ALMINE RECH

Alex Israel
LA Californie

Oct 15 — Nov 10, 2023 | Paris, Matignon

"LA Californie" Alex Israel's fifth solo exhibition at Almine Rech, Paris, adds a fresh perspective to worldwide celebrations, conversations and exhibitions marking the 50th anniversary of Pablo Picasso's death. In Picasso, Israel has found an ideal subject for his on-going explorations into intersections of fine art and Pop culture. Israel has previously evoked Picasso's "light drawings" (made famous by *Life* magazine in 1949) in an augmented-reality self-portrait produced with Snapchat that allows viewers to watch as he traces his own iconic profile around himself with a glowing fingertip.[1] In this exhibition, Israel turns his attention to another aspect of Picasso's legacy: *La Californie.*

At the height of his career, between 1955–1961, Picasso lived and worked at *La Californie*, a Belle Epoque villa on the French Riviera that he famously transformed into a salon-cum-*gesamtkunstwerk* filled with his own ceramics, paintings, prints and sculptures. Picasso, in turn, painted this elaborate mise-en-scene as a new form of self-portraiture. Referencing these intimate works, Israel offers a glimpse of his own L.A. studio—paint cans, easels, in-progress artworks and all—in *Self-Portrait (Warner Bros.),* 2023. In a series of smaller paintings, Israel replaces the traditional subjects of Picasso's still-life compositions (*Le Journal*, fruit and liquor bottles) with California staples including *The Los Angeles Times*, Malibu rum, sheet music of Stevie Nicks's "Dreams," and an avocado.

Another work on view references Picasso's glamorous social life at *La Californie*. If the villa's name alone evokes an aura of Hollywood glamour, *La Californie*'s location—perched above the seaside city of Cannes—brought Picasso actual proximity to the movie stars who flocked to Cannes each year for the eponymous film festival. Illustrating Picasso's connection to celebrity culture, Israel's *Self Portrait* (After André Villers' *'Portrait of Picasso with Gary Cooper's hat and gun'*, 1959 © *Adagp, Paris, 2023*), depicts Picasso wearing classic French stripes and sporting Gary Cooper's cowboy hat and gun. The painting, which is based on photos taken at *La Californie* in 1959 by André Villiers, encapsulates Picasso's own icon status and links him directly to Hollywood royalty. Israel, whose studio is located on the Warner Bros. backlot in Los Angeles and has long incorporated movie props into his practice, uses this image of Picasso to historicize the model of an artist who performs as a celebrity. Meanwhile, life-size painted aluminum cut-outs featuring the likenesses of Israel, Almine Rech and Bernard Ruiz-Picasso suggest a connection between pop culture and the art market. These freestanding sculptures were inspired by cardboard and paper decoupages Picasso made in the 1950s–1960s and also evoke cheaply-made celebrity standees found in front of a movie theater or memorabilia store. Using the visual language of advertising to depict the gallery owners (who also happen to be Picasso's heirs) and himself (notably wearing a souvenir Picasso T-shirt), Israel underscores the commercial connection between art and celebrity.

With this exhibition, Israel incites a dialogue between past and present as well as fantasy and reality by presenting his own work in the company of historic artworks and artifacts borrowed from the collection of the Fundación Almine y Bernard Ruiz-Picasso as well as a selection of art-related movie props sourced from Parisian prop-houses. Among the artifacts (real and faux) are several palettes. Picasso's actual palettes are here presented in the company of prop palettes as well as Israel's own *Self-Portrait (Palette), 2023.* Capturing the very essence of *La Californie*, Israel uses a bit of Hollywood magic to blur distinctions between artifact, artifice and artwork.

— Mara Hoberman, curator and writer

[1] *Self-Portrait (The Painter)*, 2019