

Artist Alex Israel Gives the TV Talk Show a New Spin

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UPDATED: His deadpan “As It LAYS” web series — featuring Rachel Zoe, Darren Star and the late Vidal Sassoon — will be screened by MOCA on May 19 and accompanied by a live on-stage interview with a yet-to-be-announced celebrity.

Where **Zach Galifianakis** leveraged the traditional TV talk show for cringe comedy laughs in his cult-hit web series “**Between Two Ferns**,” **Alex Israel** has created his own production, “**As It LAYS**,” to explore the format through a decidedly fine-art lens. The Yale grad, who received his

MFA from USC in 2010, has interviewed 30 quintessentially Southern Californian characters for the project, including **Jon Peters**, **Darren Star**, **Bret Easton Ellis**, **Whitney Port** and **Vidal Sassoon**, who died May 9.

“I wanted to do video portraits that weren’t going to be typical interviews, about their careers or biography — they’re more about personalities, likenesses,” says Israel. His other art efforts, which also riff on popular and commercial culture, include an eyewear line called **Freeway** that features a limited edition style designed by noted conceptualist **John Baldessari**, as well as “**Rough Winds**,” a kind of video landscape mash-up interpretation of the sunny wastrel idylls of *The Hills* and *Beverly Hills, 90210*, which was supported by **Michael Ovitz** and his collection curator, **Nu Nguyen**.

Israel’s idiosyncratic approach in “As It LAys” — named after the Joan Didion novel — is part Proust Questionnaire, part seeming goof. His questions are randomly selected from note cards, delivered entirely deadpan and never pursued with a related follow-up query. They initially come across as blithely banal — “Are you right- or left-handed” (to **Stephen Dorff**), “Do you Skype?” (**Rosanna Arquette**), “Where do you buy your clothes?” (**Larry Flynt**) — and often prompt answers priceless in their earnest vapidness. (“If you were to create the perfect salad, what would be the key ingredients?” he asks of **Rachel Zoe**, who readily enumerates in incantatory reply, “arugula, radicchio, endive, carrots, cucumbers, celery, chickpeas, lentils, feta cheese, tomato, beets, asparagus.”) But they also frequently elicit from their respondents answers that are surprisingly revealing, whether of private anecdotes or inner truths (see: **Cheryl Tiegs** on being overcome by the nature of time during a visit to the Swiss Alps), in ways that typical talk show interviews — invariably focused on the current project being promoted — almost never are. “These people have sat in front of everyone and he’s gotten something special out of them,” says Stereo D head **William Sherak**, a friend of Israel’s who has supported the project. Adds **China Chow**, a L.A. art world connector whose father, the restaurateur **Michael Chow**, appears in the series: “Alex has figured out a way to make classical portraits in a contemporary way.”

“As It LAys” first appeared in March, at **Reena Spaulings**, a gallery in New York, and then was released online an interview at a time over the span of a few months. The project will culminate in another screening, presented by MOCA director **Jeffrey Deitch**, at **Henson Studios on May 19**, followed by a performance with a still-secret celebrity interviewee. Israel will reconstruct the air-brushed set he had fabricated on the back lot of Warner Bros. for the program, a series of sunrise-hued panels somehow calling to mind both a 1980s-era TV morning show backdrop and the work of **Ed Ruscha**.

“I thought it was very important to present it here because it’s all about the Los Angeles experience and it’s a really superb work,” says Deitch. “There’s this uncanny mixture of reality