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Alex Prager

14 Nov 2014 – 19 Apr 2015

MEDIA KIT

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IMAGES AND INTERVIEWS,
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EXHIBITION INFORMATION

Alex Prager
14 November 2014 – 19 April 2015

NGV International
180 St Kilda Road
10am – 5pm, closed Tuesdays
Free entry

ngv.vic.gov.au

Alex Prager

MEDIA RELEASE

12 NOVEMBER 2014: Referencing the heightened drama and saturated colours of classic Hollywood cinema, self-taught Los Angeles-based artist Alex Prager presents her elaborately conceived photographs and films at the National Gallery of Victoria from 14 November. The self-titled exhibition is Prager's first solo show in Australia, and surveys her practice from the *Polyester* series, 2007, to her most recent body of work, *Face in the Crowd*, 2013.

Prager's intensely emotive and technicolour scenes feature a strangely familiar cast of characters; predominantly women, immaculately groomed and wearing wigs, fake eyelashes and adorned in retro fashion, who resemble actors of mid twentieth-century Hollywood. Characterised by the use of constructed sets, dramatic lighting, costumes and actors, and packed with emotion and human melodrama, her work openly references the aesthetics of artists and filmmakers including Alfred Hitchcock, Cindy Sherman and David Lynch.

Tony Ellwood, Director, NGV, said, 'We are delighted to present Alex Prager's evocative film and photography as part of the NGV's contemporary focus over summer. We have acquired three major works by Prager, including her acclaimed three-channel video *Face in the Crowd*, 2013, which was exhibited to much acclaim at the prestigious Art Basel art fair this year. These new acquisitions will be shown alongside twenty two other major works from the past seven years of Prager's prolific career.'

Initially working as a photographer, in 2010 Prager created her first short film, *Despair*, which the artist spoke of as being a 'full-sensory version' of her photographs. Complete with soaring string-based soundtrack, a large cast of characters and characteristically lurid colour scheme, it depicts a red-headed heroine, played by Bryce Dallas Howard, who reacts to a clearly distressing phone conversation by propelling herself out of an apartment window.

Prager's recent series *Face in the Crowd*, 2013, and accompanying three-channel video, examine the psychology of crowd behaviour. The series of photographs, staged to resemble specific sites frequented by Prager including Washington Square Park in New York, beaches, train stations, movie theatres and airports, were orchestrated on a Hollywood sound stage, and each participant's movements and appearance meticulously directed to create a complex tableaux of fascinating characters. The film sees a female protagonist, played by actress Elizabeth Banks, move in and out of a busy crowd, appearing at times curious about the throngs of people and, at other moments, tense and overwhelmed.

Born in Los Angeles in 1979, Alex Prager has exhibited at museums including The Museum of Modern Art in New York, The J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington DC, and Foam Museum in Amsterdam. She has also completed fashion editorial work for publications such as *Vogue* and *W Magazine*, and her short film *Touch of Evil*, commissioned by *The New York Times Magazine* and starring celebrity icons Brad Pitt, George Clooney and Kirsten Dunst, won a 2012 Emmy Award.

Alex Prager will present a free artist talk on Saturday 15 November, 1.30pm, to discuss her first exhibition in Australia. Visit ngv.vic.gov.au further information.

A free *Alex Prager* ebook has been produced in association with the artist, featuring a curatorial essay, biography and multimedia elements including images and video. It will be available from the NGV website from 12 November.

Alex Prager is on display at NGV International from 14 November 2014 to 19 April 2015. Open 10am–5pm, closed Tuesdays. Free entry.

Alex Prager
American 1979–
Cathy 2009
type C photograph
61.0 x 80.0 cm
Collection of the artist, Los Angeles and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York and Hong Kong
© Alex Prager, courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

Face in the Crowd, 2013

The open crowd is the true crowd, the crowd abandoning itself freely to its natural urge for growth. An open crowd has no clear feeling or idea of the size it may attain; it does not depend on a known building which it has to fill; its size is not determined; it wants to grow indefinitely and what it needs for this is more and more people. In this naked state, the crowd is at its most conspicuous, but, because it always disintegrates, it seems something outside the ordinary course of life and so is never taken quite seriously.
Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 1960

Prager's recent series *Face in the Crowd*, 2013, can be seen as a reflection on the psychology of crowd behaviour; studies of the strength, intimacy and freedom an individual can experience when in a crowd, as well as feelings of despair, claustrophobia and insignificance. Prager explores crowds' transitory nature, the ways in which they are reliant on more and more people in order to gain strength, and what Elias Canetti described in his seminal study *Crowds and Power* as the crowd's inevitable disintegration.[1]

Although the series' photographs and film were made on sets, the staged settings take their cue from specific sites frequented by Prager: Washington Square Park in New York, beaches, train stations, movie theatres and airports. She has described how her interest in the subject came from travelling and the particular experience of negotiating crowded situations:

Going through airport terminals, subways, living in London and New York for a while. Being from Los Angeles … you aren't often thrown into situations where you're surrounded by strangers. You're usually in the car or around people you know. I felt like I saw crowds a bit differently than other people; it was a bit jarring.[2]

Each scene in the series is connected by its voyeuristic vantage point, in a continuation from the *Compulsion* series. As the viewer you are set above or aside as a distant observer – you watch from afar but your gaze is constantly denied as the individuals in the crowds are seen immersed in their thoughts and actions. Prager describes how in creating the works she both controls the scene and allows for natural and spontaneous interaction between her characters:

It's very directed before we start the shoot. I'll put people in position and give them some kind of character I want them to be. I will give the overall group a direction right before we start shooting, then I let people do their thing. I want it to be as natural as possible. I want it to feel staged to create that sort of isolation and disconnected communication but these aren't reenactments of real crowds.[3]

This fictitious aspect informs each image, but as Prager notes there is an unexpected intensity created by the impromptu (and uncontrollable) physical and emotional interactions that occur naturally between her casts of characters.

The accompanying three-channel video *Face in the crowd*, 2013, recently acquired by the National Gallery of Victoria, amplifies the invitation Prager extends in her photographic tableaux to consider individual and collective emotions in a crowd situation. The film commences with a series of individual monologues, a mixture of personal stories that range from the significant and highly emotional to the mundane. Suddenly the individual figures are flooded by a sea of people – the crowd has formed. Our attention is drawn to one figure, played by the actress Elizabeth Banks. Moving in and out of the crowd, she appears both subsumed and separate from the throngs of people: one moment she seems on the brink of being overwhelmed, the next moment the tension turns to calm and she departs the scene. The heroine undertakes a complex journey of immersion and self-reflection as one individual within a crowd of people; as Kaitlin Booher has written, the character's 'lyrical experience, from mundanity to transcendence and back, is a fraction of a whole'.[4] The film is, like so many of Prager's works, one imagined narrative framed within a collective memory and experience.

Notes

1 Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart, Continuum, New York, 1962, p. 20.

2 Priscilla Frank, 'Alex Prager photographs the dark underbelly of crowds', *The Huffington Post*, <http://www.huffingtonpost. com/2013/12/16/alex-prager_n_4441057.html>, accessed 1 Aug. 2014.

3 ibid.

4 Booher, 'Crowd source: scenes by Alex Prager', p. 37.

Alex Prager

BIOGRAPHY

Alex Prager is a self-taught photographer and filmmaker who lives and works in Los Angeles. She is known for intricately staged works that draw on the drama of mid-century Hollywood films to explore uncanny elements of individual and social experience. The aesthetic of her photographs are frequently inspired by the city of Los Angeles, particularly its light, which she describes as 'so specific … warm, and mixed with all the smog',[1] and Prager often speaks of the influence her unconventional upbringing has had on her remarkable self-made practice.

Prager was born in Los Angeles in 1979. At the age of thirteen, after moving to Florida with her family, Prager left high school and moved to Switzerland with a friend, where she worked in a knife shop owned by her friend's grandmother.[2] Prager spent most of her time as a teenager between Los Angeles, Florida, Lucerne in Switzerland and travelling around Europe. She explains:

> Skipping high school just kind of happened. We didn't plan it. I was going to start after my summer break in Los Angeles when my parents decided to move to Florida. I went along with them to see what Florida was like, and I ended up in Switzerland … I think missing high school may have made me a better photographer in the sense that I never really had a plan except my own … [My family] really made it clear to me that my life was my own … I guess all the travel kind of trained me to trust myself.[3]

By her early twenties, inspired by the colour photography of William Eggleston exhibited at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, in 1999–2000, Prager resolved to teach herself photography and bought her first camera – a second-hand Nikon N90-S – and darkroom equipment from eBay.[4] Six months later she had her first exhibition, held in a hair salon. The success of the display of the only colour photograph in that exhibition inspired Prager to work with colour photography from that point onwards.[5]

One of Prager's first official exhibitions was a group show, *Special Friend*, at New Image Art Gallery, Los Angeles, in 2002. Prager was one of nine photographers included in the exhibition who displayed 'biographical photographs and personal observations of urban and suburban life'.[6] During this time, to support herself as an artist, Prager began shooting fashion editorials for various magazines in Los Angeles, and she has since worked for publications such as *Vogue* and *W Magazine*.[7]

Prager's work started to gain attention with her first solo exhibition, *Polyester*, in 2007, which was reviewed by the *Los Angeles Times*. This body of work utilises models wearing 1950s-inspired wigs to create highly constructed narratives, depicting glamorous women against mysterious cinematic backgrounds – aesthetics which have since become characteristic of Prager's photographic practice. Her following series, *The Big Valley*, was first exhibited in 2008. In 2010 Prager exhibited *Week-end* at Michael Hoppen Gallery, which included her first film work, entitled *Despair*. As Prager commented, 'The idea behind [*Despair*] is that I wanted to bring one of my photographs to life for a few minutes'.[8]

Portrait of Alex Prager
by Jeff Vespa © 2013

The same year Prager was selected by the Museum
of Modern Art, New York, to be part of the group show
New Photography, and she has since been included in
numerous group shows, including *At the Window: The
Photographer's View* at the J. Paul Getty Museum in 2013,
and *Reflected: Works from the Foam Collection* at Foam
Museum, Amsterdam, in 2014. Prager's first large-scale
museum exhibition was *Compulsion* at Foam Museum
in 2012, and her latest solo show, *Face in the Crowd*, at
Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 2013–14, was
her first large-scale exhibition in the United States.

Prager's work has been featured in publications including
The New York Times Magazine, *Vogue*, *W Magazine*,
and *Art in America*. *The New York Times Magazine* also
commissioned a short film by Prager, entitled *Touch of Evil*,
starring celebrity icons such as Brad Pitt, George Clooney
and Kirsten Dunst, which won a 2012 Emmy Award. Her
photographs are in the permanent collections of several
museums, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York;
The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Kunsthaus, Zurich;
Moderna Museet, Stockholm; North Carolina Museum of
Art, Raleigh; Cincinnati Art Museum; Queensland Gallery of
Modern Art, Brisbane; and the National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne.

Notes

1 Clayton Maxwell, 'Meeting with Alex Prager', *Eyemazing Magazine*,
May 2008, p. 99.

2 Julie Baumgardner, 'Portfolio: Alex Prager', *Modern Painters*, Dec.
2013, p. 38.

3 Maxwell, p. 99.

4 Marc Erwin Babej, 'Interview: Alex Prager's nod to the golden
age of film', 22 May 2014, *American Photo*, <http://www.
americanphotomag.com/photo-gallery/2014/05/interview-alex-
pragers-nod-to-golden-era-film?page=10>, accessed 1 Aug. 2014.

5 MoMAvideos, 'Behind the Scenes: New Photography
2010: Alex Prager', *Youtube*, <http://www.youtube.com/
watch?v=pIASkq7T0H8>, accessed 1 Aug. 2014.

6 'Special Friend', *New Image Art Gallery*, <http://www.
newimageartgallery.com/exhibitions/special-friend>, accessed
1 Aug. 2014.

7 Robert Berman, 'Polyester', *Robert Berman Gallery*, <http://www.
robertbermangallery.com/exhibitions/alex-prager>, accessed
1 Aug. 2014.

8 Gemma Brosnan, 'Interview: Alex Prager brings retro-modern
women to life', 14. Oct. 2010, *Unshredded Magazine*, <http://www.
unshredded.net/art/interview-alex-prager-brings-retro-modern-
women-to-life.html>, accessed 1 Aug. 2014.

Alex Prager
American 1979–
Crowd #11 (Cedar and Broad Street) 2013
pigment print
153.7 x 146.1 cm
National Gallery of Victoria
Bowness Family Fund for Contemporary Photography, 2014
© Alex Prager, courtesy of the artist and
Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

Program Highlights and Publication

Artist Talk

Sat 15 Nov, 1.30pm

Join Alex Prager as she discusses her first exhibition in Australia.

Cost Free

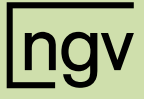**Meet** Exhibition space, Level 3, NGV International

Alex Prager ebook

This free ebook features a curatorial essay, biography and multimedia elements including images and video.

Free, available from ngv.vic.gov.au

Alex Prager
American 1979–
Film still 2010
from the *Despair* series 2010
pigment print
40.6 x 50.8 cm
Collection of Jeff Vespa, Los Angeles
© Alex Prager, courtesy of the artist and
Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong