

## Focus: Alex Israel

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Celebrity culture, film studio design and the Hollywood dream

'Rough Winds' 2010, film still

*Alex Israel lives and works in Los Angeles, USA. In 2011, he had a solo show at Peres Projects, Berlin, Germany, and his work was recently included in the group shows 'Greater LA' at 483 Broadway and 'Blind Cut' at the Marlborough Chelsea Gallery, in New York, USA. This year, he has forthcoming solo exhibitions at LAXART, Los Angeles; Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York; and Almine Rech Gallery, Paris, France.*

The last question that Alex Israel asks each of his celebrity subjects in his video interview series 'As It Lays' (2012) is the same: 'What do you want the world to know about [subject's name]?' A surprising number have exactly the same response: 'Nothing.' Surprising, because these are people whose very livelihood relies on public visibility, and who are voluntarily submitting to the Los Angeles-based artist's deadpan interrogation. Their answer points to the open secret of the celebrity system: that the illusion of self-exposure can be the best defence for intensely private personalities.

Israel has completed more than 20 interviews, in each of which he asks 20 questions, ranging from the philosophical ('Do you believe in a higher power?', 'Is all fair in love and war?') to the banal ('Are you comfortable on a horse?'). 'As It Lays', titled after Joan Didion's iconic LA novel *Play It as It Lays* (1970), is, like much of the native Angeleno's work, a portrait of the city in which it was made. This is not simply to do with its showbiz subjects, nor with Israel's (and our own) curiosity about the minutiae of their lives. Many of these celebrities (Angelyne, Jon Peters or Paul Anka, for instance) are not nearly as famous as they once were. Many are willing to be interviewed for this fact alone. 'As It Lays' ultimately touches on the cultural amnesia that a city like LA both relies upon and battles against.

Israel built a set for these interviews, a simple affair consisting of four arched panels, each stuccoed and spraypainted with shades of sunset pink, orange, red and violet, and a dais covered in thick shag-pile carpet. The artist's studio (Israel enjoys double meanings) evokes television chat shows of the 1970s and '80s.

Underscoring the pathos of fame's fickleness, that retro tone extends through each video's opening credits, theme music and logo, and indeed through other works by the artist such as his web series 'Rough Winds' (2010).

The drama of 'Rough Winds' concerns the listless, disaffected lives of privileged young Angelenos. Its characters and plots are all archetypes: the alcoholic mother, the daughter who overdoses, the surfer boyfriend, the snooping private detective. (Israel is fascinated by the Hollywood truism that there are no new stories. He has even suggested that many of the individuals in 'As It Lays' are simply living out self-assigned archetypal roles.) There is no dialogue, only a bouncy instrumental soundtrack that sounds like off-the-shelf 1980s synth-pop. We don't need to hear what the characters are saying to pick up the gist of the well-worn narratives.

'Rough Winds' is in fact a Trojan Horse, a drama that is actually an advertisement (as are most stories in Hollywood). The sunglasses that the actors wear are produced by Freeway Eyewear, Israel's own commercial sideline. They are real sunglasses that sell for real money, and Israel insists they are not art. He does, however, acknowledge the motif of the frame and the lens which arcs across his practice.

Sunglasses are emblems of everything that Israel is fascinated by: a transformative item that helps one stand out from the crowd but also makes one's face a little more like an archetype; a protection for the 'windows to the soul'; an image to hide behind and a means of removing oneself from all-too-bright reality.



'Property', 2011, installation view Peres Projects, Berlin

The frame and the lens, of course, are richly implicated in the language of film and photography (read here: cinema and its promotion). In 'Property' (2010–ongoing), Israel rents objects from prop houses, then individually titles them and displays them on plinths. He describes the selection process as akin to casting. Possible readings or associations ricochet from one prop to the next; a penny farthing, titled *Cycle* (2011), and a hamster wheel, titled *Eternity* (2011), for example, both nod to Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* (1913). For a recent iteration at Peres Projects, Berlin, Israel augmented the props with stuccoed panels similar to those from 'As It Lays', this time inspired by the shapes of doors and windows in Californian Spanish revival architecture. Sprayed mists of paint conjure the lurid tones of directional studio lighting. Though they hang on the wall like paintings, Israel refers to them as 'flats', demoting their status to backgrounds which frame the action in the foreground.

Israel claims to believe in the 'stardust' of Hollywood, in the magic that transforms an object just through its appearance on film, pictured in association with a star whose image is just as fictitious as the movie itself. Meaning and value in 'Property' becomes, in the words of Philip Larkin, a 'frail travelling coincidence' (*The Whitsun Weddings*, 1964). The props will be returned and the 'flats' will once again look onto an empty stage, their protagonists absent. Perhaps, Israel suggests, it is Hollywood's achievement to reduce people to the status of objects. ('Actors should be treated like cattle,' said Alfred Hitchcock.) But where is Israel himself in all this? In sunglasses, hiding at the centre of the frame.

**Jonathan Griffin**