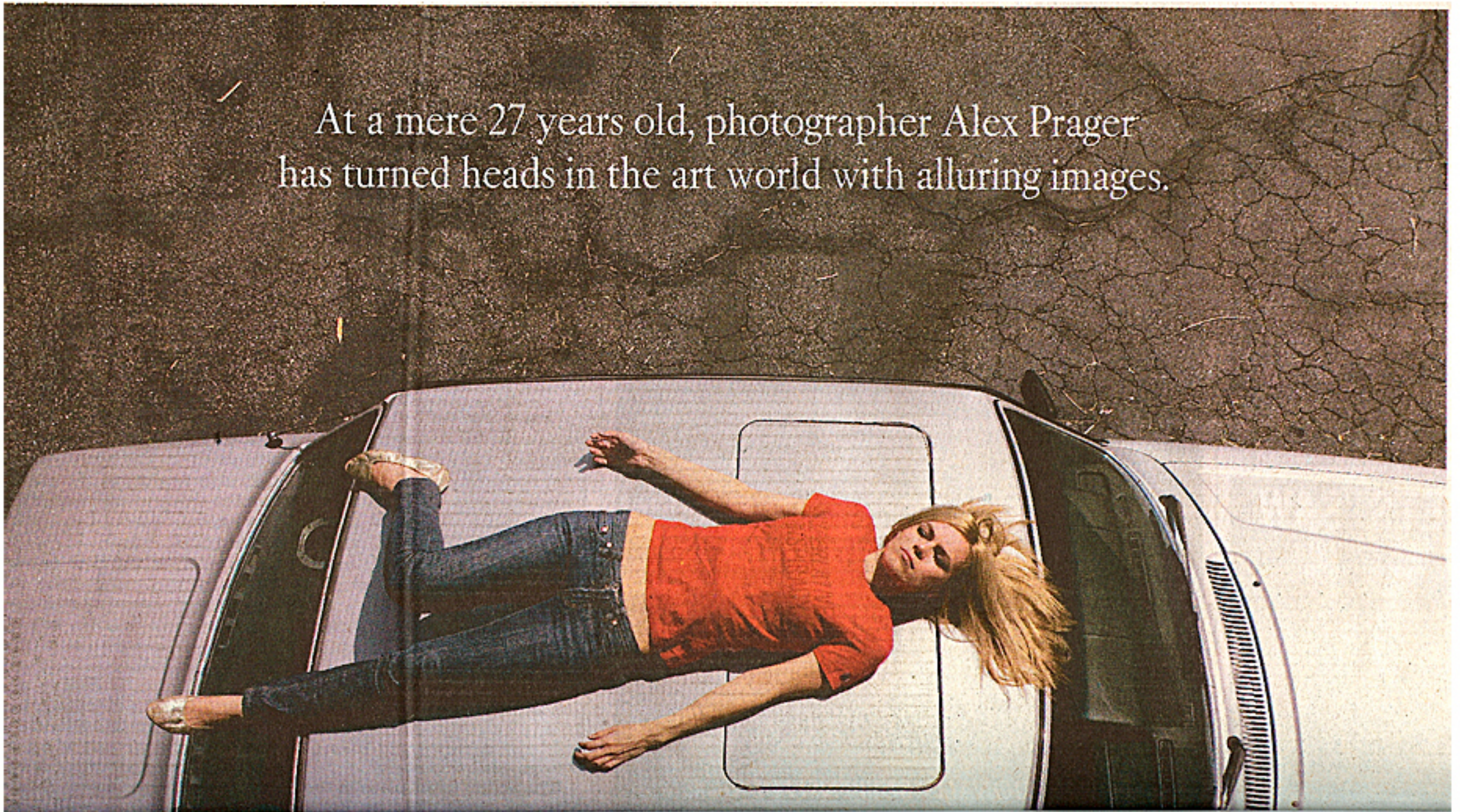


Wednesday, April 25, 2007

calendarlive.com

At a mere 27 years old, photographer Alex Prager has turned heads in the art world with alluring images.



GENARO MOLINA Los Angeles Times

LIFE IN HER FAST LANE: Alex Prager, who is self-taught, says her life was changed after she visited a William Eggleston exhibition at the Getty.

Beauty before age

By JESSICA GELT
Special to The Times

RARELY do you meet someone who happily points out that she stopped going to school after eighth grade. But that's one of the first things that 27-year-old photographer Alex Prager tells you over bagels before talking about her first solo exhibition, "Polyester," at Robert Berman Gallery at Bergamot Station. "My mom was a huge believer in life experience," Prager explains, sitting on the patio at a Silver Lake coffee shop.

When she was 14, her parents moved to Tampa, Fla., a town Prager immediately disliked: "The air was muggy and still — it just seemed so insane and desolate and weird." She befriended a girl with family in Lucerne, Switzerland, and was able to divide the next four years between there, Tampa and Los Angeles. With all the traveling, she never got around to attending high school.

At 18 she was in L.A. full time, working odd jobs and "freaking out because I had no idea what I was doing with my life."



ALEX PRAGER

HAUNTING: "Ellen" has a long braid, spidery fake eyelashes and a Big Gulp.

Not so anymore. Nearly a decade later, after a handful of group shows, Prager is turning heads in the L.A. gallery scene with bold, color-driven portraits and a mini-cadre of celebrity supporters, including Jason Lee, Giovanni Ribisi and Danny Masterson, who played the role of host at the glitzy private opening of "Polyester" on Thursday.

Ribisi also made an appearance, as did actor Ben Foster, the "It" party photographer Mark Hunter (a.k.a. the Cobra Snake) and his teenage sidekick, hipster socialite Cory Kennedy.

Vodka and beer flowed freely while the young and the beautiful mingled with an older, more sedate generation of art connoisseur.

Prager's work first caught the attention of dealer Robert Berman when an independent curator who goes by the name Elk (and only Elk) put together a show last year at Berman's gallery called "Queen of the Night: Women Under the Influence, 1963-2006." The show featured work by heavy hitters such as Raymond Pettibon and John Altoon, as well as that of [See Prager, Page E5]

Images catch viewers off guard

[Prager, from Page E1]
up-and-comers like Prager.

"It was a phenomenal show — it got a lot of attention and press — and the person that stood out in my mind was Alex Prager," Berman says. "Her work is very reminiscent of another time. It's both comforting and uneasy, and that dichotomy throws you off guard."

Take, for example, "Ellen" (2007), a photograph in the current show of a young girl with a long blond braid, spidery black fake eyelashes, matte pink lips and a pert, rounded nose, wearing a snug flower-print dress from the '70s. In her hand she grasps a Big Gulp. Her lips are slightly parted; her eyes look watery, as if from crying.

Elk admires Prager for examining "female identity in a humorous and punchy way." She also appreciates that the artist is "self-taught and has more vision than credentials."

Prager admits as much. When she was about 20 and still searching for a calling, she stumbled across a William Eggleston exhibition at the Getty Museum. "The second I walked in the door, I was completely blown away — instantly I knew it was what I wanted to do. I bought his book and read it, and the next day I went on EBay and bought a bunch of darkroom equipment for \$80."

She worked in black and white for a while before discovering her penchant for color.

Color is what drew Elk to her work as well: "There are photographers and then there are color photographers. Alex's photos are more about the arrangement of color than about subject."

Muted colors play off of one another in "Julie" (2007), a shot of a platinum blond wearing a yellow skirt and silver shoes. The woman crouches on a hill of dried yellow-brown grass above



ALEX PRAGER

HITTING HOME: "Julie" was taken in Griffith Park, near Los Feliz, where Alex Prager was born.



GENARO MOLINA *Los Angeles Times*

MIRROR IMAGE: Alex Prager stands next to a painting of herself, created by artist and sister Vanessa Prager.

an expanse of deep green trees. Her shining hair is framed by a pale blue sky.

The shot was taken in Griffith Park, near Los Feliz, where Prager was born — in her grandmother's bedroom.

Prager is petite and pretty with sharp features and thick blond hair pulled back in a tangled bun. Hardly shy when it comes to her work, her ebull-

ience earned her the admiration of actor Lee, who has lent his support to two of her shows and purchased five of her prints.

"Alex is like a 12-year-old girl, and the way she approaches everything is with that sort of skipping-around energy," Lee says. "Her pictures are of these bizarre things, and Alex is commenting on them, but without darkness."

'Polyester'

Where: Robert Berman Gallery, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., C2, Santa Monica

When: 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays

Ends: May 12

Contact: (310) 315-1937;
www.robertbermangallery.com

Fette (like Elk, she goes by a single name), who runs Fette's Gallery in Culver City and an art website called The-Flog.com, was also impressed with the uneasy qualities of Prager's work. Before Fette met Prager, she purchased one of her prints called "Envy" (2005). It's a portrait of a creamy-skinned girl with prosthetic legs dressed in a barely there white slip and holding an ice cream cone. She kneels at the foot of a bed next to a pair of black stocking-clad legs.

Says Fette: "Alex represents the women of her time, only mixed up in a cinematic way with times from the past."

jessica.gelt@latimes.com