

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Wallpaper*

Heir apparent: Alex Israel disrupts the Huntington's stately air with new work

Charlotte Jansen



The artist Alex Israel has taken over the iconic Huntington art gallery in San Marino, California, as part of a new series of creative interventions in the mansion. Pictured: Sky Backdrop Mural, 2015, installed in the gallery's main hallway. Photography: Fredrik Nilsen

Past and present visions of Southern California's culture are juxtaposed in a clever installation in San Marino, set within the Huntington estate – an elegant mansion and gardens dating to 1911, 12 miles from downtown LA.

Interposed among the historic collection of Gilded Age collectors Henry and Arabella Huntington – who established the house as a nonprofit culture space and art gallery opened to the public in 1919 – are contemporary works by Alex Israel, created between 2012–2015 and on view until July.

Arranged much like a treasure hunt, two new murals (as well as 16 paintings and sculptures by Israel) inhabit the Beaux Arts building, the Huntingtons' former residence – now also home to one of the most comprehensive collection of British and French art from the 18th and 19th centuries in the United States.

Superficially, Israel's pastel-colored interpretations of contemporary LA iconography and celebrity culture create a disruptive presence in the unusual setting – but Israel, who grew up in Los Angeles, has an enduring personal connection with the place, having visited the Huntington

since he was a child growing up in the city. ‘The Huntington is one of those places that’s in the DNA of native Angelenos, so the idea of doing something here was very attractive to Alex – both Alex Israel and Henry Huntington are/were in love with Southern California,’ explains director of art collections and show curator Kevin Salatino.

The introduction of Israel’s works is part of a series of periodic interventions in the mansion, initiated by Salatino and co-curator Catherine Hess, inviting contemporary artists to create dialogues with the collection that will appeal to its varied visitors. This also happens to be Israel’s first exhibition at an institute in Los Angeles. The placement (or displacement) of Israel’s work elicits parallels that trace the development of regional culture and taste, and touch on Californian clichés and pastiche. While the interventions are at times forceful and undoubtedly provocative, the interjection of these recent works put aspects of SoCal identity then and now into a tidy contrast. As Salatino enthuses, ‘It’s revelatory and transformative – and, quite frankly, beautiful – and it certainly makes you think about the house in entirely new ways.’

Outside the Thornton Portrait Gallery, which houses the Huntington’s renowned collection of European oil paintings, hang a series of three Israel self-portraits, including *Self Portrait (Dodgers)*, 2014–2015. In the artist’s acrylic and fiberglass work, he is dressed in the iconic satin LA Dodgers blue jacket – its scintillating texture a clear allusion to one of the Huntington collection’s most famous works, Thomas Gainsborough’s *Blue Boy*, 1770, an oil painting of a young boy in an sapphire satin suit.

Meanwhile, Israel draws other direct visual references between the history of Los Angeles’ cultural iconography. *Risky Business* is inspired by a prop from Tom Cruise’s 1983 film, and is here installed under an 18th century crystal chandelier on the mantel of the opulent dining room.

Elsewhere, the interactions between old and new are thickly sardonic. Upstairs, the entire gallery is covered with a new commission, for which Israel enlisted the help of a scene-painter. The mural, titled *In-N-Out*, recreates plants from the estate’s beloved cactus garden.