoon—Israel's stylized silhouette has since become the subject of a series of paintings. *Self-Portrait (Seagull)* and *Self-Portrait (U.S. Open of Surfing)* (both 2014) each frame an LA beach scene inside the artist's distinctive sunglasses-wearing, spiky-haired profile. *Seagull* shows a lone bird—positioned approximately where Israel's ear should be—gliding through a brilliant blue sky. On the opposite wall, *U.S. Open of Surfing* depicts the annual surf competition at Huntington Beach. Suggesting an updated version of Seurat's *Un dimanche après-midi à l'Île de la Grande Jatte* (1884), Israel's vision of waterside leisure shows fan-packed bleachers overlooking the beach and crashing waves beyond. Having deleted corporate logos from the flags and banners depicted, Israel rebrands the sporting event by superimposing his own physical features onto the landscape. Airbrushed in white, his hairline is almost mistakable for a cloud. His bright yellow ear hovers like a misshapen sun just above the horizon line. Based on Israel's own photographs, these paintings were made by Warner Bros. set painter Andrew Pike (a collaboration that dates back to 2010, when Israel commissioned several backdrops for the "As It Lays" set). Colorful, crisp, and flat, the paintings' combination of airbrush and brushwork brings to mind yet another LA artist, Ed Ruscha, whose Hollywood portraits range from the famous hilltop sign to the Twentieth Century Fox logo.

Also painted on the Warner Bros. lot, *Sky Backdrop Painting* (2014) blends the orange, purple, and yellow hues of Israel's "Lens" sculptures into a fiery sunset. As its title suggests, this 9 x 16 foot painting serves as cinematic backdrop for *Desperado* (2015), a small sculpture displayed on a white pedestal. The painted bronze miniature, a turquoise convertible parked next to a cactus, is based on a movie prop Israel found in Rome. After using the prop in an exhibition of "Property" (2010-ongoing), a series in which he presents rented objects as temporary readymades, Israel produced an edition—each of which is painted differently. The car is a 1950s Corvette, but the blue in this version matches the Ford Thunderbird model of the same era. With no driver or steering wheel in the car, this ghostly vignette foreshadows "The End" on various levels. Illustrating a cliché Hollywood ending—riding off into the desert sunset—the work specifically recalls the freeze frame finale of Ridley Scott's 1991 film *Thelma and Louise* in which the fugitives' car (a blue 1966 Thunderbird convertible) hurtles into the Grand Canyon. Evoking cinematic endings generic and specific, this tableau also bids farewell to a dying Hollywood art. As hand-painted movie backdrops become obsolete, replaced by high-resolution digital photographs and computer-generated imagery, Israel reincarnates this outmoded trade as part of his fine art practice.



**1** View of Alex Israel's "Summer", Almine Rech Gallery, Paris, 2015.

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**2** Alex Israel, *Self-Portrait (Seagull)*, 2014.



**3** (Left) Alex Israel, *Lens (Purple)*, 2015. (Right) Alex Israel, *Lens (Yellow)*, 2015.

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**4** Alex Israel, *Lens (Yellow)*, 2015.



5 Alex Israel, *Lens (Purple)*, 2015.

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6 Alex Israel, *Lens (Orange)*, 2015.



7 (Front) Alex Israel, *Desperado*, 2015. (Back) Alex Israel, *Sky Backdrop Painting*, 2014.

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8 (Left) Alex Israel, *Desperado*, 2015. (Back) Alex Israel, *Sky Backdrop Painting*, 2014.



**9** Alex Israel, *Self-Portrait (U.S. Open of Surfing)*, 2014.



**10** View of Alex Israel's "Summer", Almine Rech Gallery, Paris, 2015.

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- 1 View of Alex Israel's "Summer", Almine Rech Gallery, Paris, 2015. All images courtesy the artist and Almine Rech Gallery, Paris. All photos by Zarko Vijatovic.
  - 2 Alex Israel, *Self-Portrait (Seagull)*, 2014. Acrylic and bondo on fiberglass, 243.8 x 213.4 x 10.2 cm.
  - 3 View of Alex Israel's "Summer," Almine Rech, Paris, 2015. (Left) Alex Israel, *Lens (Purple)*, 2015. UV protective lens, 213.4 x 243.8 x 35.9 cm. (Right) Alex Israel, *Lens (Yellow)*, 2015. UV protective lens, 213.4 x 243.8 x 35.9 cm.
  - 4 Alex Israel, *Lens (Yellow)*, 2015. UV Protective Lens. 213.4 x 243.8 x 35.9 cm.
  - 5 Alex Israel, *Lens (Purple)*, 2015. UV Protective Lens. 213.4 x 243.8 x 35.9 cm.
  - 6 Alex Israel, *Lens (Orange)*, 2015. UV Protective Lens. 213.4 x 243.8 x 35.9 cm.
  - 7 View of Alex Israel's "Summer", Almine Rech Gallery, Paris, 2015. (Front) Alex Israel, *Desperado*, 2015 Acrylic on bronze, 35,6 x 24,1 x 25,4 cm. (back) Alex Israel, *Sky Backdrop Painting*, acrylic on canvas, 274,3 x 487,7 cm, 2014.
  - 8 View of Alex Israel's "Summer", Almine Rech Gallery, Paris, 2015. (Left) Alex Israel, *Desperado*, 2015 Acrylic on bronze, 35,6 x 24,1 x 25,4 cm. (back) Alex Israel, *Sky Backdrop Painting*, acrylic on canvas, 274,3 x 487,7 cm, 2014.
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