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Flaunting



her
cinematic
style

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"Ellen," a photograph by Alex Prager, is part of her solo exhibition at Robert Berman Gallery in Santa Monica.

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Stylish subtleties and imperfections the aim of Prager's Polyester exhibit

BY RAHNE PISTOR

Aiming for a cinematic ambience of artificialness and fake-ness in her photographs, Alex Prager brings her solo exhibition *Polyester* to the Robert Berman Gallery, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica. The exhibit will remain on view until Saturday, May 12th.

Polyester features images of models posed in garments made of the synthetic material with a 1950s, 1960s or 1970s vibe reminiscent of the "depressed housewives" portrayed in Douglas Sirk films.

Prager says the clothing, the props and the subtle oddities that poke through in her photographs are more important than the look of the models themselves.

"I consider the model a prop, in the same way as taxidermy," remarks Prager. "I work for about a week or two on the outfit before I even begin looking for a model."

Gallery owner Robert Berman explains what he found jolting about Prager's work: "Seldom in our vast collective consciousness do we stumble upon imagery that leads us both locked in a finite time period and at the same time full of fresh contemporary narratives. Prager's cinematic approach is reminiscent of the mid-20th century angst and naivety

that Hitchcock, John Waters, and David Lynch portrayed. Stories unfold with each photograph that stimulate the senses. Playful yet bizarre scenes are a balancing act between fantasy and reality."

Prager had her first exhibition about six months after she first picked up a camera at age 20, after a photographer friend of hers prodded her to join in one of her exhibitions in 2001. For that show, Prager's work was relegated to the back room of Dionisio, a hair salon and gallery in Beverly Hills. Though Prager says she felt the exhibit was premature, she wound up selling a number of her pieces.

It was at that time that she realized that her images had an appeal and that she just might be able to make a living doing what she loves, she says.

Since then, she has kept steadfast in contributing to group exhibitions paving the path to her first solo show.

Prager describes the work in *Polyester* as a look "purely at what's inside of me, my aesthetic," she says.

But she also has made a name collaborating on a number of photo shoots in the past for fashion and rock 'n' roll magazines.

Not long after Prager began exhibiting, her work was spotted by the publisher of *Flaunt*, an en-



"JULIE," an image by Alex Prager, is on display in her solo show *Polyester* at Robert Berman Gallery in Santa Monica.

tainment and fashion magazine focused on the avant-garde and outsider culture. This led to about a year-and-a-half stint doing fashion photo shoots. Though much of her photography has a fashion element, Prager says that it is one of her

least favorite types of shoots to do.

"I just like to photograph things a little bit off, not quite right," says Prager. "In fashion photography shoots, I'm usually assigned to work with a stylist and for a client, who will often

want things to look too cool or too perfect."

"I focus a lot on subtleties and imperfections, but not in an ugly way," she says, explaining a facet of her signature style.

Prager much prefers working in the rock 'n' roll world shoot-

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Prager...

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ing bands, which she describes as more of a collaboration between her vision and the image that the group is trying to portray.

Prager certainly hasn't had much trouble finding musical acts to take her up on her knack for stylized publicity shots.

She credits William Eggleston as her main photographic influence. But many have noted that she resembles a young Annie Liebovitz for the new generation, with a bit of Diane Arbus in the mix. Nonetheless, Prager has been enlisted by numerous rock bands, celebrities and major labels, including Geffen and Warner Bros. — turning to Prager's aesthetic touch to help sell the act.

Her publicity photos of bands have hit the pages of *Rolling Stone* and *Mojo*, among others. Her list of subjects includes Beck, The Like, Juliette Lewis and the Licks, Kilo Kiley, Pretty Ricky, Be Your Own Pet and The Electred.

Celebrities who have found themselves behind Prager's lens include Andy Marinkis, Danny Mascerson, Adam Goldberg, Giovanni Ribisi and Jason Lee.

Born and raised in the Los Feliz area of Los Angeles and recently having moved back to the area, Prager made the acquaintance of Lee and Ribisi some years back, and the actors now often host, speak at or show up to her art shows as a gesture of support. Professional skateboarder-turned-comic-actor Lee hosted her exhibit *America Motel*, which showed photographs of cheap motels and white-trash culture from across the country in 2004.

Constantly looking for new ways to add a touch of oddness to her imagery, Prager recently collaborated with her sister — painter Vanessa Prager — on a portrait of Ribisi. The work ended up a surreal hybrid of oil painting and photography.

Polyester is the first solo exhibit of her work. It opened with a reception on Saturday, April 14th, and Prager described the event as a "dream come true."

"When I first started out, I was just obsessively taking pictures. I didn't ever think that this would be my career," says Prager.

Information, (310) 453-0909.



"MARNIAK" a photograph by Alex Prager, is part of the *Polyester* exhibit at Robert Berman Gallery in Santa Monica.