

Artsy: 'Alex Israel on L.A. Horizons and Future Horizons', by Alexxa Gotthardt, June 26th, 2015

Alex Israel on L.A. Horizons and Future Horizons



Alex Israel, View of the exhibition "SUMMER," Almine Rech Gallery, Paris. © Alex Israel. Photo: Zarko Vijatovic. Courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech Gallery.

Alex Israel's Hollywood-laced paintings, sculptures, and videos have given us extreme pleasure, often followed by aftertastes of gluttony or guilt. This, of course, is intentional, and it is at the core of the Los Angeles-based artist's Pop-Conceptual practice. Whether making sherbet-hued paintings of L.A. skies, interviewing celebrities with straight-faced questions like, "are Blu-ray DVDs really that different from regular ones?" or enlarging neon sunglass lenses to mimic Minimalist sculptures, Israel has become an expert in turning the increasingly indecipherable overlap between reality and fantasy into art. As summer sets in, and as Israel returns to L.A. after opening his second solo show at Almine Rech in Paris, we speak with the artist about his new work, his Sunset Boulevard commute, and his next big project—his first feature-length film.



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Artsy: Are you still working primarily out of the Warner Brothers scenic art department? How is the commute?

Alex Israel: I'm working with different fabricators on different projects, but yes, primarily, my works are produced on the Warner Bros. Studio backlot with the assistance of the Scenic Art department. The commute is great! I usually take Sunset Boulevard to Laurel Canyon, to the 101 Freeway to the 134. I'm one of those people who loves driving in L.A. I love listening to the radio and looking out the window. It's often the most meditative part of my day.



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Artsy: What is it like spending so much time within the walls of film studios? In your work, you've drawn from scenic backdrops, props, golden age films—how do you choose which elements to focus on?

AI: I really enjoy being at a film studio. Every movie or television show is its own self-contained world, and the creation of that world is oftentimes a feat of great creative energy. I find that being around that level of creativity is contagious. For me, choosing what elements to focus on or appropriate in my work is a lot like writing a story, or working to create a world of my own.

Artsy: Have you ever thought about making a feature-length film?

AI: Yes, I am working on a feature-length film project: *SPF-18*. It's a teen surf movie with a positive message for young people, and I just wrapped principal photography in Malibu in May. I was gone for most of June, but now I'm back in L.A. and I'm about to begin the editing and post-production process.



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Artsy: Can you tell us about your logo, or could it be called an alter ego? How did your now-signature profile motif come to be?

AI: I like that you've called it an alter ego. When I was making *As It Lays* I was thinking a lot about [Alfred] Hitchcock, and his comments equating actors to cattle. He spoke to a cold reality that lies at the core of the Hollywood system. I wanted to pay homage to his contributions and his insight in my work. I decided to have my filmic self morph into a graphic at the end of the opening credits, as his does in *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*.

Artsy: How are the self-portraits in this show different from past self-portraits?

AI: Originally my self-portraits were varied only by the color combinations of the various shapes that make up its design. Now they have grown larger, to frame representational imagery of the L.A. that inspires me, sometimes in concert with the original graphic or its transparent remnants. Most of the imagery that's entered this body of work has been with me my whole life; it's also informing *SPF-18*.



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Artsy: How do you settle on the colors you use?

AI: The colors I use are resourced directly from the L.A. landscape. Our dramatic, winter sunsets inspired the new *Sky Backdrop* (2015) palette. Their purple, orange, and yellow tones also inspired my color selection for the new lenses.

Artsy: How many years have you lived in L.A.? When you left to study at Yale, for instance, how did it inform your work? Have any recent travels been especially influential?

AI: I've lived in L.A. always, minus three years at Yale and the six-month try I gave New York City. I'm now 32 and a half, which means I've lived here for a total of 29 years. I'll never forget those long, gray, bitterly cold winters in New Haven. The work I made there, as an undergraduate, was all about my longing for the magic of L.A. I was homesick.

Art history is so important to me and I'm fortunate that my recent travels have taken me to cities where I'm able to see some of art history's greatest treasures. I was just in Moscow, where I had the chance to visit the Pushkin museum and to spend time with some of the most incredible paintings I've ever seen.



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Artsy: Which works of art, music, or film do you return to often?

AI: *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* by Jeff Koons, *Black Pussy* by Jason Rhoades, and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* by John Hughes.

Artsy: Where do you prefer to see your work—in museums and galleries, on the internet, or dotted around everyday life

AI: All of the above.

Artsy: What's happening next for you? Any upcoming projects you're especially excited about?

AI: I've got a movie to edit! And I have a whole new body of work that's developing out of the movie. I'm hoping to release the trailer and to show the first of these new works in the fall.

—Alexxa Gotthardt