

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

the guardian

Bret Easton Ellis and Alex Israel: California Uber alles

The American Psycho novelist and the pop artist have joined forces to create artworks evoking the double lives of people in their adopted home, Los Angeles

Nadja Sayej



Alex Israel, right, and Bret Easton Ellis at the Gagosian in Los Angeles, where they are exhibiting their work. Photograph: BFA/Rex/Shutterstock

When the world-renowned author Bret Easton Ellis is not writing novels, he is hanging out at shopping malls. That is, when he's with the artist Alex Israel. The duo have a ritual of taking Ubers to Los Angeles malls, finding a bar and drinking martinis or tequila.

That's how they come up with new ideas, some of which are on show as part of their first-ever collaborative exhibition at Gagosian Beverly Hills – where Courtney Love, Kim Gordon and Elton John attended the opening.

Ellis, author of *American Psycho*, wrote a series of evocative sentences that accompany stock images chosen (and bought) by Israel, which depict LA landscapes in all their famous, unearthly glamour.

The exhibition continues on a Sunset Boulevard billboard, which declares: "If you don't like me unfollow me."

That's easy for Ellis to say, a man with half a million followers on Twitter. But it could also be a response to some of the controversy he has caused on the social network.

“It’s supposed to be provocative and have suspense to it,” Ellis told the Guardian. “The billboard is dramatic. It’s a statement. I believe it.”

He recently caused a fuss on the social network with his thoughts on Hollywood figures secretly backing Donald Trump in the presidential campaign (“though, they’d never admit it publicly,” he wrote).

“I tweet observations,” said Ellis, who also runs a pop culture podcast where he has interviewed Kanye West and Quentin Tarantino. “Twitter I once loved, now I’m bored by it. We live in a touchy world but you can’t be too opinionated.”

Ellis was first interviewed for Purple magazine by Israel in 2010. “His novels are really influential to my work,” said Israel. A former intern of John Baldessari, Israel worked behind the scenes at Blum & Poe, Sotheby’s New York and at Hauser & Wirth’s sales team before stepping into the spotlight with his own pop art – hyperbolic self-portraits and enormous UV-protective plastic sunglasses lenses (needless to say, he’s a fan of Jeff Koons).

On Instagram, Israel poses alongside Kim Kardashian and Naomi Campbell and has interviewed, mostly for his YouTube show, Christina Ricci, Michelle Phillips and Melanie Griffith. Some could say Israel is the art world’s biggest fanboy, as he has always been fascinated by the entertainment industry, but he takes it a step further.

He first invited Ellis as a guest on his deadpan YouTube show As it Lays in 2012, where he asked him: “Who should be the first female president?” Ellis responded: “There shouldn’t be one.”

They became friends and the idea to collaborate popped up last year when Israel started working on a feature film called SPF18, which stars Pamela Anderson, Molly Ringwald and Keanu Reeves. The Baywatch co-creator Michael Berk is the screenwriter for Israel’s feature and that sparked an idea.

“I thought it would be amazing to work with a writer to make art,” he said. “There is a long tradition of text-based art in LA, from John Baldessari to Raymond Pettibon and Barbara Kruger. It’s a daunting thing to take part in that tradition, so I asked Bret to collaborate.”

The new pieces are intended to look like the opening credits of a feature film and are handcrafted by the Warner Bros art department who work on Hollywood movies. Israel hired them to inkjet-print the digital paintings here.

The phrases are optimistic and eerie, strange and poetic. One says: “Somewhere in the empty house Jen could hear the Eagles singing Hotel California, its deep and hidden meanings revealing themselves in waves.”

The mood and setting all began in Ellis’s mind. “I started writing sentences I thought were evocative, an extension of the characters I usually write about,” said Ellis. “They were dark at first, but Alex’s sensibility would merge with mine and they changed.”

It's no coincidence they're doing a LA-focused exhibition right around the time of the Oscars. "It's a moment in time of when our city is on public display," said Israel. "It's a Hollywood-driven event."

It could very well tie into one of the pieces, which reads: "I'm going to be a very different kind of star," set against a sparkling skyline of the city.

"The theme of the show is characters in LA who have double lives," said Ellis. "You come here to reinvent yourself. The city forces you to become who you really are, especially for those who come here to transform. Will they make it?"

Another piece reads: "In Los Angeles I knew so many people who were ashamed that they were born and not made," which is set against a pastel table.

"This was an arduous process with recurring characters, it was like prose writing but knowing sentences were going to be surrounded by lots of questions," said Ellis. "They suggest an invisible world that isn't there, that's how it started and then Alex started looking for images."

Ellis is darker and Israel is more optimistic, so together, their different approaches brought a sense of tension to the artworks.

"We are two people creating work together as one artist," said Israel. "We share this interest and passion with the city and, coming together, we found a middle point."

They didn't want to taint the pieces with sarcasm when it comes to LA cliches, which include unemployed actors, rich celebrities, health nuts, yoga freaks and plastic surgeons. "Alex wants the cliches to be inspiring," said Ellis, who despite the "postmodern dread" in some of his books has a crisp outlook on the city's future.

"LA is different than city I grew up in, it's so global, more forward thinking, it's a place for young people. Manhattan is a gated village surrounded by a moat for tourists and rich people, far different than city I moved into for school," Ellis said. "LA is more optimistic than it was 20 years ago."

With celebrity worship syndrome as an actual psychological condition, isn't the city just as superficial and celebrity-obsessed as some people make it out to be?

"Celebrity culture is global, it's not LA-based," argued Ellis. "Studios are here, so it's a company town, in that respect."

The pair could be accused of taking a superficial view of a city which has 17.8% of its 10 million population living in poverty, 7.1% unemployed and a high crime rate.

"I don't have a negative view of LA, I love the city," said Ellis, whose first book, *Less Than Zero*, explored the amoral numbness of the city's partying, privileged teenagers.

"I saw a darkness here that I was attracted to as a writer, as an observer, for my fiction," he added. "I was more pessimistic as an adolescent in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which informed my work. If I was writing about it today, it would be different."

For a start, Uber would feature – it’s the pair’s preferred form of transport, as indicated by one of the artworks, which includes the text: “The Uber driver rolled across an opulent stretch of Melrose hoping to be noticed but worried that he looked as blank as his headshot.”

So how can the pair hang around malls and not get mobbed by fans? Even in a fame-centered city like LA, the artists humbly downplay their own big brand names. “There’s a lot of competition here,” said Israel. “I’m only an artist.”

“And I’m only a writer,” said Ellis.