

YANN KEBBI

LAS VEGAS TRAVEL BOOK

February 8th – April 5th, 2025
Chaussée d'Ixelles 337 | 1050 Brussels

opening reception with the artist
on Saturday, February 8th starting at 11am

book signing session
on Saturday, February 8th starting at 3pm



A true virtuoso of graphic composition, Yann Kebbi crafts scenes brimming with intricate details, where geometry plays a prominent role. For Louis Vuitton Editions, he captured the oversized streets, hotels, and casinos of Las Vegas, delivering a striking interpretation. Starting February 8th, 2025, Martel BXL will exhibit the original works from this "Travel Book".

The late writer Dave Hickey spent nearly twenty years living in Las Vegas, during which he produced a classic essay about the neon capital: "Double or Quits". In one striking passage he describes the view from inside a car on the boulevard Yann Kebbi strolled and sketched:

"I remember a blue, summer evening about a week after my wife and I came to town. We were cruising down The Strip listening to loud music on the car radio when, kaboom! this operatic desert thunderstorm exploded all around us. The rain crashed down in sheets, engulfing everything. Light from the setting sun continued to banner in over the mountains, spangling through the plunging water. The Strip seethed and sizzled around us like a neon flash fire, colours bleeding on the windshield. Mile-high lightening trees crackled down the blue-black curve of the southern sky, and then, as if to summon up the dead, this heart-stopping clap of thunder... magically synchronised with the opening chords of Pink Floyd playing 'The Wall' on the car radio. That, I can assure you, was pretty apocalyptic and pretty exciting, too, but I didn't get worried about it. All I though was 'Home at Last!'"

Yann Kebbi never lived in Las Vegas, though his drawings have the precision, love, and vitality of Hickey's prose. Kebbi first visited the city in 2012, spending the properly prescribed amount of two days while on a cross-country trip. He returned ten years later in the giddy post-COVID time when Americans were suddenly encountering each other, and the world outside, once again. Las Vegas in the twenty-first century has become a place that, despite the apocalyptic dry heat, Americans are flocking

to, settling down in, and refashioning their lives in freshly built air-conditioned bliss. Kebbi's lines bring the heat and light of the place. He develops his images by filling multiple sketchbooks with swiftly observed colored pencil drawings completed on site. Back in his Paris studio, he assembles his horizontal compositions, sometimes using a thick black marker to try out the overall design. Once he has his chosen source material and design of the sheet in place, he creates the final drawing.

There are roughly three kinds of drawings here, all in a widescreen format: First, narrative vignettes that progress over a handful of images in which we track singers, dancers, walkers, and the light traces of objects in motion. Kebbi's searching lines, his iterative process of drawing and re-drawing, which calls to mind Alberto Giacometti as much as Saul Steinberg, hints at the way each individual lives inside their own consciousness – they are each animated from the inside.

Second, there are portraits of the architectural marvels and urban sprawl that have fascinated architects ever since the publication of Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi's 1972 book, "Learning from Las Vegas". And third, formal studies that focus on the endless corridors, hallways, and interiors which hold most visitors. Here Kebbi might show us the endless gambling hall, or the absurd Venetian canal existing simultaneously in a shopping mall and underneath a bright blue sky, or a play of electrical cords and rugs and elevator portals.

The cartoon character Elmo, or rather, a person wearing an Elmo costume appears in a handful of images, seemingly observing the proceedings. Maybe Elmo is a worker in this city split between the laborers facilitating the endless entertainment and the leisure seekers consuming it. Perhaps because of his ubiquity, I can't help thinking that Elmo stands in for all of us – another person in search of his place in the world.

This Las Vegas project is Yann Kebbi's contribution to the grand tradition of visual reportage, which had its most recent heyday the 1960s, with artists drawing cities and events in America and Europe for popular magazines. It's a genre that allows the artist to both tell stories both specific and epic, and in Kebbi's case, to do so simultaneously in color drenched drawings that convey the setting, streets, and expanse of Las Vegas as much as the people and attitudes that make it all function.

It is a wild, complex portrait, and one that should take its place with Hickey, Brown, Venturi and other intrepid, ecstatic chroniclers of the great city in the desert.

Dan Nadel

Dan Nadel is a writer and senior curator at the Lucas Museum of Narrative Art, set to open in 2025 in Los Angeles.

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