

PHOTOGRAPHY

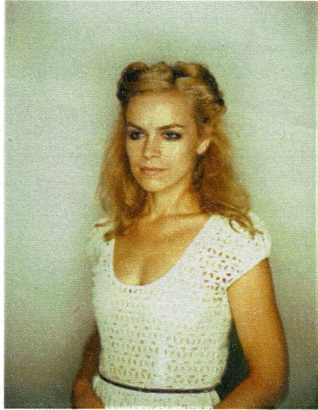
# VALLEY OF THE DOLLS

Young photographer Alex Prager uses her partying friends as models

INTERVIEW JOANNA PITMAN







Alex Prager by Jason Lee

Alex Prager skips into our interview at Michael Hoppen Gallery, where she is having her first UK photography show, dressed in a minidress with little puff sleeves, pale tights and flat ballet pumps. She is 27, but seems much younger, and is an absolute picture of LA girlhood: kooky and delightful, with an outsize white smile and a mass of thick blonde hair upon which an enormous pair of sunglasses sits like a nesting bird. She dances around talking about how different London is from her home in Los Angeles, smiling hard on full megawatt, her face twitching uncertainly between pleasure at her success and pain at having to be grilled by a journalist.

Her work is soaked in the artifice of LA. Mostly, her subjects are her girlfriends or, occasionally, her sister, who is an artist. "I always ask my friends to dress up. I pay them US\$150 [£75] for their time. They wear costumes I get from the thrift store and I have a collection of about 40 wigs." Everything in her images is staged, her subjects heavily painted and posed like mannequins in a flood of powerful lighting. "The emotions in these pictures are so strong that I prefer to make the people look a bit fake. It puts some distance between the viewer and the scene. I think people would turn away otherwise."

Last year, as she was sitting in the hot tub of her friend, the actress Bijou Phillips, she began imagining a shoot with her friends gussied up in bikinis, wigs and make-up. The resulting picture, *Susie and Friends*, is tight and brassy, the saturated colour and the obviousness of the wigs rendering the gathering strangely uneasy. Another equally unsettling shot, entitled *Cindy*, is also of a friend, a celebrity stylist, standing in front of a red Mercedes. Everything about *Cindy* sends out a message of rejection and disappointment. In Prager's experience, life in LA can be pretty stormy. "Yes, sometimes these pictures are hard to look at. That's why I distance things. The permanent lighting, rather than flash, adds to the artificial look of the girl, and makes the background totally real. I like it that way."

<< Prager's influences are easy to detect: David Lynch, Guy Bourdin, Cindy Sherman and William Eggleston for the strong colour combinations. She also loves the work of Joel Sternfeld. You sense that she doesn't give a damn if people think she is ripping off Bourdin or Sherman. She just does it her own way.

This is probably because she's had to work out how to get on in life on her own since she was 13. Prager's parents divorced when she was little and she was brought up in LA by her paternal grandmother, who found her an agent when she turned eight, at which point Prager began acting in commercials. She has remained in touch with her father, who is a Scientologist, but he lives in Florida, so she sees him only rarely. She never talks to her mother.

She left school at 13 and made friends with a girl who asked her to move to Switzerland to sell pen knives in Lucerne for four months. "I met lots of interesting people. I ended up going there every year doing that job and exploring Europe. My dad wasn't worried. I wasn't into drugs. I wasn't promiscuous. It was cool."

Back in the US, she got a flat in Santa Monica and began doing odd jobs. "I worked in shops and things like that, but it was boring. I felt depressed until I went to see a William Eggleston show at the Getty. It was completely mind-blowing to me. I stayed there for hours."

It was 2001 and Prager decided she wanted to become a photographer. She bought books and camera equipment and started making documentary photographs. Within a year she was working with a photographer who was going out with actor Jason Lee. "She was really pretty and we dressed each other up and took staged pictures with wigs and costumes. Six months into my career I had a joint show with her in LA. It took me a few years to figure out what kind of photographer I wanted to be. But now I know where I'm going."

That she has buckets more vision than credentials matters not; it probably helps to retain the rawness and individuality of her eye, drawing as it does on her weird background and her eerie imagination. Prager's failure to develop a thick skin, despite life's torments, is the key to her appeal. She is uncertain and dizzy – and very capable. ■

The Big Valley: Photographs by Alex Prager is at Michael Hoppen Contemporary, 3 Jubilee Place, London SW3 ([www.michaelhoppencontemporary.com](http://www.michaelhoppencontemporary.com); 020-7352 3649) until June 7



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