

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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STARS
IN
HIS
EYES

Is the artist Alex Israel
Hollywood's most clever critic?
Or its biggest fan?
By Christopher Bagley
Photographs by
Matthias Vriens-McGrath

The sun is high above the beach in Malibu, and Pamela Anderson, wearing a white T-shirt over an even whiter one-piece bathing suit, is at the shoreline, awaiting her cue to start jogging across the sand.

"Action!" shouts the artist Alex Israel, and Anderson sets off, bouncing past two actors playing starstruck 18-year-olds. She waves at them with a coquettish "Hi, boys!" before looping back toward the camera. "Good job, Pam!" Israel says, smiling. But he wants to shoot a second take, in slow motion—and then a third and a fourth. After the sixth try, Anderson raises an eyebrow as she walks past her makeup artist on her way back to her mark. "We never did this many takes on *Baywatch*," she says.

Today's production is not a TV reunion special but Israel's latest artwork: a feature film with a cast of young unknowns and cameos by '80s and '90s icons like Molly Ringwald and Keanu Reeves. Titled *SPF-18*, the coming-of-age drama follows four California teenagers as they learn the importance of creativity and self-expression against a backdrop of surf sessions, Viper Room concerts, and beachside sexual awakenings. And although a sun-splashed Malibu film set might seem an unlikely place to find a conceptual artist at work, to anyone familiar with Israel's oeuvre, it's not all that surprising. The 33-year-old Los Angeles native, who worked on the sales side of the contemporary-art market before becoming an artist himself, is making his name as a canny interpreter of L.A.'s glossy pop dreamscape.

When we meet at a diner off Mulholland Drive a few weeks later, Israel has just returned from Europe. His frenzied three-week itinerary gives a good indication of his current status in the art world. He landed in Rome, where he finalized a set of sculptures for a show in Paris at Almine Rech Gallery and met with his New York dealer, Gavin Brown. From there, he headed to Oslo for an appointment at the Astrup Fearnley Museum, and the next day he was in southern Sweden to meet with a curator. Then it was on to Paris for his opening, after which he joined Almine Rech and her husband, Bernard Ruiz-Picasso, on their private jet to Málaga, Spain, for the opening of a Louise Bourgeois exhibition at the Museo Picasso and later continued with them to Moscow for the inauguration of the new headquarters of the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art. There were also stops in Monaco and Antibes.

Flying private, however, does not provide immunity from jet lag, and today Israel is tired and very thankful for his dark sunglasses, which are from his eyewear line, called Freeway. (The eyewear project is not an artwork, he emphasizes; nor is Icarus, a sunscreen that he plans to distribute with the release of *SPF-18*.) »

Alex Israel, in Malibu,
on the set of his film
SPF-18, with the
actors Bianca Santos
and Noah Centineo,
May 2015.



Like other media-savvy artists before him, Israel is skilled at remaining on-message without revealing too much.

Israel's paintings, films, and sculptures, which revel in the manufactured seductions of Hollywood—and often feature the artist in a starring role—bring a very 2016 twist to themes previously explored by the likes of Jeff Koons and Andy Warhol. Viewer reactions are duly polarized. Is Israel brilliantly channeling the zeitgeist or cynically exploiting it? Is his work affectingly personal or shallowly self-promoting? And in today's hype-crazy art world, where the line between high art and salesmanship has never been blurrier, do these distinctions even matter?

Of course, the last person one should turn to for definitive answers is Israel, who, like other media-savvy artists before him, is skilled at remaining on-message without revealing too much. Both Israel and his work are upbeat, easy to like, and somewhat opaque—prompting people to search beyond all the positivity for signs of a dark underside, whether one exists or not. Israel is well-versed in art history and theory, and always adds layers of depth to his explorations of superficiality. Three sculptures he produced for last summer's Paris show—giant sunglass lenses made of UV-protective plastic—dealt with concepts such as image and identity, reflection and transparency, while also serving as symbolic billboards for his sunglass business and paying homage to earlier works by California minimalists like Larry Bell, John McCracken, and De Wain Valentine—"heroes of mine," Israel says.

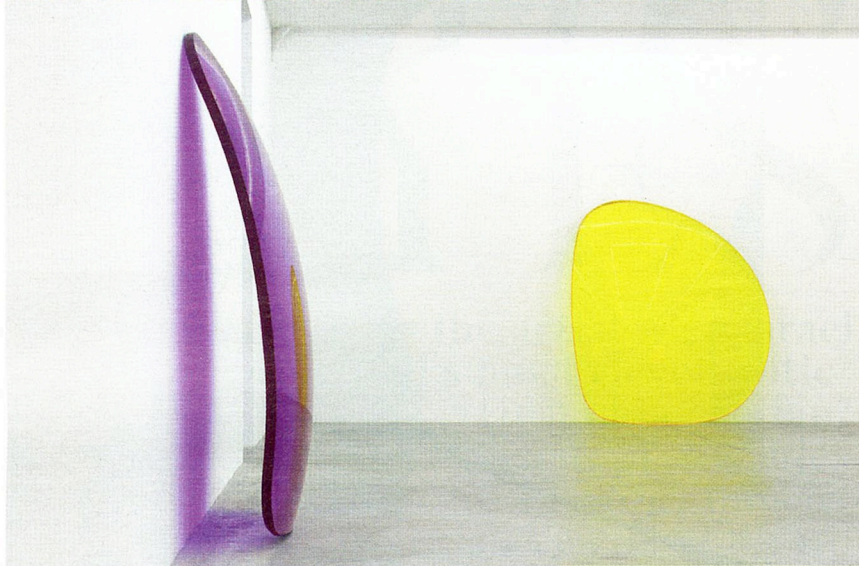
Other heroes of Israel's include Melanie Griffith, Kato Kaelin, Phyllis Diller, and Paul Anka, all of whom he featured in the video series *As It Lays*, a riveting collection of interviews he began posting on YouTube in 2012. During one-on-one chats on a talk-show set decorated with his airbrushed artworks, Israel poses mundane questions from a stack of index cards. ("Who is your favorite member of the *Jersey Shore* cast?" he asks the restaurateur Michael Chow.) All of Israel's guests are L.A. fixtures, and many are actors whose careers peaked decades ago; the host's deadpan manner and unusual aversion to follow-up questions make for plenty of revealingly awkward silences, not to mention lots of opportunities for the interviewees to stew in their self-consciousness or self-delusion.

Those who interpret *As It Lays* as mocking or cruel, Israel says, are most likely carrying misanthropic baggage of their own. "I wasn't trying to manipulate anybody," says the artist, who gave his subjects final say over what was included in the videos. To him, the project is a sincere tribute to "people who have allowed the most eccentric versions of themselves to take the foreground, and who have impacted and inspired so many others as a result."

Israel himself has admirers in high places, including the conceptual artist John Baldessari, who hired him as an intern 13 years ago, as a favor to a museum director who knew Israel's parents. When asked whether Israel's explanations of his own work should be taken at face value, Baldessari, 84, seems amused. "No," he says. "Artists are very clever, and Alex knows how to manipulate people. I think he has a great future."

Jeremy Strick, the director of Nasher Sculpture Center, in Dallas, where Israel had a solo show last month, is another art world player who first met Israel when the artist was a precocious youth. When Strick was the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Israel's high school, the elite Harvard-Westlake, held a silent auction in which one offering was a meeting with Strick. The winning bidders were Israel's parents, which is how Israel found himself lunching alone with Strick at a sushi restaurant in Little Tokyo. (Israel's father, Eddie Israel, is a real estate developer; his mother, Lonnie, is a former elementary school teacher.) To Strick, Israel's insider knowledge of the "machinery of the art market" is a legitimate component of his bigger, broader "meditation on what it means to make art in the commercial context of Southern California." Strick, who's intrigued by the complex webs of meaning that Israel weaves through various fields and media, points to a new sculpture from the Nasher show. It's an upright, hollow surfer's wetsuit—cast in aluminum from a mold of Israel's own body, minus the head, feet, and hands—that recalls an ancient Greek sculpture, mounted on a pedestal. "It's a startling piece that works in a number of different ways and relates to Alex's other projects, including the surf film—and also looks amazing," Strick says.

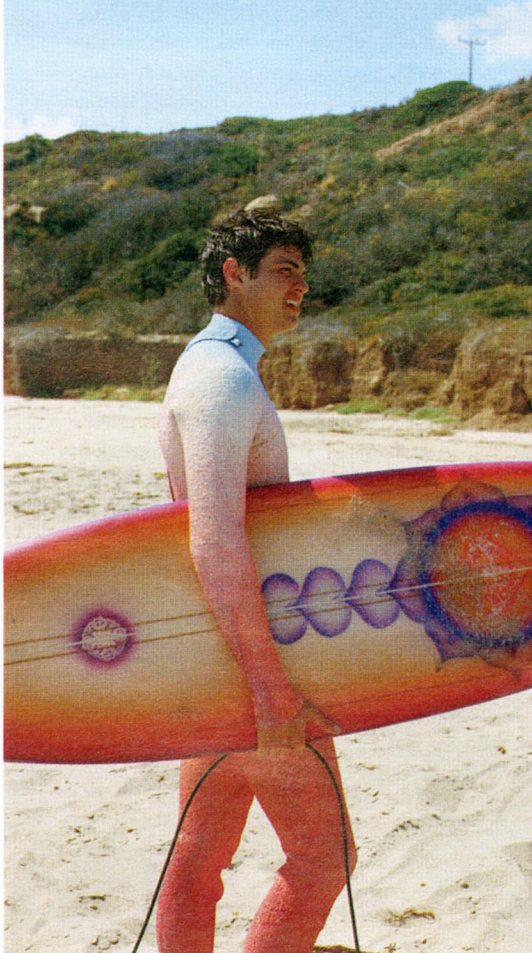
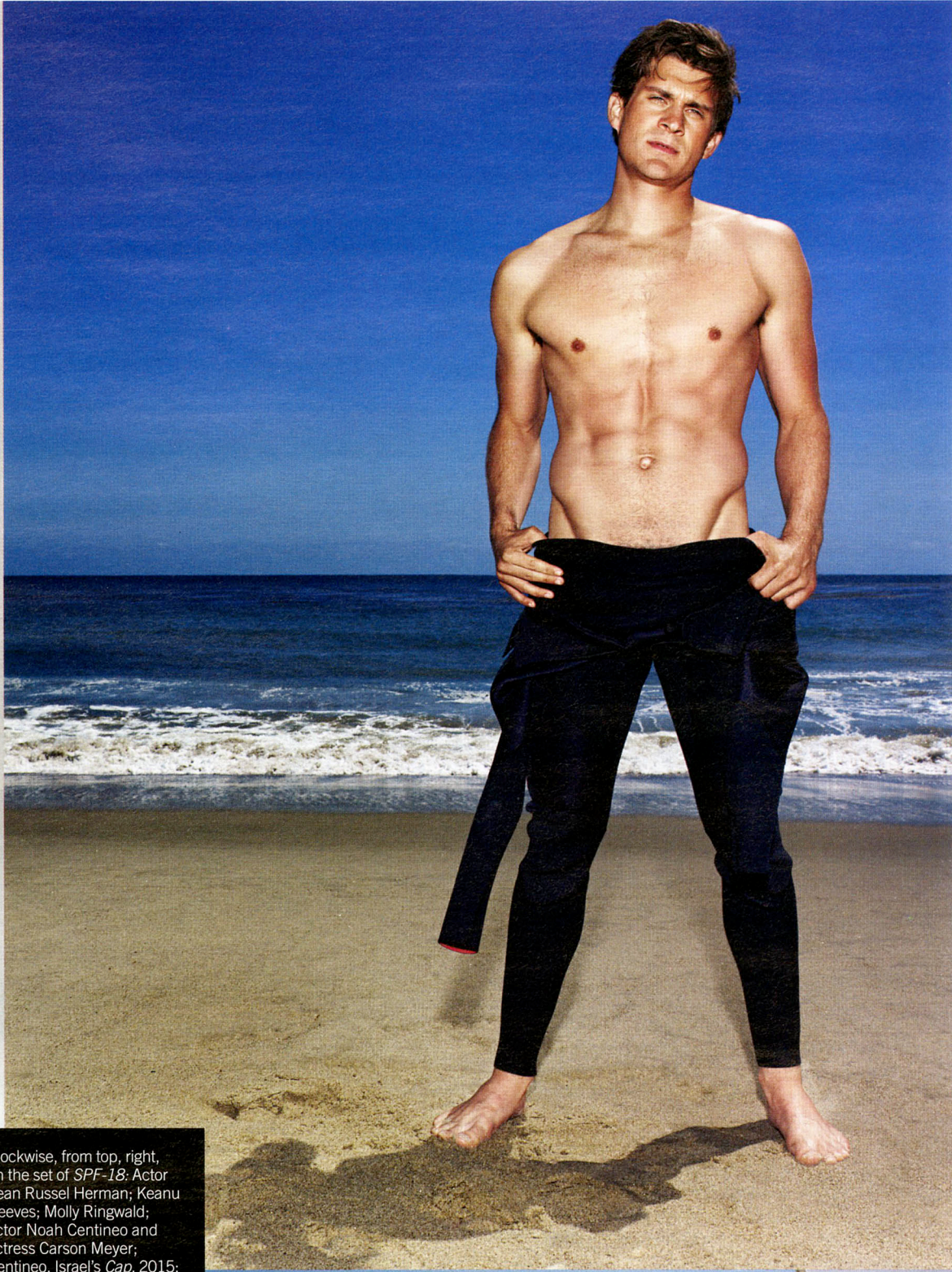
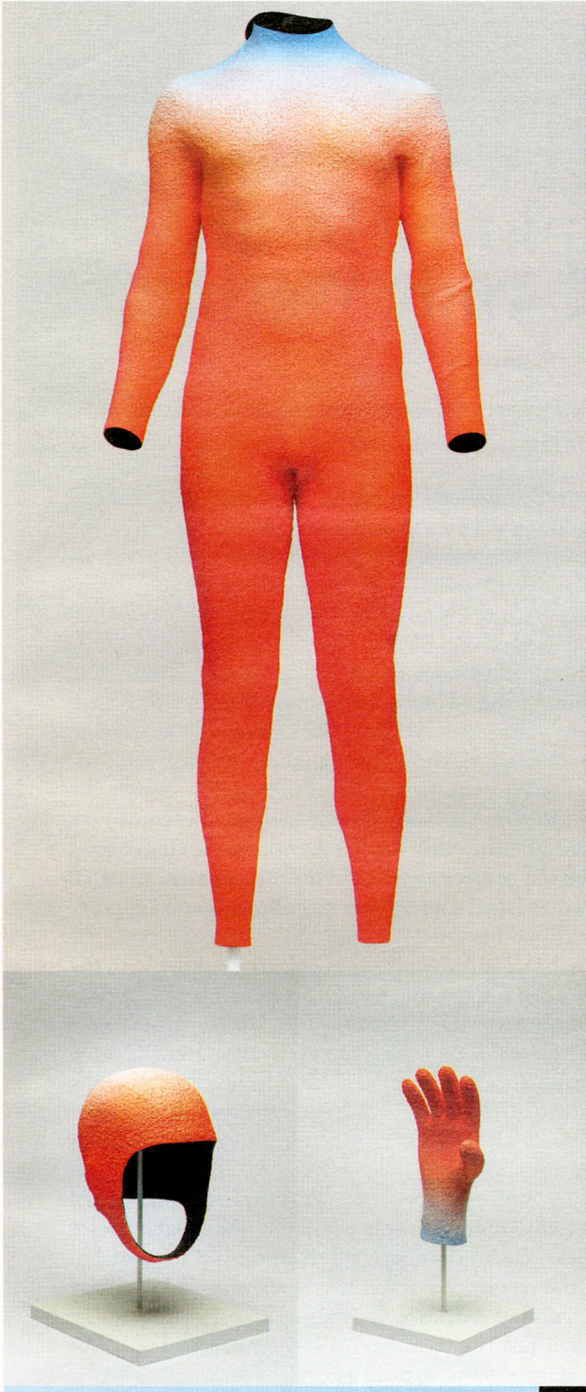
Israel, who grew up in L.A.'s Westside, experienced his first art-related epiphany during his teens while visiting New York's Guggenheim Museum—not in the exhibition spaces but in the gift shop. He was there with his mother, who offered to buy him an art book of his choosing. Israel zeroed in on an eye-catching Taschen monograph of Jeff Koons. "It was bright pink, and it had this guy on the



Highlights from Israel's sculptural work, clockwise, from top: *Easter Island*, a series of totems erected for the 2012 Venice Beach Biennial; *Lens (Purple)*, 2014; *Lens (Yellow)*, 2015; and *Lens (Jade)*, 2013; *Maltese Falcon*, 2013; the *Bigg Chill*, a 2012 work in which a frozen yogurt swirl is rendered in marble; *Casting*, a 2015 sculpture inspired by the mold from which Oscar statuettes are made.



DIGITAL TECHNICIAN: CASEY CUNNEEN; PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANT: BARRY FONTENOT; CASTING AND GLOVE: JOSHUA WHITE; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GAGOSHIAN GALLERY; LENS (GADE): ZARKO VLATOVIC; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MARGIANO ART COLLECTION, LOS ANGELES; THE BIGG CHILL: HANS GEORG GAUL; COURTESY OF PERES PROJECTS; EASTER ISLAND: JOSHUA WHITE; MALTESE FALCON: KEVIN TODORA; COURTESY OF THE NASHER SCULPTURE CENTER; DALLAS: KINGWALD, REEVES, CENTENO, AND METEER; RACHEL CHANDLER



Clockwise, from top, right, on the set of *SPF-18*: Actor Sean Russel Herman; Keanu Reeves; Molly Ringwald; actor Noah Centineo and actress Carson Meyer; Centineo. *Israel's Cap*, 2015; *Glove*, 2015; *Self Portrait (Wetsuit)*, 2015.



Israel's work brings a very 2016 twist to themes explored by artists like Jeff Koons and Andy Warhol.

cover holding a pig," he remembers. "I was like, What is this? I opened the book, and I couldn't believe what was in it." The images included photos from Koons's notoriously explicit "Made in Heaven" series, depicting his sexual escapades with his then-girlfriend, the onetime porn star Iлона Staller. "And I thought, Wow, this is such an amazing thing. And my mom said she would buy me any book, so I can get her to buy me, basically, a pornographic magazine, disguised as an art book."

Later on, Israel realized that the book had seduced him not just with works like *Iлона's Asshole* but also with the almost subliminal pull of typefaces, colors, and packaging. "It's the power of Jeff Koons's branding as an artist and how thorough that is," Israel says. "You feel it in everything that he does and touches and says. The way he smiles, the way he interacts with popular media. There's a complete through line in everything Jeff Koons."

Israel's own through line would soon emerge. He studied art at Yale and graduated a year early, at 20. Back in Los Angeles he got a job as an assistant at the gallery Blum & Poe before venturing even deeper into the art world's commercial side, moving to New York for a brief stint at Sotheby's to help catalog a contemporary art sale. Then—department head Tobias Meyer had offered him a job after they met in L.A. at a dinner party. "I was kind of apprehensive about it, because I was ready to be an artist," Israel remembers. "But Tobias said, 'Listen, if you don't like it you can leave after three months,'" which is just what Israel did.

Soon afterward, the New York dealer David Zwirner connected Israel with the artist Jason Rhoades, who'd created a large installation in his L.A. studio crammed with hookah pipes, torn celebrity magazines, and slang terms for female genitalia spelled out in neon lights. Israel ended up teaming with Rhoades and his gallery, Hauser & Wirth, to cohost Black Pussy Soirée Cabaret Macramé, a series of cult dinner-cum-performance events held inside the artwork. Rhoades died suddenly in 2006, at 41, and within months Israel found himself on Hauser & Wirth's sales team, traveling to the Venice Biennale and myriad art fairs. A year or so later, he'd had enough. "I'm not an art dealer," he said to himself. "I'm an artist, and I want to make art and focus on that." Still, when he finally launched his art career after graduating from the Master of Fine Arts program at USC, in 2010, Israel knew he'd have some biases to overcome.

"In the beginning, especially, a lot of people had gotten to know me as Jason's guy, or Hauser & Wirth's salesperson, and were kind of suspicious about me as an artist," he says. One of his first projects, *Property*—an assemblage of movie props rented from Warner Bros. and other studios and repurposed as sculptures—cannily preempted accusations of collector-baiting. The pieces weren't for sale; after the show they would be returned to the studios. The *As It Lays* videos, for their part, were posted directly online and remain viewable for free to anyone with an Internet connection. But even when Israel doesn't bring his work to the market, the market has a way of coming to him. In 2014, his two-year-old painting of a depthless sky ("It kind of looks like wrapping paper," Baldessari wryly notes) sold for more than \$1 million at Christie's.

All along, Israel has been building on his vision of Los Angeles as the world's primary desire factory. There's a series of "flats," arched stucco panels that Israel has prop painters at Warner Bros. make in sunset colors and often displays behind other objects, like the backdrops on film sets. A sculpture called *The Big Chill* re-creates Israel's favorite dessert—vanilla frozen yogurt—in white marble. Another body of paintings offers variations on what Israel calls his "logo," a silhouette of his face, inspired by Alfred Hitchcock's famed self-caricature. "It's a way of reducing my facial features to a graphic that can represent and symbolize the various things I do, within and outside of the art world," he explains. Many of Israel's creations explore the truths and falsehoods of image making, and most, like *SPF-18*, are presented with a straight face. In person, Israel actually smiles a lot and even giggles sometimes, as when we're discussing the YouTube comments about his *As It Lays* Michelle Phillips interview, in which she reveals that she likes her peanut butter chunky, not creamy.

SPF-18 is Israel's most ambitious project to date and clearly his most stress-inducing. The idea for the film, he says, came to him while thinking about how teenagers have been essentially ignored by the contemporary art world. "The main audience for art is really the people who buy it, or write about it, or make it," he says. "And that doesn't include a lot of young people." While researching California surf culture, he learned that many early surf films were first screened in high school gymnasiums. "I thought, What a great way to once again pay homage

to the history of this region and also to reach teenagers and potentially get them excited about art and creativity."

It's one thing to have a soft spot for vintage after-school specials; it's another to direct a feature film modeled on them, with a crew of 40. The photographer Rachel Chandler, a friend of Israel's who shot stills during the 19-day production and stayed with him in a nearby house in Malibu, recalls shuttling Israel to the set daily in his own car because he was too nervous to drive: "At first, he was really outside his comfort zone—like, 'Am I the one who says "action?"'" Chandler recalls.

It helped that Israel used his connections to lure several seasoned pros. The score is by the music producer Emile Haynie, who has worked with Kanye West and Eminem; *Baywatch* co-creator Michael Berk wrote the script; one of the four leads happens to be Carson Meyer, the daughter of Universal Studios president Ron Meyer. For the soundtrack, Israel managed to secure the rights to the song "Hungry Like the Wolf," by Duran Duran, whose most recent album cover he designed, after meeting the band through his close friend China Chow. Financing for the project came chiefly from an edition of 10 sculptures of wetsuit hoods that Israel sold on spec to collectors and supporters, without knowing what they'd be.

As well-connected as he is, Israel still seems to view celebrity culture with the obsessive wonder of a fan. At one point while we're discussing his all-time favorite TV shows—*American Idol*; *The Hills*; *Beverly Hills, 90210*; *Saved by the Bell*—he mentions a current obsession, *Nashville*, and tells me, "I saw Connie Britton once at Soho House. It gave me a warm and fuzzy feeling." As he crafts his own public persona—seemingly unconcerned about overexposure in magazines but admittedly conscious about not over-posting on Instagram—he finds social media to be an indispensable tool.

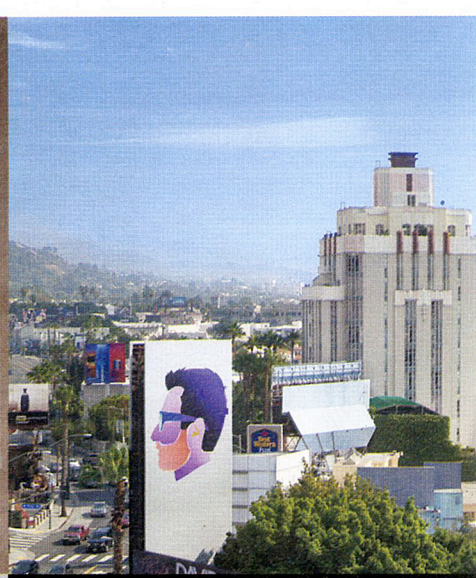
"There are a lot of forces that have pushed artists out of the basement," Israel says. "For my audience, especially younger people who I'm thinking about a lot more now, it really helps to see me and my image in relationship to what I'm making." Besides, he adds, "the whole idea of the artist locked away in solitary confinement—I just don't feel that narrative is meaningful for people today, who have direct access to their favorite creatives on Twitter or Facebook. For me, being in the work, and being around it, feels natural."

There's plenty more of Israel on view in his current show at the Huntington Library, the Gilded Age mansion and exhibition space outside Los Angeles. Billed by the museum as an "intervention," the show playfully intersperses Israel's works among its permanent collection, which includes Thomas Gainsborough's famed 1770 portrait *The Blue Boy*. Israel's response to that painting? A self-portrait in a blue L.A. Dodgers starter jacket. The Huntington's Art Collections director, Kevin Salatino, says that Israel approached the project not as a pure provocation but as another thoughtful step in his multilayered exploration of the "historical and conceptual topography" of Los Angeles.

Meanwhile, opening this month at the Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills—during Oscar week, not incidentally—is a new show of large-scale text paintings that Israel created with his favorite writer, Bret Easton Ellis. (*NUMBNESS IS A FEELING*, reads one.) Ellis, whose controversial novels include *Less Than Zero* and *American Psycho*, sees parallels in the way some critics have "attacked" both him and Israel for their "surface-y" take on contemporary culture. "People assume that it's very easy to do that, but in actuality, you really have to work at it," Ellis says. "What I saw when collaborating with Alex is how careful and obsessed he is about getting it right." Revealingly, Ellis also draws a clear distinction between his own often dark and satirical sensibility and Israel's. Ellis believes that Israel is ultimately driven by a genuine (or a genuinely Warholian) kind of earnestness. "In art, I don't think we're very used to earnestness. So it can be confusing to some of us."

Having finished our lunch, Israel and I are contemplating whether or not to order dessert and discussing the finer points of Dolly Parton's accent. It feels like a good time to ask him about the dance between calculation and sincerity that seems to be present in everything he does. When I remark that even Israel's chief admirers sometimes suspect that they're being toyed with yet keep coming back for more, the artist laughs.

"Really?" he says. "It's funny that you say that. Yeah, I don't know how to respond to that. But I really want to get some frozen yogurt." ♦



Clockwise, from top, left: *Sky Backdrop*, 2015, behind two sculptures by Alberto Giacometti, at the Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, 2015; a billboard of *Self Portrait*, 2013, on L.A.'s Sunset Strip; a detail of *Movie Star Maps*, a room-size mural commissioned by Jeffrey Deitch for his L.A. home; Melanie Griffith and Israel, at the MOCA screening and performance of *As It Lays*, Los Angeles, 2012; installation view of "Alex Israel," an exhibition at Museo Civico Diocesano di Santa Maria dei Servi, Città della Pieve, Italy, 2012; *Self Portrait (Dodgers)*, 2014–2015, currently on view at the Huntington Library, San Marino, California; *Valet Parking*, 2013, a mural installed for the solo exhibition "Alex Israel" at Le Consortium, Dijon, France, 2013.

