Garage
May 10, 2020

GAGOSIAN

GARAGE

Always On My Mind

As we enter a new era, artist Alex Israel looks back at a decade of work and the fast-changing technology and culture that influenced it.

Alex Israel

Alex Israel, Self-Portrait, *2013, Sunset Strip, Billboard Photo: Michael Underwood*

Today's is a new world, forever changed by the spread of a novel coronavirus. When I began writing this essay over the December 2019 holiday break, the idea was to walk readers through my thinking (hence the title) and to trace the evolution of my work from early projects to recent paintings. I was writing both to contextualize my practice relative to the shifting media landscape that had inspired it—the previous "new world"—and to punctuate a decade of artistic production. While I wasn't able to finish the text in time for distribution at my London opening in January, as I'd hoped, I continued to write in the new year, finally finding the hours to hone and polish at the start of quarantine last month. But since then, in just a matter of weeks, everything has shifted in ways that we are all still processing. While it's hard to know what to say or think about this moment, suddenly, almost magically, the previous one appears clearer than ever in my

rearview mirror. What used to resemble a living, breathing ecosystem now feels like a time capsule, and whether what happens next is a new chapter, a new book, or (perhaps most likely) a new language altogether, one thing's for sure: it's happening.

Saint Joan

My life changed on a Black Friday. That sounds a lot more ominous than it actually was—in fact, at the time it all felt rather benign. It was 2011, I was in Los Angeles, and just two days before the biggest shopping day of the year I had attended a live conversation with Joan Didion at Saint Vibiana's Cathedral. The night replays in memory with crystal clarity—parking was a nightmare and the church was packed—but my friends got there early and saved me a seat so I could stop at home on my way downtown to pick up my copy of *Play It As It Lays* in the hope that Joan might sign it for me.

This isn't an essay about Didion or how much her writing influenced me in the decade after college, when I returned to Los Angeles, the city where I was born and raised and which I had already identified as the prime subject for my work. But it very well could be. After all, I'm a millennial, and at some point during the past decade Joan became one of my generation's patron saints. For me, her work unlocks an acute understanding of modern California's mythical history and culture while simultaneously providing a path to a better understanding of my parents' generation. In 2010–11 I was working on a project (*As It Lays*) I had titled after the novel I hoped she might inscribe at Saint Vibiana's, and her work was top of mind.

Once the program ended, my friends and I waited in line, inching our way down the nave before finally making it up onto the chancel to catch a closer glimpse of Joan's fragile frame. There she was, poking out of a lavender pashmina and barely supporting her oversized glasses and a Sharpie. As she dedicated my book, I took a photo on my iPhone.

Two days later I woke up with a fridge full of Thanksgiving leftovers, oblivious to how much my life and art were both about to change. I'd be lying if I said I remembered the time of day, but at some point I picked up my phone, played with an app my friend Edison had just told me about, and posted that image of Joan, signing my book, into a feed. Like Baby Moses in a basket on a calm bank of the Nile, I sent my little square image off to live a life of its own in a foreign new land called Instagram.

RIGHT: JOAN DIDION AT A BOOK SIGNING IN 2011, POSTED TO ISRAEL'S INSTAGRAM ACCOUNT. LEFT: DIDION IN THE SPRING 2015 CELINE AD CAMPAIGN, PHOTOGRAPHED BY JUERGEN TELLER.

Maybe it was the famous old photos of Didion with her Corvette Stingray, or the Céline ad shot by Juergen Teller that debuted in January 2015, but whatever it was, in just a short time Joan's presence across millennial consciousness was ubiquitous: her iconicity was cemented "on the 'gram," her saint status secure. Joan, avocado toast, the mannequin challenge. Before I knew it, that gently flowing river had transformed into a gushing waterfall of images and videos as Instagram grew to a scale beyond anything I could ever have imagined.

Finale

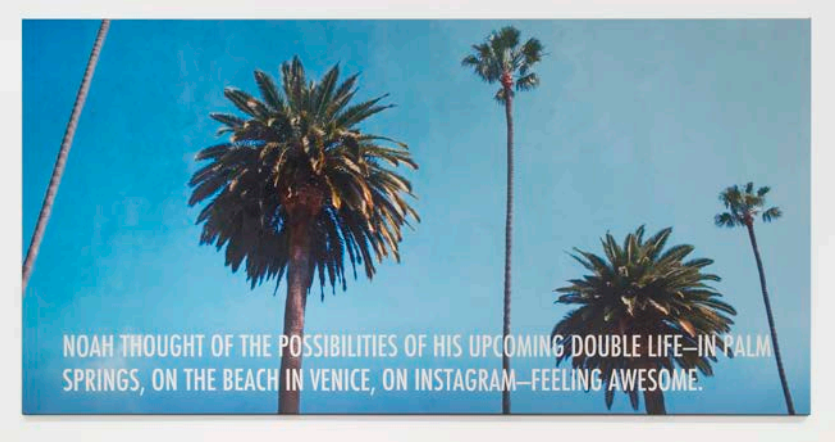
I'm flashing even further back, to July 13, 2010. Where were you? I was home in bed watching budding lovers Kristin Cavallari and Brody Jenner bid farewell on a palm-tree-lined Hollywood street, just a stone's throw from where I now live. Like many of the pivotal moments of my favorite reality TV soap, *The Hills*, this scene was bathed in magic hour's golden glow. As the camera pulled back on the final shot of the series, however, something surreal happened: a wider view revealed that we weren't with our stars on a real road in front of real palm trees. In fact, we were on a Hollywood backlot where an artificial mise-en-scène, complete with backdrop and theatrical lighting, had been constructed to appear nonfictional—the implication being, as the show ended, that perhaps none of its "reality" had ever been real at all.

BRODY JENNER IN THE LAST SCENE OF "THE HILLS" SERIES FINALE.

Now, I wasn't born yesterday (that was in October 1982), and I think most of us who watched the show had enough imagination or insight to know that there was likely always a producer or two just off-camera, guiding the show's stars through the series of highly constructed and *produced* situations that would come to define their *real* on-screen lives. And yes, certainly the show had its emotional moments that couldn't have been acted more brilliantly by Meryl Streep or Daniel Day-Lewis, because, put simply, these stars weren't acting (Heidi Montag's plastic-surgery reveal, also in the show's sixth and final season, was certainly no farce). Some of it was all too real. But the show creators' admission, in that final scene, that some of it wasn't seemed at the time like a faith-restoring gesture with the audience, a breach in MTV's fourth wall that let us know that we were all suspending our disbelief together.

So, for multiple reasons, my relationship to popular culture, media, and celebrity reached a turning point around 2010–11. In the decade prior, scripted television had given way to a rise in reality TV. Then, seemingly all of a sudden, social media provided the logical next step in a

systematic peeling back of the curtain that had, for so long, stood as a barrier between the audience and its favorite entertainment content. Ashton Kutcher's first tweet, dropped in 2009, marked a change in tide wherein Hollywood soon felt closer to home than I'd ever thought possible. My favorite stars and creators were now providing endless behind-the-scenes scoop while surfing the same feeds populated by our collective crazy aunts, our oversharing coworkers, and ourselves. In 2011, in an oft-referenced essay spurred by the public unraveling of sitcom king Charlie Sheen (ultimately replaced on his TV show by Kutcher), Bret Easton Ellis recognized these symptoms as feeding into a larger cultural shift from an "Empire" era to the one we're muddling through now.



ALEX ISRAEL AND BRET EASTON ELLIS, "FEELING AWESOME," 2015, ACRYLIC AND UV INK PRINTED ON CANVAS. PHOTO: JEFF MCLANE

You Can't Put the Genie Back in the Bottle

Before joining the second season of The Hills as its resident surfer-heartthrob, Brody Jenner had made his reality TV debut in *The Princes of Malibu* on the Fox network in 2005. That series lasted only six episodes before the network moved on to kissing other frogs, but it did pave the way for Jenner's parent (Caitlyn), his sisters (Kylie and Kendall), and their sisters (Kim and Kourtney Kardashian, who made a cameo on Princes, and Khloe, who did not) to launch a celeb-reality vehicle of their own on E! in 2007. *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (KUWTK) began as a Calabasas twist on *The Brady Bunch* and has been the linchpin in the seemingly endless growth of the controversial family's power and influence ever since.

I'd like to take a moment to defend the Kardashians. It's not that I think they're perfect, or that I'm of the mindset that everyone should make a sex tape. What I love about their family is this: They value family. They promote an expanded idea of female beauty. They embrace interracial love. They work hard—American Dream hard—yet never complain about the workload or take their many opportunities for granted. Through Caitlin's story they have advanced the conversation around transgender life by immeasurable strides. And of course they're hilarious to watch and remind me to take comfort in knowing that all families are complicated, not just mine.

When I recently interviewed Kardashian mother hen Kris Jenner for the second season of my ongoing video project *As It Lays*, she showed up to my studio with a cameraman and a release form, which I gladly signed, hoping that our meeting might make the cut for the next season on E! But the fate of the show remains unsealed: the seventeenth season of *KUWTK* premiered this

past fall to a modest (if not lackluster) one million viewers, and rumors of cancellation swirled. The network forged ahead with the eighteenth season (we fans are in the midst of watching it right now), and despite Kourtney's decision to quit, or at least to restrict her appearances, a nineteenth and possibly final season was confirmed by Kris on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* just before the country went into lockdown. Still, while the televisual arm of the Jenner/Kardashian dynasty may be waning, the family's media influence and product lines continue to grow and thrive. Today, both Kim and her youngest sister—beauty mogul and direct-to-consumer pioneer Kylie Jenner—hold two of Instagram's top ten most influential user spots, with a combined total of more than three hundred million followers. What the Kardashians learned from reality TV (and what Kim learned during her prior stint as Paris Hilton's protégée) they applied to social media. In fact, they doubled down, edited their lives, made themselves more digestible, focused on producing self-mythologizing images and video clips, and broke the Internet, in the process cannibalizing the success of their own show and changing the world for the blingier. I love that the Kardashians clearly demonstrate how social media not only put the nail in the coffin of magazine culture as we once knew it but also began to replace TV culture as well.

Television didn't die—in fact, many say it's in a golden age. It evolved into binge-worthy marquee content available 24/7 on streaming platforms, which have to a large extent replaced the culture's need for movies. But movies haven't died, either; they've morphed into tentpole events, mostly brought to us by Disney, that you go to see on holidays in IMAX 3D. And events—conventions, conferences, festivals—have filled the need for public human interaction that's been markedly reduced in the era of personal computers, advanced mobile devices, dating apps, and Netflix-and-chillin' (see the Forbes article "Millennials Gone Mild"). Coming full circle, events also provide the content to post on the social media apps that all but eliminated the need for in-person human interaction to begin with. #Coachella, #BurningMan, #ComicCon, #NYFW, #ArtBaselMiamiBeach.

How each of these formats fulfills (or doesn't) my needs and expectations has shifted over time. All I ever wanted from lifestyle magazines and old television shows, and from reality TV—escapist pop distraction—is now simpler and easier to access and digest across social media platforms: on my iPhone's touchscreen I can double tap to like all the Kardashians. I can watch their lives unfolding in real time, and I don't have to sit through commercials or wait a week for the next episode (or a month for a new issue). Additionally, I can tell them what I think in the comments and let them (and everyone else following them) know that I'm there. I'm so much more enfranchised in their world.

City of Angelynes

Before the rise of reality TV and social media, for as long as I can remember, Angelyne (née Ronia Tamar Goldberg) has been a reliable presence in my life. The Barbie-doll blonde cruises the canyons and highways of Los Angeles in a bubblegum-pink Corvette, publicizing her name and image on billboards across the city for no apparent reason other than the goal of fame itself. Before Kim, before Paris, Angelyne achieved fame through groundbreakingly shameless self-promotion.

ANGELYNE AND HER PINK CORVETTE CIRCA 1992. PHOTO BY BARRY KING/WIREIMAGE

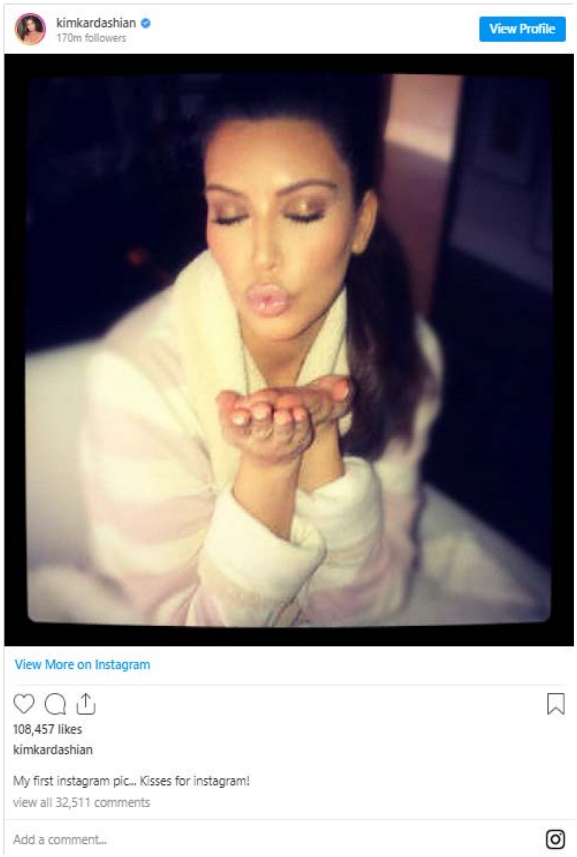
Cultural critic Sean Monahan has a theory about why Los Angeles embraced social media so wholeheartedly: because it's not a place that's *trying* to change the world. Unlike New York and San Francisco, he asserts, "LA doesn't presume to be building the future, merely inhabiting it." It's an amazing point that I had never considered, but there are also a few other reasons LA may have adapted so well to the new MO. For starters, the foundation built by mainstream Hollywood—from movies to television to reality TV—and its periphery (e.g., Angelyne) was already well established here in Southern California. Los Angeles had the stars, the would-be stars, and both the infrastructure and the mindset to produce new stars out of regular people fresh off the Greyhound bus. The star system was ready and waiting to evolve into its next incarnation.

As twenty-first-century screens became smaller and smaller and user-created content exploded, social media's savviest students could emulate the production value of frictionless Hollywood fantasy (now reality TV fantasy) with little more than an HD digital camera, user-friendly software, and decent natural light. To entice an audience and corral influence, the content simply has to be sticky. Thanks to the efforts of Empire-era Hollywood, many users already understood LA's psychedelic sunsets, perfect human bodies, sunshine, palm trees, wellness obsessions, and designer pets (RIP Tinkerbell). LA was already sticky, and at the onset of the past decade's social media gold rush, the city's users had a running-head-start advantage. As successful pioneers can attest, aspiring influencers had to understand just three things: 1) visibility is currency, 2) repetition is key, and 3) there is no risk of overexposure.

Love Thy Neighbor and Her Selfie

Kim's first Instagram post arrived in 2012. It was, you guessed it, a selfie. It was around the selfie that the concept of visibility as currency, for me, truly crystallized. In 2011 the hashtag #selfie first appeared on Instagram. At the end of 2012 Time magazine declared "selfie" one of the year's top ten buzzwords. By 2013 it had been added to the Oxford English Dictionary. Little by little, selfies became the building blocks of a whole new language that defines how millennials live their lives: through self-branding. With Instagram filters, iPhone's portrait mode, and the Facetune app at one's fingertips, achieving the highly produced look of advertising was suddenly easy. In a couple of taps and clicks, anyone could become a brand, sell themselves, sell

products directly to consumers, and amass fame, fortune, and influence with no more hardware than a smartphone in their pocket, working at the speed of swipe.



As Instagram took the world by storm, yes, of course, the Justins and Beyoncés shot up the social media food chain in rapid measure, as was to be expected. But there was also an entirely new crop of stars who couldn't have sold out Madison Square Garden but were vying for attention and getting it nonetheless: Who are Emma Chamberlain, Cameron Dallas, and Lil Miquela, and why do they have millions of followers? Just what is it that makes them so different, so appealing?

Social media disrupted the Empire-era fame hierarchy as visibility came to replace traditional notions of "talent." One no longer had to be a great singer, dancer, actor, musician, athlete, writer, comedian, painter, etc., to gain cultural influence. One just had to be good at self-promotion. I'd go so far as to say that the concepts of "talent" and "self-promotion" have become almost interchangeable. To be fair, self-promotion isn't as simple or straightforward a proposition as one might initially think: I wouldn't dare *try* to keep up with the Kardashians. And I wouldn't presume to know what may or may not go viral. Fame works in mercurial ways.

On October 8, 2019, just this past fall, the New York Post published an article covering twenty-two-year-old Malcolm Abbott's reaction to the sentencing of his wealthy parents, Gregory and Marcia, to one month of imprisonment, 250 hours of community service, and $90,000 in combined fines for their role in the infamous college admissions scandal. The press had a field day over the trials, which gave new irony to two of the famous defendants' show titles, *Desperate Housewives* and *Full House*. One detail not linked to either Felicity Huffman or Lori Loughlin piqued my curiosity—and yes, it's all about Malcolm. The Post caught up with the

aspiring rapper, who grew up between New York and Aspen and goes by the alias "Billa," while he was smoking a blunt on Fifth Avenue and acting notably blasé about the situation at home. An Instagram-related detail from the article stuck with me: "[Billa] was ecstatic to get his blue-checkmark verification on the app last night." The media circus surrounding his family had its silver lining for the young MC: he had attained coveted verification status on Instagram and was one small step further along on his path toward celebrity and influence.

Fifteen Minutes

The history of regular people achieving far-reaching renown in Southern California runs deeper than Angelyne—the Louds of the 1973 PBS docuseries *An American Family* were from Santa Barbara. But in the 1960s in New York City, there was an even earlier maker of amateur superstars, a prophet who understood the future of fame better than anyone. He absorbed the changing new world around him in order to reflect it back to all of us, like a mirror, through his art.

"Mind you, I'm not saying that Andy Warhol doesn't have any talent, because obviously he has some; he has to. But I can't put my finger on exactly what it is that he's talented at, except that he's a genius as a self-publicist."

ANDY AND HIS BRILLO BOXES, 1964. PHOTO BY MARIO DE BIASI\MONDADORI VIA GETTY IMAGES

I urge you to reread the above quotation substituting Donald Trump's or Kim Kardashian's name for Warhol's (and using the appropriate pronoun as needed). You might notice how the quote rings as true as it did when it was originally published, in 1982. The words are Truman Capote's, and when I came across them in Jean Stein's oral history/biography *Edie: American Girl*, they zapped me with a white-hot reminder of just how advanced Andy's methods and attitudes really had been, and how much they had contributed to the fame-defining logistics of my generation.

I think of Andy as the ultimate consumer. All the things he could buy ended up right there in his work: tomato soup, soda pop, Brillo pads, flowers, Hollywood stars, and even the news (bad, sensationalist, tabloid, advertisements, comics, etc.). After the war, with the country in boom and New York City his oyster, so much of what Andy did was both strikingly novel and refreshingly democratic. He brilliantly outlined the evenhandedness of American consumerism in that famous

quote about how everyone, rich or poor, drinks the same Coke. Today, our most novel, democratic objects of consumption are each other. We consume each other and sell ourselves on social media, paying in follows and likes to grant everyone the same chance at going viral and gaining influence, which can then be capitalized on ad infinitum. We are the brands, the products, the Campbell's Soups and Marilyn Monroes of 2020.

Kanye 2024

As we enter this new decade, a logical juncture for self-reflection, I've worked here to describe and analyze the ever-changing entertainment culture I inherited as a young artist on the brink of my professional life. I've been closely observing, participating in, and digesting it and its wide-reaching impact through my art, but until now I haven't had the time or focus to synthesize the data and experiences as text. For whatever reason—maybe it's the ten-year mark—2020 feels like the perfect time to finally write.

Ultimately, I'm not a punk. I've passively ridden the corporate-fueled wave of new technology since welcoming the Internet into my life as a high-school student, and to a large extent I've become complacent about much of what it offers: I've embraced its platforms, accepted its algorithms, and watched myself develop in its ethos. It might seem strange—and I get this—to have spent so much time thinking and making art about, for example, the evolution of reality TV and social media instead of, say, the politics and policies that are displacing so many at our nation's borders and around the world today. But in Los Angeles, entertainment and politics have been inextricably linked since before my birth. From Reagan's rise to the presidency to Bill Clinton's saxophone playing on "The Arsenio Hall Show" (which inspired my fourth-grade self to take lessons) to the Governator—for as long as I can remember, it has seemed to me that fans are voters and vice versa. The current president of the United States was once a prime-time reality TV star, and his go-to form of communication is the tweet. We must not forget that popular culture and media are key to understanding political developments in our sometimes hard-to-swallow late-capitalist society.

With as much information as I could gather about the energies unfolding around me, with my intuition and the winds of youthful optimism in my sails, I began to show what I would consider my first fully formed works of art in 2010. In January of that year I was preparing my graduate-school thesis exhibition; planning the launch of a line of sunglasses, Freeway Eyewear; and building the website for an accompanying web series (and product-placement vehicle), *Rough Winds*. Ten years later, it's January 2020 and I'm making the final preparations for an exhibition of new *Self-Portraits* that opens mid-month at Gagosian Grosvenor Hill, London, my first solo show in the United Kingdom.

When it comes to deciding what to do or to make, I lean on everything: my continuing education, my observations and conversations, my thinking about and processing of all the data that glides across my screens. I try to make sense of the world I know, to absorb it and translate it both visually, through the making of objects, and personally, through the actions of my daily life. When David Byrne's voice rhetorically asked "How did I get here?" over the car radio this morning, I could take an ounce of comfort in knowing that, for me, much of the answer to that has now been captured in this text.

Profile Pic

My self-portrait was first rendered digitally in 2011 as the logo for *As It Lays*, my DIY online talk show (a.k.a. user-generated content). In homage to *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, the self-portrait logo appears in a morphing dissolve over video footage of my actual head in the opening-credits sequence of each episode.

LEFT: ISRAEL'S LOGO FOR "AS IT LAYS" (2012). RIGHT: HITCHCOCK'S ICONIC SILHOUETTE

When I made *As It Lays*, I was determined that it live both in the physical spaces of the art world and also online, where anyone could find it. I remember being a student, reading about video art, and never being able to watch more than a brief clip of an important piece here or there on YouTube or on the rudimentary website of some faraway museum I couldn't visit in person. In conjunction with the work's premiere at Reena Spaulings Fine Art in New York in February 2012, I decided to release the first thirty episodes over the course of that winter/spring season on YouTube, on a lifestyle blog called *Purple Diary*, and on the proprietary website asitlays.com. It was important to me that the work be accessible, seen, and not precious.

As the project entered the world and momentum slowly built around it, I couldn't shake the logo from my mind. Soon, I made it my Facebook profile picture. Despite the embarrassment I felt about putting myself in the work as well as translating my head into a would-be emoji, I remained fully committed to doing so because, somehow, intuitively, I felt a change in tide. A wave of selfies, self-branding, and visibility was just appearing on the horizon, and I (convinced that an insistence on myself, on my image, was urgent) decided to surf it. I embraced the logo as a symbol for my work, embraced myself as a brand, and ultimately brought Self-Portrait into the world as an art object and also as a sticker, a billboard, a mural, a postcard, a pin, a keychain, and a luggage tag.

As a physical artwork, I wanted my *Self-Portrait* to look and feel like Los Angeles. I chose to produce it in fiberglass and acrylic paint—materials used to make surfboards, custom cars, and movie sets—to connect it to the aesthetic history of Southern California. I scaled the object to my height: sixty-nine inches. The graphic logo is framed by a bright-white bullnosed border to give it the look and feel of my favorite products designed in Cupertino by Apple—a nod to the hardware that services the digital realm from which the logo was originally born.

ALEX ISRAEL, "SELF-PORTRAITS," 2013 ACRYLIC ON FIBERGLASS, INSTALLED AT ISBRYTAREN, STOCKHOLM. PHOTO: JEAN-BAPTISTE BERANGER

Once the object's physicality had been determined, it was time to repeat, permute, combine, and imply an expanding, unstoppable visibility. I sourced colorways from images of tropical fish and flowers, from the 2009 film *Avatar*, and from the works of David Hockney, Ken Price, and others. For the first exhibition of these works, in 2013, I produced twenty uniquely colored examples. For a follow-up, I hung five not on walls but on metal wires, stacked and floating in space, like the virtual record covers one could once flip through on an iPod when looking for the perfect song to play next.

Big Heads

Technology evolved, and so did my work. In 2012, its popularity surging, Instagram was acquired by Facebook. The following year, to compete with the launch of the Vine app (and its video-driven feed), Instagram introduced video sharing. Sponsored posts (advertisements) and direct messaging (to compete with the popular messaging feature on Snapchat) soon followed. Social media's capacity for communication was expanding, and storytelling soon became key (even before the "Story" feature launched on Instagram in 2016). As everyone's content became more confessional and diaristic, like the narrative-driven content of the reality TV shows it was replacing, I soon felt compelled, in my work, to move beyond the color-blocked graphic logo and into my headspace itself. I began to source imagery from the streaming thoughts that made up the story of my life. Each new work could now be self-promotional and brand-reinforcing and provide a window onto my #currentmood.

ALEX ISRAEL, "SELF-PORTRAIT (SELFIE AND STUDIO FLOOR)," 2014, ACRYLIC AND BONDO ON FIBERGLASS. PHOTO: JOSHUA WHITE. COLLECTION OF THE BROAD, LOS ANGELES.

Making the “Big Heads”—as we started calling these new, photorealistic *Self-Portraits* around the studio—begins with photographs. The photos are edited and composited in Photoshop until a final mock-up is ready to be painted. The mocked-up image is emailed to Warner Bros., the movie studio, where it is printed at full scale to be pounced with charcoal dust onto one of my larger (now eight-feet-tall) profile-shaped fiberglass panels, also built on the Warner Bros. backlot. Finally, Andrew Pike, the studio’s last remaining full-time scenic artist, paints the image on the panel in acrylic, using both brush and airbrush in a traditional Hollywood technique. The combination of airbrush spray and hand brushwork approximates the more time-consuming efforts of blending oil paint. Seen from a distance, or through a camera’s lens, painterly evidence becomes difficult, if not impossible, to detect.

Technology shifts, the world changes, and painting’s obsolescence is always on the table. Still, for reasons outside art history’s constant warning that painting is dying or dead (namely, advancements in special effects and backdrop-scale digital printing), the scenic-painting department at Warner Bros. was on its last legs when I discovered it online and made my first visit there in the fall of 2010. I wanted to commission a painted backdrop for the set of *As It Lays*, and Warner Bros. was the last major studio that still had an on-site department—namely, Pike—to handle analog requests such as mine.

ALEX ISRAEL, "SKY BACKDROP," 2013, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS. PHOTO: JOSHUA WHITE. COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK.

As my relationship with the studio progressed, the backdrop I commissioned for *As It Lays* was followed by the development and production of my *Sky Backdrops*, *Flats*, *Tiled Flats*, and finally *Self-Portraits* (and later my collaborative *Text Paintings* and *Waves*). I became a studio regular. I'd bring people to visit and learn about my production process, always explaining that I never wanted to be an artist standing on the perimeter, pointing a critical finger at the Hollywood system to expose how entertainment manipulates us. I'd share my impression that, post-Empire, we all already knew that every picture of Kim Kardashian was photoshopped, that Justin Bieber's voice was auto-tuned, and that reality TV was (as *The Hills* had admitted) maybe more production than reality. The reason I chose to make my work on the lot, I'd explain, was to be as close to the Hollywood system as possible, in the hope that some of its stardust—that magical, metaphysical ingredient that incites our basic human desire to suspend disbelief—might rub off on my art.

The decision to paint (rather than print) my color-blocked *Self-Portraits* and photographic "Big Heads" was organic. At this point, aside from my work, there's little else keeping the Warner Bros. scenic-painting department alive. Through my relationship with Warner Bros., I feel a connection to a piece of Los Angeles's unique aesthetic history. Nostalgia plays a large role in my work—as it might for any artist who deals in personal history, the place of their upbringing, and the culture that's shaped their life. While it sometimes stings like a cipher of regression, nostalgia can also be useful as a bridge to the new. I think about the many filters on Instagram that make an iPhone photo look as inviting as a vintage Polaroid. I remember first hearing Lana Del Rey's haunting, timeless voice laid over a hip-hop beat and realizing that I was drawn to her sound precisely because it was both familiar and new at the same time. As a foil, the Old Hollywood nostalgia of scenic art folds perfectly into my thinking about cultural evolution, digitization, and the future of entertainment.

LEFT: ALEX ISRAEL, "SELF-PORTRAIT (ARCADE), AFTER @LILMIQUELA," 2018-19, ACRYLIC AND BONDS ON FIBERGLASS. PHOTO: LUCY DAWKINS RIGHT: A PHOTOGRAPH FROM @LILMIQUELA'S INSTAGRAM.

While I've adapted and committed myself to the digital experience of art on a screen, I remain equally committed to the experience of art IRL. As an expression of labor and time so foreign to the speed of Insta, a photorealistic painting in a contemporary art gallery is a rarer and stranger sight today than ever before. A printed *Self-Portrait* might translate no differently in person than it does across a screen, but a hand-painted one most certainly does. And if that hand-painted image is disguised as Instagram-ready content—a glossy selfie or a filtered landscape—then the overall effect of the work could be ever more surreal for a viewer standing before it, having to reconcile qualities both analog and digital, old and new.

The Audience Is Listening

Afew years ago I was invited to attend an intimate conference in Moscow that coincided with the opening of the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art. George Lucas, also a guest, raised his hand during a Q&A to express a complaint: he just couldn't understand why so many young people at concerts feel the need to watch and record large portions of the show through their smartphones. He was noticeably agitated by this notion, despite the fact that he, a major force in the advancement of audio and visual effects, bears a large share of responsibility for the hypersensory experience of modern entertainment and desensitization of our culture to real life (e.g., live performance). My initial thought upon hearing his remark was: why is he so concerned? And then: maybe because he knows he's partially to blame? And finally, I was compelled to think about the nature of this phenomenon, and whether or not it's in fact related to collective overstimulation.

I take videos at concerts all the time, and it's definitely safe to say that most of that footage never sees the light of day. For me, holding up my phone to watch and record a live show isn't just about making memories or culling clips to post on social media. I find that condensing a massive spectacle to the space of a five-inch screen can make my real-time viewing experience much more effective: watching through my phone allows for closer looking and listening in an otherwise sensory-overloaded environment. What Lucas might be missing is the relationship this phenomenon has to painting. The human need to shrink the experiences of life into the space of a rectangle—moving or still, digital or handmade—isn't breaking news. What's the moral of the story? Well, I believe that technology forces us to examine the world anew, but it also reminds us that some stories are simply retold over and over, again and again, so that a live pop concert

seen through an iPhone or a Renaissance portrait hung in a palazzo might equally inspire a deeper consideration or fuller examination of our world.

Deep Impact

In 2005 the first user-generated video was uploaded to YouTube. In 2009 David Robbins's seminal essay "High Entertainment" heralded an era wherein everyone with a computer and web access, now able to create their own quality content, could also access a worldwide distribution network that couldn't be easier to plug into. Robbins presaged a tearing down of the long-existing wall between art and entertainment, suggesting that a creative middle ground fueled by "independent imaginations" could now emerge and triumph. When I was a graduate student, reading "High Entertainment" gave me the confidence to continue pursuing a path toward making products and publishing videos (and eventually a film) online, some of which I didn't and don't define as art. It also helped me to think outside the binary structures the Empire-era art world seemed to impose on young and impressionable talent: the idea that the marketplace (galleries, auctions, and private collections) and the critical establishment (museums, scholarly publications, and academia) are the only two viable contexts for art, and that one must choose to align with either the market or the symbolic value system.

In 2016, when I began to consider the options for distributing my film *SPF-18*, I worked with talent agents and met with executives at Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon as well as a couple of smaller streaming start-ups. I was planning a tour of American high schools to share the film with students but also looking for a partner to stream it online. I'd made a small, quirky, independent art-movie-with-a-message for teens (about how creativity can help us find our voices), and neither financial remuneration nor critical acclaim was ever the point. As I attempted to explain this to an executive on a fateful conference call, fumbling and failing to describe both my motivations and the experimental nature of the piece, he gently interrupted to say that he completely understood my position and that it sounded like the goal of the project was, simply put, impact. If Robbins's phrase "high entertainment" was a way to define content made somewhere between art and entertainment, and the "independent imagination" was his moniker for the creator of such content, then "impact" was, for me, a perfect way to describe the potentially nonbinary goals of such pursuits. We hear it all the time in other fields—impact investing, impact advertising, and so on—but it had never fully occurred to me that "impact" could be the goal of an artwork until that call. The idea of creating impact through visual art aligns perfectly with the technology of social media and the Internet, the fluidity they have afforded our culture, and the desire to gain traction, friction, and visibility in the rush of the feed.

Thank You, Next

Thursday morning, October 5, 2017, I pulled into the parking lot of Hendersonville High in a suburb of Nashville, Tennessee. The redbrick-clad school's welcoming art teacher (the epitome of Southern hospitality) had arranged for me to present my film and speak with the students about being an artist. The auditorium, full of giggles and hormones as the opening credits rolled, sported an AV kit so advanced that it was only logical to later learn that the equipment had been donated to her alma mater by "Miss Americana" Taylor Swift herself. Everything was going smoothly—laughter at all the right moments—until just under twenty minutes in, when one character, Penny, broaches the subject of sex with her cousin, Camilla. As if she'd been tricked

(she hadn't, she'd even been sent an advance copy!), that welcoming art teacher's temperament quickly soured, and to the boos of her students and the shock of my tour manager and me, she turned off the film in the middle of the special assembly "in the name of abstinence!"

NOAH CENTINEO ON THE SET OF "SPF-18" (2015). PHOTO: RACHEL CHANDLER

SPF-18 had landed on Netflix just one week prior (with what I think was an overly conservative PG-13 rating), and as I predicted, it received no rave reviews and made not a dime of profit. In fact, except for my favorite Bible Belt art teacher's, there was disappointingly little reaction to take in. However, all that changed one year later when cast member Noah Centineo, an unknown eighteen-year-old actor when he had auditioned for me a couple of years earlier, broke through. As a result of Netflix's algorithm, my film was suddenly being suggested to everyone who enjoyed Centineo's viral star-turning vehicle, *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*, and after resting dormant for a year, *SPF-18* was suddenly trending and fan DMs were rolling in. However far it may have reached, however many teens may have watched (Netflix doesn't reveal its analytics), the film had found its audience and gotten its shot at making an impact.

The ways and habits of millennials are by now old news. Gen Z, having recently nominated the first in what will surely be a string of politicized young heroes (see Emma Gonzalez and Greta Thunberg) and entertainment stars (Billie Eilish, Zendaya, and even Centineo), has emerged and stepped up to the plate. It's fun to think about where these Internet and touch-screen natives will take us—many predict that key millennial ideologies that came to fore during this past decade will not be passed down. Working with Snapchat to create a series of augmented-reality lenses for a project last year, I learned that the app has been more successful than Instagram in commanding Gen Z's free time. Snapchat offers an ephemeral and creative way to communicate with friends, as opposed to the launchpad, soapbox, and archiving structures that define its status-obsessed competitors—evidence that the visibility/self-branding industrial complex is already cracking at its foundation.

Maybe not everybody needs to be a brand, and maybe the old binaries of Empire will finally fail for good, too, to make way for an even more fluid, more impact-oriented world like the one teenagers everywhere are already seeming to define (see the widely circulated trend report "GenExit" by K-HOLE). So much has been said about the relationships between technology and art, entertainment and politics, politics and fashion, and of course there's Robbins's essay on art and entertainment... I could go on. As these various fields continue to overlap and meld, is it possible that eventually we'll let go of such categories altogether? The answer is: probably not. Art doesn't seem to want to die, no matter how hard artists and others have tried to kill it. But

isn’t it those efforts and attempts to destroy it that somehow push it forward *and* reinforce its power, all at once? How Gen Z will ultimately challenge and change the creative landscape is hard to predict, but I’m genuinely excited to see what they make of it all and what they make to post on TikTok. So, right now, I’m at home in my slippers under coronavirus quarantine, watching the world change again, watching the kids dance for their lives, and reminding myself that the future’s as sublime as ever.