
alex prager

intro and interview by: dan christiansen

Equal parts Hitchcock and Valley of the Dolls, Alex Prager's photographic episodes scream with the over-dramatization of a minor character in a soap opera. Her pictures, thickly coated in layer upon layer of striking veneer, stem from the climatic and thespian nature of a regional theater group coupled with the bad acting that anybody who grew up in Los Angeles is all too familiar with.

The subjects in her photos, dolled up with porcelain-like make up, messy wigs, fake eyelashes, blank faces, over-the-top body movements, static poses, and vintage store outfits live in this cinematic wonder of make-believe where not-so-bad situations seem like horrifying, suspenseful incidents with the worst just on the horizon.

Behind that facade lies more than just a grown-up having their very own set of living, breathing dolls to play with. Instead, she's turned her work into a commentary on the flashy lights, bright smiles, fake tans, and plastic bodies of Tinsel Town, using the idea of beauty to make her photographs easier to look at. It's up to the viewer at that point to finish the script for his or her self.





FROM WHAT I'VE READ, YOU LEFT HOME AT A PRETTY YOUNG AGE AND TRAVELED THE WORLD?

That sounds a lot more dramatic than what was actually happening. I was born in LA, and my grandmother basically raised me until I was about thirteen. That's when I started getting into trouble. I was never really a bad kid or anything, but my grandmother had already raised four kids. So, at the first sign of any trouble for me, she sent me to live with my parents in Florida. I looked into some schools with my parents, and they all seemed pretty ridiculous—like I would waste time if I went to high school out there. I met this girl while in Florida named Sarah, and she had a grandmother that owned a knife shop in Switzerland. She needed a friend to

go work in the knife shop with her to speak English to the tourists. I guess my parents thought Switzerland was good enough because a fourteen-year-old kid wouldn't be able to get into trouble, which they were right about. I went out there and just kind of traveled around. I basically did that for 5 months every year until I was 18 when I moved back to LA and got my own place.

WOULD YOU GO BACK TO FLORIDA AFTER THOSE FIVE MONTHS?

I'd go back to Florida for a couple of months and visit my family. I'd come to LA. Honestly, I don't know what I was doing. [laughs] The whole thing seems kind of weird now. It seems like my education was just traveling around.

HAVE THOSE TRAVELS HAD ANY IMPACT ON YOUR WORK?

It made me very independent. I didn't really know what other kids were doing because all my friends weren't in school either. They weren't following what other people were doing, and that's how we became friends. We made our own rules and just kind of did our own thing. I think the way that affected me in my photos is that I'm able to follow my own instincts about things.

A WILLIAM EGLESTON EXHIBITION GOT YOU INTO PHOTOGRAPHY, RIGHT?

It was more than just that. When I moved back to LA, I got three jobs just to support myself, and after three years, I didn't know why I was earning money to just spend it

on clothes and food or random things that meant nothing to me. I'd end up selling my clothes and cds for money to pay rent. It was like this cycle where I didn't really have money or never really cared about the things that I did have when I had money. So, after a couple of years of that, I got a reality check and kind of freaked out and realized that I couldn't be doing that for the rest of my life. The only thing I thought I might be good at is something creative, but I didn't know what. So I started going to see friends' bands play, and trying out different things. It was until I was about 21 when I went to a Williams Eggleston exhibition, and it blew my mind. Within a week I had all the darkroom equipment and a camera, and I taught myself photography.



THAT'S QUITE AN INVESTMENT. WAS IT EASY?

At first, I was just doing it. The question of whether it was easy or hard didn't really go through my mind at all. All you had to do was push a button. That's as easy as it gets. I really liked that aspect of it. I thought the pictures I was taking were the best pictures anyone had taken in the history of any art form. I remember waking up in the middle of the night to look at the pictures I had processed earlier that day and looking at

them for hours thinking: "Oh my god, I can't believe I did that." They were literally pictures of someone's shoe on pavement, and I thought I was incredible. The whole thing really excited me though. I couldn't sleep. I was basically up for a year straight. I practically slept with my camera just in case I might wake up and want to go out to take pictures of things. I was roaming the streets in the middle of the night taking pictures. It was crazy. It was a very slow process for me because I was learning things based on

trying to see what's missing from a picture—thinking it might be better if I did this or that with the camera.

YOU SORT OF STARTED CREATING WORLDS FOR YOUR SUBJECTS TO LIVE IN. IT SEEMS LIKE YOU TREAT THEM LIKE DOLLS OR TOYS.

I'm creating this imaginary world, and it comes from me. I can daydream all the time. Basically, I'm constantly seeing things that aren't there. That sounds weird. [laughs] I'm basically just showing you what's in my head

through my pictures. When I look at my photos, what I'm saying in them is kind of dark, in my opinion. Having that element of plastic or fakeness or false veneer with the wigs, the make-up, and the bright colors creates this fake cheerfulness almost within this imaginary world of beautiful women. It just kind of sets you back from what's actually taking place in the photo, and it makes it easier to look at. That's what I'm going for in the photos. Whether or not that comes through is totally up to you. I think adding that plastic element definitely makes them easier to look at. I can basically say whatever I want, and no matter how disgusting or repulsive or dark or sad whatever communication I want to put in the picture, it's easier to look at through cheerfulness or beauty.

IS THAT A COMMENTARY ON BEAUTY OR THE FEMALE IDENTITY?

There's a lot I'm saying in my pictures. There are definitely aspects of that as a whole in my pictures. I don't want to say exactly what's going on in each photo. I think that's up to the person looking. I'm definitely commenting on what I see. I grew up mainly in Los Angeles. I definitely have a lot to say about the female identity and women that come and live in LA.

YOUR MODELS ALSO HAVE A SCARED LOOK OR A SENSE OF VULNERABILITY.

What I see in the pictures is just this false veneer through beauty and make-up. Beneath this shell, there's a real person who's probably really scared. It's not like things are great right now, but to continue on acting like everything is fine in the world and the commercial aspects of the world, I'm commenting on all that.

WHY ARE THEY MOSTLY ALONE?

It's funny you asked that because I was just toying around with the idea of having my next series be all group photos. It wasn't intentional. I think it was just because I spent a lot of time alone. I don't want to analyze myself. In the beginning, a lot of the ideas would come to me when I was

alone—just out in the middle of the night driving around trying to come up with ideas. I would just imagine myself in this situation or that situation. I'm not saying it's me in the photos, because that's not what's happening at all. It's based on my experiences, and then I put somebody else in that same experience and try to imagine what this person's world would be. The girl is her own person. She's imaginary. I actually don't know what's really happening with her. I feel like sometimes they just have their own mysteries, even from me—or there own secrets.

WHERE DO YOU FIND THESE OUTFITS AND THE PROPS AND WIGS AND ALL THAT?

The wigs I just find wherever. I used to wig shop all the time. In Hollywood especially, the wigs are really cheap. I got a lot of wigs from thrift stores, or I buy theater wigs. The clothes I find at thrift stores, too. A lot of

them end up in my own closet because a lot the clothes I buy specifically for a shoot, I'll make sure I can wear them later. A lot of the times, I'll wear the outfit around after I've exhibited it, and people will ask me if it was in a photo. The way I dress my girls or the hairdos they have is very contemporary to me or something I'd wear. I sometimes wear fake eyelashes. [laughs]

SO, IT'S NOT NECESSARILY ALL AN ACT?

The original idea behind the photos or the basic idea I kind of started with was kind of this soap opera or overacting. Basically, these girls are really bad actresses. They're living out this really dramatic, serious lifestyle. Everything is overdone. Their feelings are magnified. It's like the classic 1950's film actress. Or even back to silent films where everything was a little bit overdone—like these women are in mortal danger and



in my work. I still think it's funny to look back on those photos, but my new series has a different quality. It's not even intentional. It's just where I'm at in life and what's going on with everything in the world. I think they're better, personally. [laughs]

DO YOU WAKE UP IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT TO LOOK AT THE PHOTOS FROM THIS SERIES, TOO?

I don't know about waking up in the middle of the night anymore. I need my sleep; I'm getting older.

YOU USED TO ACT IN COMMERCIALS, IS THAT TRUE?

Oh my god, how did you find that out? [laughs] I was trying to avoid that whole thing when I said I was coming back to LA between 14 and 18. I used to act. That's why I was coming back to LA. I'd been acting since I was 7 or 8 years old because anyone that's born in LA ends up acting at some point. I was in commercials and in soap operas. I never talk about this, but there's no point in hiding it.

I THINK IT PERTAINS TO YOUR WORK.

You're probably right. I probably learned a lot about photography from being on set—watching the directing and cameras and stuff like that. I also got to watch a lot of bad acting, myself included.

running from something, but you don't know what it is. It's all sort of campy and overdone and playful. I like that aspect of the silent films. It's also like a small town group of girls got together and formed a drama group where they wanted to put on plays, but they're all really bad actresses.

IS THAT GOING TO CARRY OVER INTO THE NEXT SERIES?

Not as much. It's going in a different direction. I'm going towards another theme

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