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Free Way

Los Angeles artist Alex Israel traverses the cultures, desires, and obsessions of his home city through his work.

INTERVIEW BY SHARON JOHNSTON AND MARK LEE

PORTRAIT BY PETER BOHLER

(OPPOSITE) Alex Israel in Los Angeles.
(FOLLOWING SPREAD, LEFT TO
RIGHT) Israel's "Casting" (2015).
Israel's "Self Portrait (Psychic Neon)"
(2014–2015).

At 33, Alex Israel has quickly become a fixture in the art scene of Los Angeles, where he was born and raised, but also globally. As the city's cultural profile has risen, so has Israel's. The two have largely if unintentionally grown in tandem. His works have been added to the permanent collections of institutions including the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in the Netherlands, the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, and the Centre Pompidou in Paris, as well as the private collections of industrialist Peter Brant, LVMH executive Delphine Arnault, and Ivanka Trump. What makes Israel's paintings, sculptures, and videos stand out is that they capture Hollywood and celebrity culture in a playful, refreshingly subtle way. Through his art fantasy and reality merge into a timeless netherworld, a place that's both fresh in sensibility yet rooted in history. His work, in other words, is very *L.A.*

Unlike many artists, who

describe what they do as a "practice," Israel prefers the term "brand." This approach manifests itself most obviously in his role as the founder and president of the sunglasses company Freeway Eyewear, which he launched in 2010 shortly before receiving an MFA from the University of Southern California (he graduated with a B.A. from Yale in 2003). He'll be the first to tell you, though, that the sunglasses are not artworks. His art is a separate thing entirely. The name of his company, however, reflects an unavoidable aspect of L.A. life that's echoed in his art: driving on the freeway. The name also references the *free way* so many Angelinos, Israel included, go about their daily lives. The culture of the city isn't necessarily laissez-faire, but it's certainly not uptight or hard charging, either. It is most definitely *not* New York. Somehow, there's efficiency within L.A.'s relaxed pace. Through vivid

use of color and eccentric references, Israel explores many of the city's inner workings in his art, which can be viewed in the exhibition "Sightings" at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas (through Jan. 31) and at a site-specific intervention at the Huntington Art Gallery in San Marino, California, opening on Dec. 12 and on view through July 11. (His work also showed earlier this year at the Almine Rech Gallery in Paris.)

Another L.A. entity on the rise, the architects Sharon Johnston and Mark Lee of the firm Johnston Marklee, recently spoke with Israel for this issue. The firm—which designed the Maison Martin Margiela store in Beverley Hills and is at work on the Menil Drawing Institute in Houston—is collaborating with Israel on the design of his new L.A. studio. Here, the three discuss the specialness of L.A., and how it continues to influence their various projects. >



Mark Lee: Alex, we've known each other for a long time, but this is the first time we've gotten to sit together properly and talk about you and your work. Why don't we start talking about Los Angeles? The city is somehow intrinsic in your work. You were born and raised here.

Alex Israel: Yeah, I was born and raised here. What about you?

Sharon Johnston: I was born here. I grew up in Malibu. I think my L.A. life as a child was probably the inverse of the typical L.A. experience: the beach, no Hollywood.

Lee: I was actually born and raised in Hong Kong, but moved here in 1983 and stayed. Technically, Sharon and I have been in L.A. for just as long, although I came with a lot of baggage in my head already. *[Laughs]*

Israel: I've been here one year longer than you, Mark. *[Laughs]* I was born in 1982 at the UCLA medical center in Westwood, and I grew up in Westwood.

Lee: You've been in L.A. pretty much your entire life, except for your time at Yale, right? Afterward, you came back and worked with the artist Jason Rhoades,

Israel: I went to Yale, came back, and was working at MOCA as an intern. I was

part-time at MOCA and then also part-time at Blum & Poe [gallery] for about a year. Then I moved to New York to work at Sotheby's in the contemporary art department. I lasted there for about three months. It wasn't for me. *[Laughs]* Then I moved back to L.A. So I lived in New York for about six months—I moved there for that job, and then I moved back. I've been in L.A. ever since.

Lee: After you moved back, you studied at the University of Southern California, correct?

Israel: Yeah, I started working for Jason after I moved back. I worked with Jason on the "Black Pussy" project in L.A. Then I worked for Hauser & Wirth, one of the two galleries that represents Jason's estate, and while I was working there, I mustered the courage to apply to graduate school and ended up going to USC.

Lee: Did being away from Los Angeles—being at Yale, being in New York—give you a different perspective of Los Angeles that you didn't see when you were growing up here?

Israel: Absolutely. Moving away gave me literal distance from the city and that really helped me to see it. When I was away at Yale, I got really homesick. All of the work I was making as an undergraduate art major

was about missing Los Angeles, wanting to be home. Removing myself from the city, I learned not to take it for granted—and I began to really appreciate its magic.

Johnston: I'm curious about your experience at Yale. Were there seminal people at Yale or USC who were important in helping you crystallize things? You talk a lot about how your vision of L.A. was formed when you were a young person.

Israel: I had amazing professors at Yale. One of the most inspiring, formative classes I took was a class on modern architecture that Vincent Scully taught. It was really interesting for me because we went through the history of modern architecture, and at the very end of the semester we arrived in Los Angeles. That was how it ended. I thought, "Well, wow, that's an amazing thing. Here we are now, at the end of this history, and we've ended up in L.A." So L.A. became the starting point. It was given the torch, and now was its time to run. Seeing this firsthand in this class, understanding it, that was very inspiring.

Lee: There's a John Baldessari quote in which he said he loves L.A. because no one really cares about Warhol in L.A. I think this points to L.A. being its own element, that you have a certain type of freedom here. Being situated in L.A., do you feel that? You're also very connected to different

realms, not only the art world but also the social world.

Israel: I don't know if I agree with the idea that people in L.A. don't care about Andy Warhol, considering it's here where he had his first show [at the Ferus Gallery in 1962], but I do agree with the idea that you can find freedom in Los Angeles. I think that has to do with a lot of factors: the landscape, the environment, being able to isolate yourself amidst the sprawl, or while driving alone in a car. There's also the fact that L.A. is younger than many other major American cities. There's less an anxiety of influence here. There are fewer burdensome precedents to overcome on the path to creativity. Do you agree?

Johnston: I feel really free here. I think part of it is because we have a stronger connection to our architectural colleagues in Europe than in the United States, and certainly in L.A. We work on projects in L.A., we teach in the East Coast. For us, the idea of L.A. being isolated is really liberating. We're very focused on our work, and when we travel to the East Coast or to Europe, that's where we have our most fruitful discourse with our colleagues. In a way, there's a kind of efficiency in that, too, just about focusing on work, collaboration, and outward production when we're not here.

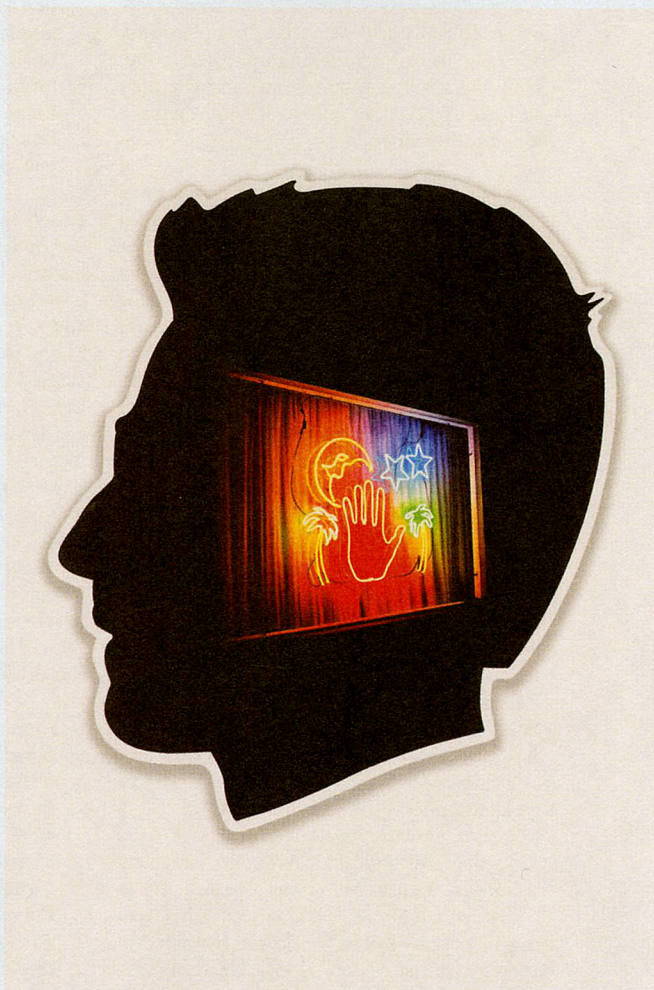
Lee: L.A. has a healthy separation. On the one hand, it's a metropolis. The city is there. But if you want to be alone, if you want to be isolated, the city allows you to be. It's not like people are piling on top of one another. Having that choice makes us want to think of L.A. as home and some place that we are part of the city and the scene.

I actually was just thinking about the book *Less Than Zero* by Bret Easton Ellis. That was one of the first books I read independently. I remember the first line of the book: "People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles." There's something about that freedom and isolation, but at the same time everyone is going in the same direction. That very much encapsulates some spirit of Los Angeles. I also realize that your eyeglasses are called Freeway Eyewear, so there's always this type of Los Angeles-ness underlying your work. I think the freeway is the subject matter of your work as much as Hollywood is the subject

matter for Ed Ruscha.

Israel: *Less Than Zero* is one of my favorite books. It's also one that had a direct impact on my creative thinking. I read it as a college freshman on the airplane home from Yale for Thanksgiving break.

Johnston: I remember talking with you, Alex, a few years ago—you were not that long out of USC—and we were discussing how it was important to you to *not* have a gallery in L.A. Why did you feel that way?



Israel: At the onset of my commitment to making art professionally, it was really important to me to have a certain amount of freedom in the city where I lived. I preferred to not be aligned with a gallery here, because that came with a whole string of obligations and time commitments and associations. I was just trying to develop my work on my own, to have time and space to incubate.

Lee: That idea of separating the art production from the art consumption—that it happens in two different spaces—allows you to have a type of freedom. Since we're talking about art production, and because we're

starting to design your studio with you on Pico Boulevard, we should make use of this conversation to know more about the space you're envisioning. When you think about the history of great art spaces—Warhol's factory, Brancusi's sculpture studio, or Francis Bacon's painting studio—they have very specific characteristics. I'm curious if you've put any thought to how your studio will be, given you work with Warner Brothers and that you have very different locations where your work is made.

Israel: I make my work at a variety of different locations, and in a variety of cities. I've been working mainly with the scenic art department at Warner Brothers in Burbank to produce my paintings. I work with a plastic factory in Italy and an aquarium company in Las Vegas to make my lenses. And I've worked with other various fabricators, from Orrefors in Sweden to the Walla Walla Foundry in Washington. And I've kind of always worked from home.

When I was just out of school, I had a studio in the Pacific Design Center in West Hollywood—it was part of a program they had initiated to bring artists into the center's vacant spaces. While there, I was able to set up a television set to shoot my talk show "As It Lays," and since then I've always planned to do a second season. I've been planning to do this for a while, and I finally felt, "Okay, well, I really need to get the space to do this." I also like the idea of moving my work out of my home and into a place where I can centralize all of these different projects—not in my kitchen! [Laughs]

So I started looking at spaces. The main criterion for the space was that I wanted it to have enough room for an office, some storage, and additionally enough space to create a set for "As It Lays 2." In my thinking about and looking at buildings, I realized I also wanted some space to hang my work, to look at it, spend time with it, and experiment with ways of installing it.

Johnston: You've also talked about having friends or aligned practices being a part of the space...

Israel: Well, the space I've found on Pico is a little bit bigger than what I need, so I'm going to try to find someone to take space within it, someone who has a creative project that would be complimentary, and potentially even collaborative, with mine. We'll see. >

Israel's "Untitled (Flat)" (2015) at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, with Auguste Rodin's "The Age of Bronze."

Johnston: Part of the myth of how I think about your work is the idea that it's made by a lot of different people—the whole Warner Brothers thing. It's not like I can go to one place and see all of your production. With the kind of diversity of the output you're engaged in, how do you think about people coming into your studio? Do you want all of your practices to be within the space?

Israel: I think it's going to be a somewhat different kind of studio. I'm not going to cease the production of my work elsewhere; I'm really just hoping to have a centralized workplace. Initially it'll be a place for planning, drawing, drafting, mocking up, researching, sampling, playing, thinking, meeting, chatting, and storing. And, of course, it will be a place for shooting video.

Lee: Looking from the outside, there appear to be some autobiographical aspects to your work: the self-portrait or the frame and the lens as a motif. As we've started thinking about designing your space, we've been looking at your work, looking for something architectural. The closest thing we could find are those paintings that resemble the frames or doors of Spanish Revival architecture. I'm curious, did you ever live in a Spanish Colonial house? Was that part of your upbringing?

Israel: No, I lived in a Tudor house growing up, and then we moved into another Tudor house when I started middle school. I've never lived in a Spanish Colonial Revival house, but I've always loved them. My middle school campus was Spanish Colonial Revival. I always had this fantasy that when I got a house it would either be modern or Spanish. Alas, my house is midcentury modern.

Everyone who grows up in L.A. has to make a model of one of the California State Missions. I always loved making things, so as a fourth grader at Warner Avenue Elementary School in Westwood, it was a project I was really excited about. We also went on a field trip to the mission in San Diego [founded in 1769 by Junipero Serra]. I loved learning that this was the architectural vernacular of our region—that's always stuck with me. I guess I've always just been aware of it, and have loved looking at it and enjoying it.

Johnston: Have you ever thought about engaging architecture directly?

Israel: I think there's an aspect of this idea in the "Flats." They're meant to create their own context, as that's the nature of a backdrop—they transport you to another place and can begin to suggest a space within a space. But there are also projects I've done, like my murals, where I really want to engage with specific locations. Right now I'm doing two murals in and about the Huntington [institution in Southern California] for an upcoming show. One of them is titled "In-N-Out,"

after the hamburger joint, but also because I'm reproducing, as a 360-degree scenic wall painting, a number of plants from the Huntington Botanical Garden inside the Huntington Mansion interior. The other mural I'm making there—which is going in the grand staircase—is also site-specific. It's a direct response to the sweeping grandeur of the space and the windows above the stairwell. The Huntington happens to be an incredible inspiring place. Sometimes space is just a vessel in which to create or project fantasy.

Lee: What you talked about—this oscillation between foreground and background—is very interesting. When we've previously talked about this, you've mentioned the importance of people in L.A. like John Baldessari or Ed Ruscha. Are the Light and Space movement people also important to you, or are they on the periphery?

Israel: They're all important to me. My various bodies of work are informed by different historical precedents. Certainly, my sunglasses brand came out of my thinking about light and space—sunlight, specifically. So did the "Lens" sculptures that I made. They reference Light and Space and Finish Fetish artists like Larry Bell, Craig Kaufman, John McCracken, and DeWain Valentine. A lot of the things that inspired these L.A. artists in their pursuits haven't changed: the climate, the light, surf and car culture, the aerospace industry, and for the artists using text, the freeway signs and movie title sequences up on the big screen. All of that stuff still exists and is still so much a part of life here that it's hard not to be inspired by it. The challenge is to find a way to add to the already long-running dialogue.

Johnston: That's something that we have a sensibility about—and manifest very differently in our work as architects—but that we're intuitively drawn to about your work. It's our shared interest in this legacy of artists and art history in Los Angeles. Certainly there's [Frank] Gehry, but I think the very diverse body of works that inspires you is somehow evident. We're drawn to this as part of our practice, too—always wanting to understand the work in terms of its lineage, but also projecting forward in really personal ways. Sometimes artists, or maybe more so architects, want to mask that and not make it evident.

Israel: If I wanted to mask it, I'd have to deny that these forces play a huge part of my thinking, and my experience of everyday life. That's impossible to do because they're everywhere. There are basic things, these forces of inspiration, that we experience just living here. I'm always excited to learn about our region's art history. In fact, it's an interest I became more aware of when I left the city to go to college. I somehow ended up carrying this kind of L.A. pride with me. >



PHOTO. KEVIN TODORA/COURTESY NASHER SCULPTURE CENTER

Lee: There always seems to be this presence of history in your work, but you're never really burdened by it. You're just part of it and continue it.

Johnston: Let's discuss some of the artists you like. We've talked about Baldessari and Ruscha. What about your interest in conceptual art? What artists do you look to?

Israel: It's interesting that you bring up conceptual art. I don't want to say grew up in it, but it framed my first serious professional exposure to the art world. My first summer back from Yale I was an intern for John Baldessari and for Ann Goldstein at MOCA. I worked part-time for both of them. Ann and I co-curated the major historic survey of conceptual art "Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975." I was always aware of this historic period and deeply inspired by the determination of its key artists to really push the boundaries of what could be construed as an artwork. But there are other things about conceptual art I always felt less connected to. Namely, I like objects, and I enjoy making sensual things. I love the work of Jeff Koons and Jason Rhoades. Personally, I've always been influenced by the magic of entertainment culture—so a great deal of my thinking is about how to channel this Hollywood "stardust" into material form.

Another point to bring up is that my eyewear brand, Freeway Eyewear, has been wrongly referred to as a kind of conceptual artwork. My sunglasses aren't art, and that's an important point of distinction. Freeway is not an effort to take an artwork and disperse it through mass production and distribution. It's just a company, and an exercise in branding. It's my work, but not an *artwork*. For me, it's a way of putting objects in the world in a less precious way—these objects, sunglasses, happen to evoke the same concerns as my art: Los Angeles culture, desire, entertainment, framing, and seeing the world through a lens.

Lee: You traverse a lot of traditional boundaries, even in your formative years when you apprenticed for an artist, but also through your work for Sotheby's. You're both in the marketplace and also in the production of things. It seems it's become this practice in which you have your studio-based work, and then you have your sunglasses. These things exist in different realms for you.

Israel: Maybe "practice" isn't the right word to use. Maybe the correct word is "brand." The idea of "branding" provides a pretty natural way for me to think about what I do. I've always wanted my work to speak in the language of our time. Rather than resist the way our culture has evolved, I prefer to use it in order to communicate my ideas. That's where this impulse stems from.

Johnston: I also feel like—and maybe this is just my reading of it—you're not really talking

about "branding" as most people know it. You're talking about your *brand*. To me, it seems like a smart way to talk about the diversity of how you produce, and the modes of production you have. There's self-control. It's just a way of organizing, as opposed to being a media-controlling operation.

Israel: That's probably true. Organizing my "brand" is certainly a way of creating an umbrella over all of these various activities that I participate in. Branding also provides a way of filtering things—are they on or off brand? But then there's branding in the way that most people know it—logos, ads, products, and focus groups—and this is also key to my work. It's not a new concept in the art world. To some extent it's been there for centuries, from tapestries, to prints, to a cookbook, endorsement deals, T-shirts, a theme restaurant, and furniture. Artists like Boucher, Whistler, Dalí, Warhol, Haring, Hirst, and Donald Judd have done it.

Lee: Your output is diverse, too. There's not a particular thing one can expect from you. It could be a talk show, it could be props, it could be paintings, it could be murals. I think that's why conceptual art becomes not so much the binding factor. Maybe it's the brand that becomes the binding factor uniting the work together.

Israel: There are two forces that I credit with shaping my practice into a something more like a brand: 1) Branding provides a structure from which I can make work across many different mediums. Having worked on the other side of the art world, I witnessed certain things that scared me—artists feeling limited by the marketplace, and believing that they only had permission to do one thing over and over again. 2) This relates to what came up earlier, about wanting to speak in the language of our time—the Internet played a huge role in how I think and create. I grew up at a moment in which the Internet became prevalent and widespread. As a high school student, I could use the Internet to access all kinds of information, and to connect with people all over the world very easily and instantly. The Internet gave me the freedom—or the illusion that I had the freedom—to imagine making anything: sunglasses, sunscreen, backdrops, giant plastic lenses, etc. I just had to find the right website and send a good email. This really made my first point possible.

Johnston: You didn't have to fly to Italy to meet the lens guy? [*Laughs*]

Israel: I never felt that I had to face the limitations within four walls of a studio, or the distance I could drive in my car. The whole world opened up through my computer, and it meant that making all kinds of things became a possibility. Other things became possible, too, because of similar technologies. The advancement of consumer-grade cameras made "Rough Winds" and "As

It Lays" possible. Both were shot on Handycams. I was able to use the Internet to distribute these videos to an unlimited online audience, and that's a huge difference from what existed before.

A lot of this rhetoric, this discussion of technology and how it affects art, is something I thought about a lot while in graduate school. I remember my USC professor Charlie White telling me to read an essay by David Robbins called "High Entertainment." Reading it, I was so excited that someone had articulated many of the ideas I was thinking through—I was encouraged to continue pursuing them. With such clear and precise thinking, Robbins gave a name to this potential art-entertainment hybrid that I was hoping to make and distribute via the Internet—and this was incredibly inspiring.

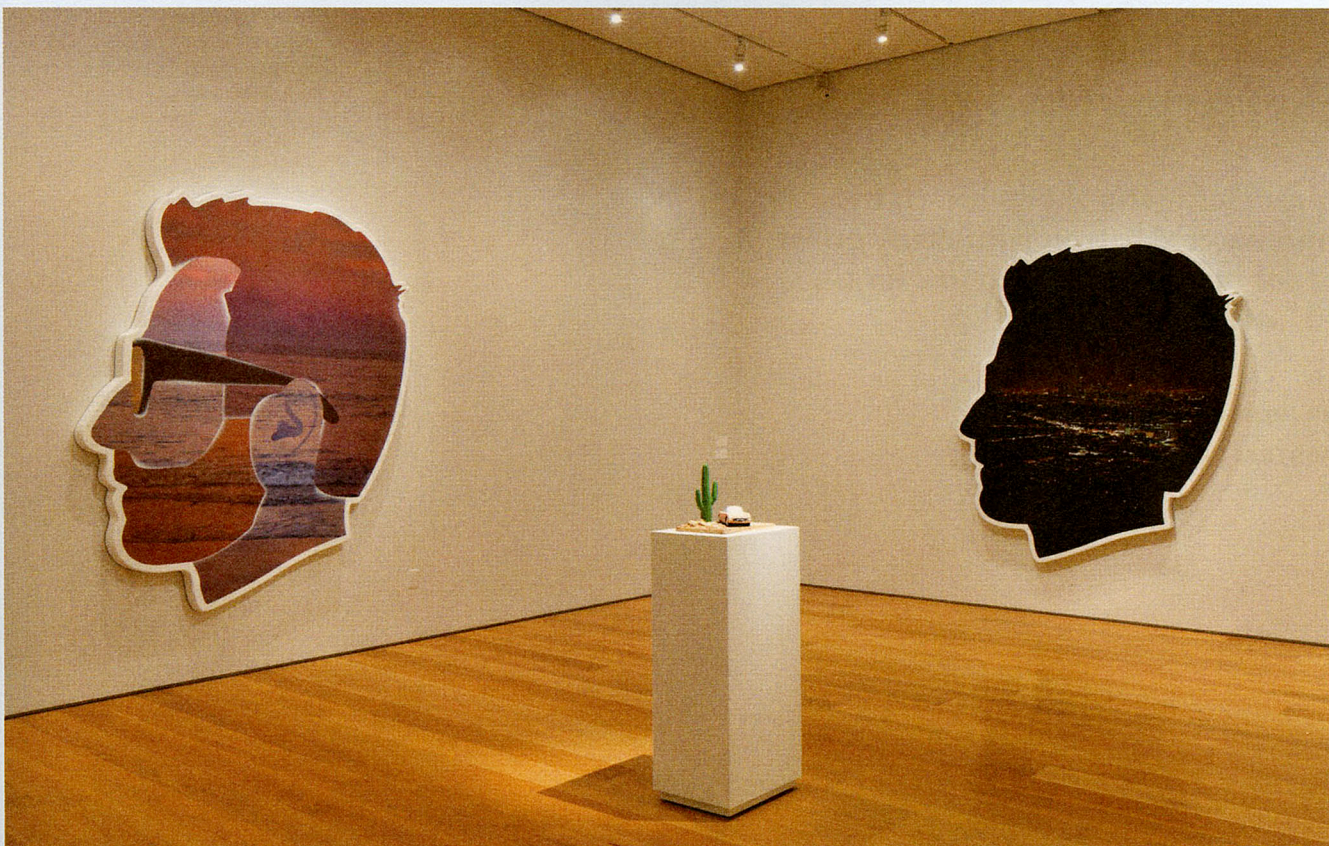
Johnston: You currently have a show at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas. Earlier we were talking about artists who have inspired you. Some of your works there are surrounding pieces by Giacometti, Rodin, and others. It's seems very contextual. What was it like putting that exhibition together?

Israel: As part of the Nasher show, I've done a kind of intervention in the permanent collection gallery. I've installed a "Sky Backdrop" painting and a "Flat" in place of where there are usually gallery divider walls. For me, it was an exciting opportunity to engage with these incredible works of modernism, and to imagine them as characters, or actors, performing in front of these dramatic set pieces. The "Backdrop" and the "Flat" are meant to somehow reframe the Giacomettis and the Rodin. Hopefully, these works can be seen, temporarily, in a new or different way.

Johnston: How was the conversation with the museum as you were proposing that?

Israel: Great! When we were installing the "Flat," it was always understood that the white plaster Rodin would really pop in front of its light blue, pink, and lavender surface. What we didn't realize was that the back of the "Flat," which is aluminum, would have such a strong presence in the gallery. So Jed Morse, the curator there, showed me this amazing Naum Gabo ["Constructed Head No. 2"], and we ended up placing it behind my piece. The metal of the Gabo worked incredibly well when foregrounded by the metal on the back of the "Flat." This whole other dialogue emerged in the gallery, between the Rodin, the Gabo, and nearby works by Picasso and Duchamp-Villon. The tableau that resulted completely exceeded all expectation. It was one of those incredible things that we could never have planned for—it just happened in the moment.

(OPPOSITE) An installation view of Israel's "Sightings" exhibition at the Nasher.



COLLECTORS OF ALEX ISRAEL'S WORK WEIGH IN ON WHAT THEY THINK MAKES HIM ONE OF TODAY'S MOST STANDOUT YOUNG ARTISTS:

Steven Guttman, founder and chairman of Uovo and chairman of the Centre Pompidou Foundation: "We purchased a 'Sky Backdrop' in 2012 from Almine Rech Gallery in Paris with the intention of donating it to the Centre Pompidou Foundation for its permanent collection. The Pompidou already had two pieces by Alex in its collection, 'Lens' (2013) and 'Self Portrait (Sunbrella)' (2014), but Alex felt that this third piece would round out and complete a story about his work. Alex's art engages with pop culture and is specifically California-centered. His practice is centered on his expansive social network, and his work itself is very collaborative: While he conceptualizes the work himself, he often works with others to actually fabricate the pieces, and the result is incomparable. It's been very rewarding seeing Alex's work deservedly embraced by the art world. When we first purchased 'Sky Backdrop,' he was a relatively unknown artist. With the Pompidou's growing collection and recognition by other significant public institutions, Alex's unique oeuvre has gained the appreciation it deserves."

Francesco Stocchi, curator of modern and contemporary art at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen: "Our collection has a 'Yellow Lens' and a 'Flat.' We have special holdings of two generations of Pop: the '70s and the '90s. We found it pertinent to pursue more [works] in that direction. There is no such a thing as neo-Pop. Pop is a style that has not evolved, though carries its original freshness. I like Alex's work because it's smart, but does not aim to look like it. Which is actually quite smart."

Dasha Zhukova, founder of the Iris Foundation and the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow: "Like Alex, I grew up in California, so I felt an affinity with his general outlook and how he portrayed that in relation to his work. Alex has managed to successfully create his own unique brand of Pop-conceptual art while completely stepping away from Warhol and Koons in his appropriation of iconic objects."

Jeffrey Deitch, curator and art dealer: "Alex's work is totally contemporary. He extends the fascinating and confounding dialogue between fine art and popular culture that goes back to Edouard Manet and goes through Picasso, Duchamp, Picabia, Warhol, and Koons. I'm fortunate to have several works by Alex in my personal collection, including an astonishing mural that wraps around the entire top floor of my house."

Peter Brant, founder and president of The Brant Foundation: "I own one of the 'Self Portrait' works. I think he's really bright, and I really like the work. I find him to be one of the most interesting and promising young artists in California. I like that he connects the past 50 years of L.A. and modernist culture to create works that are contemporary and relevant to L.A. culture today."

Joanne Heyler, director of the Broad: "We added Alex's work to the collection earlier this year. We visited him on the Warner Brothers lot about a year ago, where he works with the scene painters there to create some of his works, effectively turning a very 20th-century setting — the traditional movie studio — into a production center for 21st-century canvases. We were impressed with how his work reflects Hollywood and the cult of celebrity, but without necessarily focusing on existing celebrities themselves. Alex's work reflects our intensely self-interested society and the increasing blurriness between fame and the everyday."

Rosa de la Cruz, founder of the de la Cruz Collection (Miami): "I own a 'Sky Backdrop' and a 'Flats.' Alex's works attracted me the moment I saw them. The 'Sky Backdrop' is the Los Angeles sunset, and it's very reminiscent of our own sunset here in Miami. The city is always present in his work. Spanish Revival houses and stucco coated popcorn walls appear in his stage backdrops. This is a great example of the passing of trends in the city and how this has affected the L.A. history. Alex's work is the perfect backdrop for our museum."