

Modern Painters: 'Alex Israel', by Daniel Horn, February Issue, 2013



PARIS

Alex Israel

Almine Rech Gallery // October 19–November 13, 2012

ISRAEL HAS TAKEN his enterprise to Paris in “Thirty,” showcasing his signature-style movie props (*Property*, 2010–ongoing), placed here within a white cube turned floor-to-ceiling Los Angeles–sunset airbrush job. For the latter, the artist flew in a scenic artist from Warner Brothers, which was money well spent: Previous iterations saw Israel positioning the rented items in front of awkward foam-core panels, whereas this immersive, illusionistic installation makes for a persuasive Surrealist environment.

The homage to or exploitation of that movement is helped by a selection of props exuding a vague Frenchness, most expressly a freestanding wooden puppet theater stage courtesy of Guignol, a marionette character from the early 19th century well known in France. The gallery wall–cum-backdrop doubling as minimized stage scenery achieves the effect of a Magritte in the round. Other props in the exhibition are more arbitrary: a wooden crate filled with severed mannequin hands invoking fin de siècle morbid urbanity and a bronze of an eagle clenching a clock, maybe an art historical nod to Marcel Broodthaers’s 1968 *Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*, whose institutional, short-term employment of the prop as artwork is key, after all, to *Property*.

The dusky backdrop, in its spray-paint Turner peach and purple hues, is similar to the one used in Israel’s ongoing talk show, *As It Lays*, in which he devises clipped interviews of purposely comatose entertainment value

Alex Israel
Installation
view of “Thirty.”

featuring a sundry cast, picking up Hollywood has-beens (Molly Ringwald) as well as its recently exhumed (Stephen Dorff), that are fed back into lucrative channels—on this occasion, Paris-based Purple TV. The exhibition’s press release links the backdrop to the TV-show backdrop, claiming it to be the same (which it isn’t). The videos are viewable on Purple TV, coinciding with their diary section covering Israel’s opening, thus creating a cross-promotional platform.

This vampiric milking of the last lifeblood of both shelved pop culture and conceptualism suffuses Israel’s work, including his 2010 web-based miniseries, *Rough Winds*. Choosing reductionism over parody, the revamped, nonetheless perpetual tropes à la *90210* are flattened into skeletal vignettes that, aided by their slipshod production, could be plausible promos for American Apparel.

Also essentially American is a tasty group show of gallery artists that Israel curated in the upstairs space, redolent of that dark, licentious Americana that was all the rage during the Bush years, adding curator to his expanding résumé of entrepreneurial parts performed, as befits a contemporary artist warranting that title. —Daniel Horn