

With exhibits in New York and Los Angeles, photographer Alex Prager has created a surreal fantasy world of lost girls and damsels in distress. VIEW OUR GALLERY.

For the most part, the perfect, pouty, mega-dolled-up specimens in Alex Prager's cinematic color photographs don't seem quite real. They have that fuzzy, almost mythic quality—a Betty Draper-ness. As women, they seem sadder, more beautiful, and more fragile than the real thing.

And, in many ways, they are. Prager, a 30-year-old Los Angeles-based artist, photographs her friends—wiggled, glossed, rouged, and carefully posed as lovely West Coast archetypes. Her most recent series, *Week-End*, is on view at New York's [Yancey Richardson Gallery](#) through February 20 (with a companion show up at [M+B](#) in Los Angeles, January 30 through March 6). In it, Lynchian beauties stare vacantly into space; false eyelashes and fake hair provide ineffective armor; and, visible or not, the city of Los Angeles is a persistent costar.

The Living Dollhouse

by Rachel Wolff
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As photographs, Prager's large-scale, crystalline images are practically perfect. Expertly lit and shot from unusual angles, they mix retro sensibilities with decidedly modern techniques—sort of like seeing Hitchcock in HD.

Each photo is named for its fictional leading lady (simple, provocative titles like *Rita* and *Deborah*). And the drama pictured equates the psychological with the melodramatic—*Barbara*, for example, looks *awfully* sad; *Cathy* just crashed her car into the Pacific...

In many ways, Prager's women—draped in faux fur, coolly smoking cigarettes—are metaphors for Los Angeles itself, which the artist has called "a strange picture of perfection... with a sense of unease under the surface of all this beauty and promise." It's an easy metaphor (and one we've seen before) but there is a certain allure to Prager's images. They recall the roleplay and self-imposed artifice of Cindy Sherman's film stills; they offer a user-friendly antidote to the sort of palpable grit embraced by other female artists living and working on the West Coast ([Katy Grannan](#) and the duo Harry Dodge and [Stanya Kahn](#) among them); they're pretty, private, and self-referential—the sort of thing you'd want to hang in a bedroom instead of over the couch—but nonetheless macabre, especially given the recent demise of pretty young things Brittany Murphy and Casey Johnson.

Prager does picture the occasional misfit—in-jokes, perhaps, and an acknowledgment of L.A.'s more subtle layers (the thriving art scene? Or wherever they shot *500 Days of Summer*). The best of these delightfully awkward tableaux is *Rachel and Friends*, a carefully composed shot of a four-eyed ingénue in a movie theater. Her oversized bifocals are more dorky than chic; her curly brown hair is slightly unkempt; and her eyes are deeply fixated upon whatever is playing on that screen. She's the star. She's that *Funny Valentine*-type who seems soulful in a way that the glassy-eyed Barbies seated next to and behind her could never be. Maybe L.A.'s not so bad after all...

Rachel Wolff is a New York-based writer and editor who has covered art for New York, ARTnews, and Manhattan.