

Mark Grotjahn & Alex Israel: In Conversation

The two artists discuss their shared affection for Justin Bieber and Instagram, as well as the information superhighways found in Grotjahn's work.

Mark Grotjahn is best known for his geometric paintings. His works straddle the line between representation and abstraction. Born in Pasadena, California, in 1968, he began his career in the mid-1990s, working in oil, colored pencil, and various sculptural mediums. His work is in many important international collections, including The Broad Art Foundation, the Pinault Collection, LACMA, MoCA Los Angeles, the New York Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim, the Whitney, and Tate Modern, London.

Late last year, Grotjahn sat down with fellow artist and California native Alex Israel at his Los Angeles-based studio. The duo delighted in their shared enthusiasm for Justin Bieber and Instagram—which has become an artistic medium for Grotjahn—and delved into questions of exhibitionism, rule-breaking, and self-indulgence in art. (Israel's work, unabashedly pop, revels in the manufactured seductions of Hollywood.) To mark the occasion, Grotjahn has also created a special-edition Garage Magazine cover.

Alex Israel: I saw you this summer, but you didn't see me, at a Justin Bieber concert at the Staples Center. What are your thoughts on the Biebs?

Mark Grotjahn: I think I love Justin Bieber. I love his music.

AI: Me too.

MG: I remember telling you once that I liked "Sorry," which had just come out.

AI: I think we actually spoke about "Love Yourself." There was a lyric in there that you liked.

MG: What's the lyric?

AI: "My mama don't like you and she likes everyone." Justin Bieber seems to enjoy rebelling. Do you relate to him in that way?

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MG: I don't know a lot about Justin's rebellion because I didn't follow him much until recently. Plus, I haven't watched TV in about eight years. I see him as this sweet kid who got some tattoos and then toughened up a bit.

AI: Bieber shrewdly plays with his audience's expectations, shifting gears from productivity to acting out. From making massive hit songs to going haywire on Twitter, vandalizing his neighbor's house, speeding on the highway, or erasing his Instagram account. Were you a rebellious teenager?

MG: Yes. I got arrested a lot. For silly things, like pounding nickels into the size of quarters. Got busted at a video arcade, for example.

AI: I didn't know one could do that.

MG: For me, there was nothing better than taking a nickel and turning it into a slug. Which is interesting because I'm actually doing slugs for my new paintings. It's like getting something for nothing.

AI: What's a slug?

MG: Something that's the shape of a coin but is not a coin. I also got arrested for stealing and public intoxication. I did drugs, but I always made sure I did my schoolwork. As a kid, the people I looked up to the most were people like Jim Morrison, Led Zeppelin, Pollock. People making things.

AI: Would you rather get stung by a jellyfish on your face or on your private parts?

MG: I've already been stung by a jellyfish on my private parts. I've been stung all over that general area. I wouldn't want my eyes fucked with.

AI: Which myth of the artist is most interesting to you?

MG: Well, myth means it's not true. I'm not sure that any of them are particularly interesting, but if you're asking which is the one that I relate to most, or the one that I think about, or the one that my mind keeps going to—the artist whose life is falling apart. I think that's it. Who's making good work but is just completely fucking up their lives and is beyond help. As ridiculous as that is, there's still something I find appealing about it. Which maybe points to an interest in complete abandon, right?

AI: Do you feel connected to that?



Mark Grotjahn, "Untitled (Creamsicle)," 2007. Courtesy Mark Grotjahn.

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MG: I feel connected but I am not that.

AI: And being in that place or headspace, is that a source of inspiration for your work?

MG: I don't think it's for me, certainly not right now. The best is when I lose myself in the actual, physical making of the thing. That's my favorite feeling. It's like I'm a professional ice skater and there's nothing I can't do. And it's fucking perfect and everything in my brain is firing that there's nothing else, but that feeling is rare. I think most artists get that from time to time and it's great. Then there are all the other times when I'm half in, half out. Or I'm completely out.

AI: Do you consider Instagram to be an extension of your work?

MG: Yes, I consider it to be an extension—it's also a studio for experimentation. Not everything on it is necessarily my art, but...

AI: What is tic-tac-toe about for you? I'm referring to this project that you've developed on Instagram, using the grid.

MG: I have an obsessive-compulsive side. Tic-tac-toe has allowed me to indulge, and to divide, perfectly. I use the grid to divide images, and to add images, and divide again.

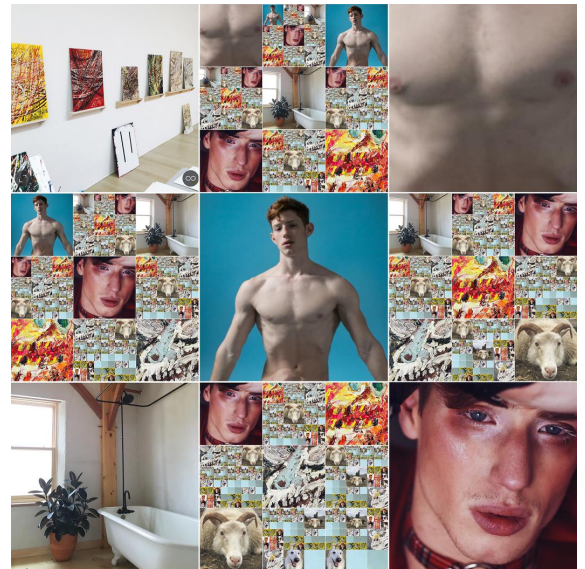
AI: So is it related to math?

MG: It's about splitting and printing images, and then splitting them again. And then adding something else, another image, because it's fucking great, or the color is great, or the person in it is great, or it's like, "Are you going to add these images? And you're going to fucking post that?" I'm not doing this in silence—I do have a secret account, on which I post way more porn, and there's no thrill, nothing. No one is looking. No followers, no likes. There isn't the risk.

AI: And you've been posting, publicly, lots of images that feel like lost stills from the Girls Gone Wild videos, or stock photographs of barn animals.

MG: Barn animals, yes!

AI: What about the screenshots of album covers from 1980s classic Top 40 hits that you're constantly posting? Are those the songs you're listening to?



Instagram tic-tac-toe by Mark Grotjahn.
Model: Kevin Adrian at Heroes New York.
Courtesy Mark Grotjahn.

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MG: I used to post them only while I was listening to them—like I had to take a picture of them while I was listening to them. For a while, that's what I've been listening to—1980s classics and new wave.

AI: Could something like a new wave hit ever inspire an artwork for you?

MG: I grew up in the '80s, so a lot of this is the music I grew up with. It brings about a kind of nostalgia that makes me sad. In some ways, I use music as a downer, to slow me down. It makes me feel more contemplative and at ease.

AI: Do you think these songs, their rhythms or melodies, can be seen or felt in your paintings? You told me once that, as a kid, you were inspired by Kandinsky, who was very inspired by music.

MG: Some of the new things I'm doing have a more musical feel to them—but no, not really. I don't want to be that specific. Sometimes I want my paintings to have a certain kind of vibe.

AI: But not a direct reference to any actual song, for example?

MG: No, but I do operate in the real world. I'm a human being in this thing.

AI: Yes, and you've reminded us of this on Instagram. Particularly in a series of posts where we saw you kicking a beach ball into a light post. Would you say that you're a performer?

MG: I'm an exhibitionist. Instagram got me in touch with how much of an exhibitionist I am. I'm a person who's putting stuff out there. I think it's obvious that I'm an exhibitionist. Most artists feel they have something to say and they want to say it in a public sphere. That's true for me, but most of my art gets seen in galleries.

AI: So Instagram is a tool that enables you to be public in a completely different way?

MG: It ended up being that. At the beginning, I didn't know what it was or what it was going to be like. Now you can see things on my Instagram that also exist in my painting. I mean like this painting here—it's divided up, like the tic-tac-toe posts. Then there's the kicking of the ball. You set up a goal, and it doesn't matter how many times you fail, you just have to keep going until you fucking hit it.



Mark Grotjahn, "Untitled (Top and Exterior Gates, Dewalt Masks M33.e)," 2014. Courtesy Mark Grotjahn.

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AI: This kind of exhibitionism finds an ironic counterpart in the fact that you make masks, and masks are generally used to hide or disguise oneself.

MG: I started making the masks out of boxes. When I first had the idea of making them, I thought about how an artist making a mask and putting it over his face is basically saying, "Look, I'm crazy. Look, I'm weird."

AI: A crazy exhibitionist.

MG: Exactly. But self-consciously an exhibitionist.

AI: Supposedly, people wear sunglasses when they don't want to be noticed, but you can also wear them when you do want to be noticed.

MG: Maybe there's a little bit of, "Look at me, I'm an idiot!" or, "Look at me, I can't believe I want you to look at me!"

AI: Your grandfather Martin Grotjahn was a well-known psychoanalyst. Were you close to him?

MG: He was the first person I drew with. He would draw in front of me and I remember the noises he made with his mouth as he drew.

AI: For him it was expressive, it was physical?

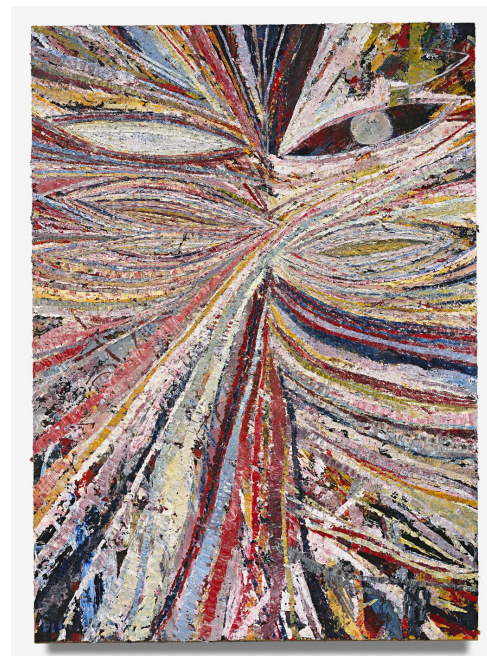
MG: They were cartoons and they were all about family. He was not just telling a story, he was documenting life.

AI: Do you think of your work as narrative at all, in that way?

MG: I don't like to.

AI: I guess any artistic practice exercised over time becomes inherently narrative when taken as a whole. Sometimes I look at your paintings, especially the Circus paintings, which have these sweeping, curved lines, and I enjoy seeing how within each line there are tons of little colored bits. They make me think of digital information traveling through wires. Is that something you've ever thought about? Is there a relationship between your work and the digital world, bits and bytes?

MG: I don't think about that at all, not with regard to my painting. I love how information travels on Instagram. But to me, the sweeping lines feel like the ball going up and then landing.



Mark Grotjahn, "Untitled (Face for Greece 843)," 2009. Courtesy Mark Grotjahn.

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AI: They have a musical quality as well, and sometimes I look at them and am reminded of maps—roads and freeways or highways. That might be what got me to thinking about wires, information superhighways.

MG: I do think about how much information there is in these paintings. I put in a lot of stuff that will ultimately make sense in some different kind of way.

AI: Could this abundance of information be understood or interpreted as a reflection of how much information we face in our media-saturated age?

MG: Because I have an active and obsessive eye, I'm interested in finding as much contentment as I possibly can. In my work I create problems and then solve them in order to feel peace.

AI: Who makes you starstruck?

MG: I think I would be very starstruck to meet Obama. Having said that, a few months ago I was leaving a restaurant with my wife and Mick Jagger walked in. I just put up my hands, victory style, and said "Yes!" And that wasn't a choice, that was a reflex.



Mark Grotjahn, "Untitled (Colored Butterfly White Background 10 Wings)," 2004. Courtesy Mark Grotjahn.

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