

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

KALEIDOSCOPE

Renaissance Man: Make it a Double!

Jeffrey Deitch



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Reflecting the polyedric mind of its author, the Renaissance Man series is the site of unexpected encounters and perspectives that challenge the boundaries of visual culture. In this issue, Jeffrey Deitch talks about the collaboration between Alex Israel and Bret Easton Ellis.

Left: “Make it a double,” Derek told the bartender. Everything seemed up for grabs as he stood on a cliff overlooking the Valley in his Club Monaco shirt.

Right: “Make it a double,” Julio told the bartender. Everything seemed up for grabs as he stood on a cliff overlooking the Valley in his Tom Ford loafers.

On one of my visits to Alex Israel’s dream factory on the Warner Bros. lot in Burbank, Alex took me down to the digital printing workshop in the basement to show me a new development. In front of the largest ink jet printer in existence, he rolled out a sample of a top-secret project that would combine the radical Los Angeles history of text paintings with the history of the Los Angeles novel. Alex was creating a collaborative body of work with his favorite Los Angeles writer, Bret Easton Ellis.

I asked Alex, aside from illustrated collections of poetry and artists’ homage to poets (e.g., Charles Demuth’s abstract portrait of William Carlos Williams), had any artist ever jointly

created paintings with a writer? We could not think of any other examples. In asking Bret to make paintings with him, Alex was introducing a simple but unprecedented innovation.

Alex and Bret were making a double: works with double authorship that would reflect the double life that so many people come to Los Angeles to pursue. As one of the paintings observes, “In Los Angeles, I knew so many people who were ashamed that they were born and not made.”

Alex Israel first came to Warner Bros. when he was looking for a shop to make the 1970s-style set for his meta talk show, *As It Lays*. He decided to visit one of the scenic design studios that actually made sets for TV shows and started with the most famous, Warner Bros. There, he discovered what might be the world’s most impressive painting studio, an astonishing structure as high as a ten-story building where giant backdrops can be lowered or raised below or above the floor on pulleys so the painters never need to use a scaffold or ladder. By the time that Alex arrived, the shop that once employed dozens of skilled scenic painters was down to one. Not only did the Warner Bros. set shop gladly help Alex fabricate the perfect Merv Griffin-type talk show set, they welcomed him to come back for more. The studio’s archives and its capability to make virtually any kind of prop would provide Alex with immense inspiration and an ability to realize his vision. It is the encroachment of digitalization that is decimating the traditional scenic crafts that have helped to inspire some of Alex’s best-known work, so I was surprised when he led me down to the non-descript basement digital print shop to show me his new project. Upon seeing the first tests of his collaborative paintings with Bret, I immediately understood that the content of the work was reflected in its digital fabrication.

Bret Easton Ellis has recently developed a fervent following for his Twitter posts and his podcasts. He has been at the forefront of adapting literary expression to a streamlined digital format. The remarkable “mini-novels” that he has written for his collaborative paintings with Alex Israel are the perfect literature for readers whose concentration span has been reshaped by Twitter. Bret has been able to evoke complex characters and their fictional worlds with only one or two inspired lines.

The Alex Israel/Bret Easton Ellis collaborative paintings build on the Los Angeles text painting tradition of Ed Ruscha, John Baldessari, Alan Ruppersberg and Barbara Kruger. Alex wanted to try to extend this tradition in a fresh and unexpected way. Bringing in the perfect literary collaborator reflects and advances a contemporary artistic structure that has become standard in popular music (Jay Z featuring Kanye West), but is less common in other art forms.

Bret’s texts mine the language of Twitter, phone texts and Instagram posts to advance American poetry into the present. The texts have none of the pretentiousness of “Poetry,” but they evoke our time with the same literary precision as the work of the aforementioned William Carlos Williams and other modernist poets who observed the American scene. Alex told me that Bret had written as many as 1,000 texts, which he distilled down to the 100 that he sent to Alex. Alex and Bret then further refined these into the sixteen texts that were made into paintings for their recent exhibition at Gagosian Beverly Hills.

Alex paired the texts with stock images of Los Angeles, purchased online and then extensively retouched. The fabrication technique is multi-layered and complex, developed through trial and error. Rather than simply printing out the image on an ink jet printer, each canvas is first painted with acrylic and gel medium. The spaces where the text is visible are left blank, prior to the

printing of the image, so what one reads as text is actually the underpainting. The works have the depth and texture of paintings, rather than printed photographs.

Connecting the structural and the conceptual elements of the project is the concept of The Double. There is the inspired collaboration between a very contemporary artist and a very contemporary writer, and there is the exploration of a very contemporary Los Angeles state of mind, which Alex Israel describes as a “culture of self-transformation and performance.”

As one of the characters in one of the most of the iconic of these paintings declares, “I’m going to be a very different kind of star.”