

# Alex's World

by Jon Leon

“Only Hollywood matters. What it doesn’t overshadow it infects.”

Peter Schjeldahl

I’m in New York City on March 11, 2012. After a brisk-paced weekend touring the Armory Show, the Independent, ADAA, and the New Museum Triennial, I cross Canal on Essex Street toward Baxter and enter Reena Spaulings. My friends and I are the first guests to arrive. Critic and dealer John Kelsey of Bernadette Corporation sits quietly at a table, a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes. I accept a glass of champagne from some ladies in black and settle into an old loveseat. I pick up an Andes Crème de Menthe from a crystal bowl atop the coffee table in front of me. I’m watching a large monitor at the fore of this office-like configuration. On the screen in front of me a gentleman wearing a navy suit, green rep tie, and sunglasses asks Christina Ricci a series of questions. It’s not a conversation at all. In fact, it’s rather awkward. The interviewer doesn’t respond to any of his subject’s answers. He just proceeds with the next question. At one point he asks, “What has been for you the most interesting political scandal?” Ricci settles on “Weinergate,” the sexting scandal involving congressman Anthony Weiner. “I especially enjoyed, hmm, when that guy Weiner sent pictures of his own wiener to people.” I’m transfixed, hooked. *Artforum’s* Linda Yablonsky strides in and takes a seat next to

me. She appears equally transfixed. The set for this peculiar talk show, originally filmed at the Pacific Design Center in Los Angeles, is installed at the rear of the gallery: four arched stucco backdrops painted with a linear color gradient, the back of which read “Made at Warner Brothers Studios,” and two chairs on a carpeted riser. The show is called *AS IT LAYS* (in reference to Joan Didion). As the evening wears on and the interviews continue (30 in all), the gallery fills with visitors. We’re all just watching TV together. It’s one of the warmest, most inclusive art experiences I’ve ever encountered.

Alex Israel, the creator of *AS IT LAYS*, was born in 1982. He grew up in West Los Angeles, eventually leaving for Yale, graduating in 2003, and moving on to the University of Southern California’s Roski School of Fine Art, where he received his MFA in 2010. His thesis show, *Property*, was composed entirely of an obtuse collection of rented movie props, including a vanity, a bar, a GE deep fryer, and a chalkboard, among a diverse array of bric-a-brac. Between his BA and his MFA, he worked the business side of art for Jason Rhoades, Blum & Poe, Hauser & Wirth, and Sotheby’s, and as an intern for Ann Goldstein at MOCA. In 2010, he launched his own luxury sunglass company, Freeway Eyewear, naming five of the six styles on offer after LA thoroughfares, the 405, the 10, the 110, and so on. The line’s first campaign was shot by famed Southern California photographer Anthony Friedkin. To contextualize his sunglasses, Alex conceived of and shot ten

episodes of a Web series titled *Rough Winds*. Through a joint commission with LAXART and the City of West Hollywood, the trailer for *Rough Winds* looped from the Videotron on the Sunset Strip throughout the summer. In 2011, Alex was included in the well-publicized Greater LA, organized by Eleanor Cayre, Benjamin Godsill, and Joel Mesler at 483 Broadway in SoHo. In September 2011, Alex celebrated his first solo show at Peres Projects, Berlin, again showcasing a selection of props, this time from Babelsberg Studio, but with a new addition, *Flats*. *AS IT LAYS* went on to tour Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), the Utah Museum of Contemporary Art in Salt Lake City, and New Holland in Saint Petersburg, Russia. MOCA hosted a live segment featuring Laird Hamilton, Molly Ringwald, and Melanie Griffith.

Using his comprehensive and panoramic Angeleno vocabulary, Alex expresses one of the central characteristics of his oeuvre with the shapes of his backdrops, or “flats,” as he calls them. Constructed at “The Mill” on the Warner Bros. backlot, their shapes can be traced directly to California’s Spanish Revival architecture, the cozy western design movement that achieved its golden age after the First World War. It’s a style that prioritizes a simplistic harmony with its geographic surroundings. Principally, these shapes provide a frame for Alex’s carefully chosen cast of cinema props, yet the homey feeling of these regional shapes also serves to indicate their value as works of art. Their domestic referentiality suggests a design for the home. Like his favorite artist, Jeff Koons, who used his income as a commodities broker to fund his early work, Alex possesses a razor-sharp entrepreneurial ingenuity. The pristine, sunset-colored *Flats* eventually find their way into collectors’ homes, just as Alex’s Freeway Eyewear found their way onto the faces of Jessica Biel, Mary-Kate Olsen, and Paris Hilton, to name a select few.

In Alex’s world, everything is symbolic of the ethereal LA image-making culture. A pinch of stardust coats the surface of all his work. The obvious: from the LA Lights cigarettes that the actors in *Rough Winds* smoke to his *Purple* interviews with extremely focused LAists seeking an art-life balance, Kenneth Anger and David Lynch among them, to his

Duchamp-inspired *Abbot Kinney Mural* (2012) in Venice, California, it’s clear that Alex’s work is synergistically connected with his hometown. In an interview with Italian art magazine *Mousse*, he acknowledges, “I’m much more interested in Hollywood than I am in cinema. Hollywood is real, cinema is illusion.” So, Alex, calm, engaged, a *bel esprit*, erected a studio at the Pacific Design Center and began to scour Hollywood. He asked Angelyne, “Do you tweet?” He asked Rosanna Arquette, “Do you Skype?” He asked Whitney Port, “Have you ever bought a Groupon?” He asked Phyllis Diller, “How do you handle telemarketers when they call?” He asked Vidal Sassoon, “Do you use Facebook?” He asked Larry Flynt, “Do you ever listen to books on tape?” He asked Oliver Stone, “Are Blu-ray DVDs really that different from regular ones?” His most banal questions, nearly all of them, are sly, penetrating prompts that elicit surprising depth and candor from his subjects. It appears that by simply putting himself into the mix, by just *being there*, an artist creating a weird juxtaposition of entertainment and high concept, he’s able to conjure honest and intimate portraits of some of LA’s most notable figures. Unlike many artists who tackle celebrity in their work, Alex is producing something new, rather than merely consuming and regurgitating back to us the cultural detritus.

There’s a stylistic continuity that runs through Alex’s work. The design of his exhibitions benefits from an insistent visual focus and a sharp apprehension of the exhibition environment. Whether indoor or outdoor, in a group or solo show, in the US or abroad, Alex’s approach is tailored to seamlessly fit the space provided for him. His participation in the Venice Beach Biennial, held July 13–15, 2012, was represented by four life-size Styrofoam Easter Island heads, a rich Polynesian touchstone that resonated perfectly with the ocean, sand, and palm trees near Venice’s Ocean Front Walk. For his first solo show in Italy, at Museo Civico Diocesano di Santa Maria dei Servi, he rented his props from legendary Cinecittà in Rome, where *Cleopatra*, *Ben Hur*, *La Dolce Vita*, and *Roman Holiday* were filmed. Alex’s Styrofoam and fiberglass prop-house statues, a bishop, a Virgin Mary, a Bocca della Verità, and others appeared to be carved from stone. They looked

so incredibly chic and indigenous in the Baroque interior, it’s almost as if they always inhabited the space. And for his first solo show in Paris, at Almine Rech Gallery, titled *Thirty* to commemorate his 30th birthday (a Libra), he painted the gallery walls floor to ceiling to represent a rich Los Angeles twilight, completely transforming the gallery to look like home.

For those props that aren’t set directly onto the floor, Alex uses pedestals. The clean white rectangular pedestals operate in tandem with the *Flats* to frame his sculptures. The number of objects displayed in each show has diminished since his thesis show, wherein a voluminous 37 items filled the gallery. For *Thirty* at Almine Rech, he arranged just four choice selections: a puppet theater, an eagle with a clock dangling from its beak, a box of slender mannequin hands, and a yellow box of vintage General Electric flashbulbs. This paring down resulted in a more refined thematic. By tempering his selections, Alex is able to more directly convey his particular magic, which is more a *Magical World of Disney* magic than the magic of, say, Aleister Crowley. Rather than mere functional tools for the display of artworks, the abounding, recurring presence of pedestals in his exhibitions seems emblematic of his overall preoccupations. The way Alex mines studios and prop houses around the world to concoct a unique conceptual environment, and then fabricates his singular and unyielding pastel world of illusions, one that always connects in one way or another to a broad indefinable feeling for Hollywood, is his way of elevating those feelings to the level of art. His work is quite generous in this way, and earnest. Alex puts his obsessions on a pedestal.

There’s a great picture of the artist taken at Soho House West Hollywood at the joint launch party for the Fall 2011 Jerome and Freeway Eyewear collections, wherein we see Alex wearing a white shirt and tie, jeans, sunglasses, sans jacket. Gia Coppola is on his arm; a bulky black camera is hanging from his neck. Despite the obvious cues, it seems much too easy to connect Alex Israel with Andy Warhol. Rather, Alex’s presence in the art and entertainment worlds feels more attuned to another register of iconic presences—such as Jackie Collins, the movie *Clueless*, Google

architecture, Louis B. Mayer, Bret Easton Ellis, Hollywood Regency interiors, or Spago. Indeed, after a redecoration in 2013, Alex’s work hung in Spago Beverly Hills, the tony restaurant that opened the year of the artist’s birth and in the mid-1980s commissioned Warhol to design a house wine label and menu. One gets the impression that Alex is the quintessential man-about-town, curiously hooked into LA’s cultural past and present while contemplating and perhaps reorienting its future. And although there is a twinge of nostalgia that runs through his work, those aspects seem less like hang-ups and more like over-the-shoulder glances that allow him to build on and add texture to an expanding, thrillingly evolved, body of work.

Shakespeare’s eighteenth sonnet opens with “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? / Thou art more lovely and more temperate: / Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May, / And summer’s lease has all too short a date.”

These few lines of poetry were appropriated for a scene in the 1995 blockbuster movie *Clueless*. Shakespeare by way of *Clueless* by way of CliffsNotes then became the origin for the title of Alex’s Web series *Rough Winds*. For Alex, no detail of the Los Angeles landscape, real or cinematic, fictional or historical, is inconsequential. He zooms in on a single detail, crops it from its original context in the world, and then spectacularly blows it up. Each piece in his oeuvre is a fragment, a trace of culture, like the tail of a shooting star—an afterglow. His impulse is toward recovery. It’s easy to imagine Alex creating a work of art from the sound a VCR makes while rewinding a VHS tape (*Zuma Beach* or *Troop Beverly Hills*, perhaps?). He instinctively understands the lingering psychic presence of the minutiae of pop culture and reminds us of what we haven’t forgotten by seizing our collective subconscious, injecting it with his signature showmanship, updating it for the current moment, and then magnifying it beyond its original imprint. We may not remember, for example, the fonts that advertise movies and TV shows like *Risky Business* or *Baywatch* until Alex brings us *Rough Winds* and *AS IT LAYS*. Alex Israel’s work is a cynosure, guiding its audience to an awareness of the artistry and personal significance of



commercial creativity. His distinctly familiar sunset colors—pale oranges, pastel pinks, subdued reds, powder blues, and faded purples—direct the viewer like the talking signpost in 1991's *LA Story* that promises, "LA Wants 2 Help U."

Alex is operating within the art world, but with the expansive vision of a *mondain*. He doesn't shy away from working in multiple mediums and connecting that work to the culture at large. His closest confidants aren't solely other artists but creatives, broadly defined and non-medium-specific, interested in expressing the particular nuances of the current mode. Alex is keenly alert to contemporary art, yet he's clearly working toward a transcendence of it. The gallery, the fair, and the studio aren't the only sites of creativity and presentation for Alex. They are simply nodes in a broader network of sites that contribute structure to Alex's world. Each new work turns back on itself, referencing the work that came before it—a prop, now a backdrop to frame the prop, now painting directly onto the gallery wall. Alex makes art that a diverse audience can understand and approach. Like many successful artists from across the media spectrum, he is able to produce work with the potential to cross over and out of the scene in which it was created, while retaining its draw as the work of a singular, unwavering vision.

In *LA Demystified? Art and Life in the Eternal Present* (1981), Peter Schjeldahl writes, "The regulation purchase for young marrieds here, it is said, is a Bengston watercolor." In 2008, Alex curated a show titled *Endless Summer* (a reference to the 1966 surf documentary), as part of the California Biennial, at Glendale Community College. Under this iconic rubric he included a notable roster of vital LA artists, Ronald Davis, Lita Albuquerque, and Billy Al Bengston among them. There's so much finesse and precision in the way Alex connects his references, and the way in which he touches the people and places that surround his work. Sizzling co-branding and endorsements are spot-on pairings: a Vidal Sassoon video interview on *Purple* magazine's website, Easter-egg-colored tie-dye *AS IT LAYS* totes by ForYourArt, signature Alex *Flats* on the walls of Wolfgang Puck's Spago, a John Baldessari collaboration with Freeway Eyewear, Freeway Eyewear at Gagosian Shop,

at Barney's, and at Maxfield, and a surprise flash mob in front of the Bass Museum set to Duran Duran's "Rio" for Art Basel Miami Beach 2012. This winter I walked into Cady Noland's installation *Genre Scum* (1990) and later wondered if there was a connection between Noland and Alex as well. Returning to my inbox, I noticed a Cady Noland image attached to an old email from him. It's an image of *Enquirer Page with Eyes Cut Out* (1990). In the message Alex noted, "I love this Cady Noland of Jaclyn Smith." This brought to mind a recent photo of Jaclyn Smith wearing a pair of Freeways. What a virtuoso Alex maneuver, I thought to myself. One that materially brings art history to life.

Alex's *Lenses* are an extension of the Freeway Eyewear concept: gigantic polished plastic, identical but for scale to the ones used in his sunglasses, complete with UV protection. Again, he's magnifying the details. He's also mining his own work for inspiration; a practice that creates a circular field of reference that traces the boundaries of Alex's world. Within Alex's work there is an exceptionally controlled layering of references that are combined to create a highly stylized, near-impenetrable presentation of artifice, a *realistic* artifice or dramatized reality à la *The Hills*. In creating a fabulist intermedia portrait of LA, Alex forecloses on the encroachment of any foreign elements—he presents a purity, an ideal.

America doesn't seem to have a *thing*, its own style, anymore. It feels like an increasingly grotesque confusion of values. Like Noland, Alex is moved by a distinctly American narrative, yet in the way that LA has come to represent it. The dream, the celebrity, rags to riches, riches to rags, frontier capitalism, and showbiz. *AS IT LAYS* isn't just about Los Angeles people, it's about eccentric, ambitious American people who made Los Angeles their home and transformed it. Of all the appealing qualities in Alex's work, it's his stubborn fidelity to the American dream that is most fascinating. While across the country the dream fades like a line of dominoes, Alex uplifts and exalts it. As an audience we walk away from Alex's work with a bittersweet feeling, a little bummed out, but also a little hopeful. Bummed because the cohesiveness and order in his work is in stark contrast



to the disintegration and disharmony we currently face, but hopeful because we're reminded that hope itself is an alternative to disillusion. Alex challenges us to question our attitudes and beliefs, about not only the substance of art but the substance of ourselves. If his work is nostalgic or filmic, it's because America as it has historically defined itself has lost its definition and is now only present in our memories and our movies. In *Clueless*, Cher's father tells her, "Everywhere in LA takes 20 minutes." In Alex's world, "everywhere in LA" is *everywhere*.

