

Tanish Misraim

Using Walls, Floors,
and Ceilings

Alex Israel



About the Series

Using Walls, Floors, and Ceilings is a series of artist commissions at the Jewish Museum, initiated in 2013. Artists from around the globe have been invited to create new art or adapt a work for placement in the entrance lobby. The project builds upon *Using Walls*, a 1970 exhibition of commissioned artworks installed both within and beyond the gallery space of the museum's Warburg Mansion. That series, curated by Susan Tumarin Goodman, began with the premise that the wall is not just a surface on which to display a work of art, but can be a component of it. Site specificity was crucial to many of the resulting projects. Among the participating artists were Sol LeWitt, Robert Ryman, Richard Tuttle, Mel Bochner, and Richard Artschwager.

Forty-four years later, the Museum revisits this idea in *Using Walls, Floors, and Ceilings*, curated by Kelly Taxter, Associate Curator.

About the Artist

Alex Israel was born in 1982 in Los Angeles, California. He received a BA from Yale University, and an MFA from the USC Roski School of Fine Arts. Selected solo exhibitions include *#AlexIsrael*, Astrup Fearnley Museet, Oslo, Norway (2016); *Sightings*, The Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas (2015); *Alex Israel at the Huntington*, The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, California (2015); *Alex Israel, Le Consortium, Dijon* (2013). His work is in the collections of The Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; Centre Pompidou, Paris; and the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Israel lives and works in Los Angeles.

November 4, 2016 – April 23, 2017

Alex Israel

Self-Portrait (Mom)

The work of Los Angeles native Alex Israel is inextricable from the myths and culture of his hometown. For many, Los Angeles is synonymous with Hollywood, which is marked by a sign that demarcates its hills like a white picket fence around a suburban home. The Hollywood Sign was originally built in 1923 to announce a new housing development called “Hollywoodland,” and it has remained in situ ever since, an enduring symbol of hopes and dreams. Israel works in traditional media such as painting, sculpture, and installation. His practice extends to entertainment and commercial enterprises, such as the talk show *AS IT LAYS*, a forthcoming feature film *SPF-18*, and a line of sunglasses called Freeway. Across all of these activities, Israel investigates the notion of the American Dream, the idea that anyone from anywhere, with a combination of hard work and luck, can rise from a Nobody to a Somebody. That concept is alive

and well in Los Angeles, where countless flock to become a star — or at least look like one.

Israel's paintings are made on the Warner Brothers Studio backlot, within the scenic art department's workshop. Backdrop painters have largely become unemployed as a result of digital printing, and now Israel, rather than Warner Brothers, is the department's biggest client. Their talents make the fakeness of Hollywood feel real, and our shared willingness — and sometimes need — to believe in artifice is essential to Israel's art.

Self-Portrait (Mom) (2016) is a painting of the artist's mother made within an outsize silhouette of his head in profile. It was executed in the traditional Hollywood scenic style, a combination of airbrush and brushwork. Israel's *Self-Portrait* first appeared in 2012 as the logo for *AS IT LAYS* and subsequently as an ongoing series of color studies on fiberglass panels. Now, as the series has evolved, within each are scenes and symbols fundamental to picturing Los Angeles: the Dodgers baseball team, a palm tree, a director's chair. Israel enacts a not-so-subtle branding by intertwining his own image with those of the city, echoing the silhouette of a big apple, filled in with New York City's most iconic buildings.

Self-Portrait (Mom) shows Israel's mother standing on a beach, a timelessly elegant, confident woman, comfortable with her place in the world. It feels like the example photo in a store-bought frame or one appropriated from the all-American, aspirational advertisements of Ralph Lauren. Lauren was born



Self-Portrait (Mom)
Alex Israel, 2016.

- Ralph Lifshitz in the Bronx, and he built one of the world's most successful fashion and lifestyle brands. The preponderance of successful Jews in the New York garment industry parallels those in Hollywood. Warner Brothers was founded in the early 1900s by Jewish immigrants, and Jews continue to be industry power-players to this day. Their success is a great assimilation story, an example of the American Dream that preoccupies the imagination of Israel, who is also of Jewish descent.

Indeed, characters from television and film have propagated Jewish stereotypes, including the *yiddishe mamaleh* (Jewish mother). She is loving, yet smothering, and offers unsolicited food, observations, and advice to her children as she simultaneously riddles them with guilt. Examples include cringe-worthy characters like Sylvia, Fran Drescher's materialistic, whiny mother on television's *The Nanny*, and, on the flip side, the ultra-groovy Roz Focker from the film *Meet the Fockers*. Israel's Mom stands in stark contrast to both. She speaks more to the ideals of ease and beauty than to struggle and eccentricity.

The "portrait of the artist's mother" has a long history within art. Perhaps most celebrated is the American artist James McNeil Whistler's *Symphony in Grey and Black, No. 1* (1871), also known as "Whistler's Mother." A stark study in color and composition, Whistler's unsentimental rendering of the most sentimental of subjects was considered radical, even offensive, in its time. But perhaps more than any other example, *Self-Portrait (Mom)*, with its subject's body slightly turned, a glint of a smile across her

lips, the horizon line just meeting her shoulders, evokes the most iconic of all female portraits: Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (1503–04). Israel manipulates the Hollywood machine to fabricate his own legend, and *Self-Portrait (Mom)* raises his mother from an unknown to a glossy icon. It is also a double portrait, a story of mother and child, of bringing the artist into the world and fostering his talents.

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