





*Beth*

Week-end stars many spellbinding women and opens at M+B in West Hollywood, CA on January 30, 2010. It continues until March.

This third solo exhibition brings Alex back to Los Angeles, where she has mainly resided, formative years also unfolding in Florida and Switzerland. Last year, her exhibition, *The Big Valley*, premiered at the Michael Hoppen Gallery in London. Then in February 2009, the collection moved to New York, where the Yancey Richardson Gallery hosted it.

Customarily, Alex uses wigs, wardrobes, and props, reminiscent of the 1960s, and some are quick to attribute Alfred Hitchcock, Guy Bourdin, and Cindy Sherman to her aesthetic. More rewarding, however, is examining the influences she has affirmed: photographers like William Eggleston, Mitch Epstein, Brassai, Helmut Newton, and Jeff Wall, and painters like Lucian Freud, Manet, Balthus, and John Currin.

In spirit, these luminaries endure in *Week-end*. Alex enjoys playful staging, but not to the vicious degree of Wall. Brassai's mastery of tone and atmosphere is parlayed well by Prager, who can heighten tension with color saturation and abysmal emptiness. Eggleston was quoted by his wife as saying, "Now, you must not take anything for granted when you're looking at the picture. Never do that. Every single little tiny space on that page works and counts." Alex adopts his democratic camera, as all the elements in frame concert.

While these hallmarks linger in her photography, her craft has evolved over ten years. Credit her courage. The negative space is bolder in "Becky and Jill," and suitably so, since one character's eyeline probes the endless. Intimacy pushes the lens closer in "Wendy," than in any of Alex's previous work. Gone is the pronounced body language of action shots like "Julie" from *Polyester* and "Eve" from *The Big Valley*. The characters of *Week-end* speak quietly with appearances, but no less profoundly.

Alex Prager speaks with that solar splendor from her smiles. It is brave but not brazen, spirited but not lofty. Honest, aware, and vulnerable at times, the artist survives my inquisition, even when the question kills her.



**It's public knowledge now that you sleep nine hours a day. What happens when that amount is reduced? Will heads roll?**

Ah, yes, I do sleep a lot! I'm like a baby when I get tired; I can just fall asleep anywhere. On the rare occasion that I have to work on no sleep, I can usually pull through pretty nicely, as long as I'm constantly eating. That's the key: I need either a full night's sleep or lots of food. If I don't have either, I'll end up crying over something.

**What is the price of being a renowned photographer? Do friends beg you to film their weddings and bar mitzvahs? Do you pale from spending time in the dark room?**

Surprisingly, no one ever asks me to film or shoot anything for them. Probably because they don't want their wedding pictures to end up being them and all their guests in wigs and dressed in clothes from the 1960s -- scary -- although it also sounds kind of cool; I'm not sure I'd even hire me to shoot my wedding photos.



**For a moment, let's indulge all the animal rights activists who read Juxtapoz: there's a puppy flying without safety goggles in your early piece, "Undo." Did it land on all fours? And what's the secret to making a dog fly?**

The secret to making a dog fly...well, first of all, this dog was really little. She looks big in the photo, but actually she's a miniature. I had my sister and my friend tossing her back and forth in front of the camera when I'd give the signal. Yikes! Am I going to get in trouble? We did around ten shots and then set her down. I think she liked it actually -- the feel of wind in her hair. After that shoot, we noticed she started sitting in higher places, probably trying to relive the experience of flying.

**Juxtapoz #106 features your portraits of Robert Williams, artist and founder of this magazine. Share the details of that shoot. How did you elicit the right poses and performances? How did this differ from directing your own artwork?**

Robert was really fun to work with. I think the fact that I had five pretty girls dressed in bikinis posing with him helped my position. The only thing I had a problem with is that he kept putting on these dark sunglasses, because he wanted to look like an Italian gigolo. He didn't want to wear his regular glasses, because he thought they made him look like a nerd, but I liked them. Anyway, I had to take several shots of him in the cool sunglasses, before he would put his regular ones on for me.

**How was your London exhibition for *The Big Valley*? How did it feel compared to your Santa Monica exhibition for *Polyester*? Describe the receptions, visitors, comments, atmosphere, and describe the way your art connected with each metropolitan culture.**

I love London. I had such a good time there. I was actually only supposed to stay in town for a few weeks for my opening and I ended up staying for five months.

I guess the opening was pretty similar to any other opening, except everyone had English accents. Maybe it was a bit more exciting because I didn't really know anyone there, and I had no idea how people were going to respond to the work.



### **How did this sojourn influence your photography?**

It's harder for me to shoot in London because of the weather and the architecture. I need a certain type of light for shooting outdoors, and also the buildings there all look very English, so that makes it harder to do the style I like to do, which is more on a California vibe.

### **How did your photography benefit from the environment?**

I don't really think my photography benefited, looking back. I could have probably used it more to my advantage, but when I first got there, I was trying to do things in the same way I would in Los Angeles, and I don't think that made it very easy, because it's a totally different climate out there. In fact, everything about London is the opposite of Los Angeles -- there's just nothing that is the same.

### **While we're on the topic of region, London has a greater population density than Los Angeles, which makes the energy invigorating. Did this affect your mood, your work habits?**

It definitely affected my mood. That is the part of London I like so much. I love how everyone is on foot, out in the streets. It feels amazing, but also very distracting for me while I'm trying to work. I get really caught up in the lifestyle there that it's hard for me to focus.

### **You used to shoot with a Contax 640. What camera are you using now? In what ways is it better than the Contax? In what ways is it more limiting?**

I still shoot with the Contax 640. I love it because the film is still a good size, but I can hand-hold the camera the way I would if I were shooting with a 35mm. It's a great camera. I'm sad that they have discontinued it.



### **What events or epiphanies inspired *Week-end*? How did you conceive the title?**

I saw a theme of apathy and impending death running through these pictures -- the death of and dreams. Originally, I was going to call it, "Weekend," without the hyphen, but by adding the hyphen, it emphasizes the word, "end," so it could also mean, "Weak End." That adds a layer of comedy to it which I like.

### **I see the images that compose *Week-end* and now I'm curious about the photos you didn't select. What qualities do they have? What makes them incongruous with the series? And what will happen to these photos?**

They didn't fit for various reasons -- the same way a band will write around 40 songs for an album and then only record ten of them. I do the same with photographs for a show.

**In your photo shoots, you've learned that contrivance doesn't lead to anywhere good. Instead, you wisely trust your instincts, in the moment, on the set, to capture great pictures. Do you recall what your instincts told you, while working on *Week-end*?**

My instincts told me to push for something I didn't know how to do easily. That's why in this new series a lot of the photos are more produced. I wanted to go for more control over every aspect of the production side of the scene, rather than using what I had available like I'd done in a lot of shoots.

In these new photographs, I spent a lot more time on the preproduction side of things. I paid a lot more attention to the small details that were in my mind, and made sure I created them in the picture.

**Finding stars in the L.A. sky is finding water in the L.A. River, so I have to ask: with "Sophie," did you envision that celestial backdrop, or was its availability serendipitous?**

I shot it at the Griffith Park Observatory near my apartment. They have an exhibit of Space printed out 20 feet tall. It's perfect for a starry backdrop.

**You've been admired for your discerning eye and shooting locations -- such as with "Julie" from *Polyester*, which overlooks Los Feliz, CA. In this regard (and in many others), "Beth" exemplifies your genius. How did you discover this composition? Are you always scouting for locations in Los Angeles and recording them for future use? Do you round up a list of places, when you begin an exhibition?**

The location in "Beth" is just outside my bedroom window. That's the view from my sewing table. I've always thought it was such a weird perspective with the Albertsons parking lot in the top frame, and my apartment car park in the bottom. Visually, it doesn't really make sense, so inevitably I had to use it in a shoot.

**You once described the women in *The Big Valley* as being in their own worlds, like *The Little Prince*, accompanied by internal reflections. What worlds do the characters of *Week-end* occupy?**

These women are also in their own worlds. I'm trying to shed a bit of light on the more vulnerable side of a girl in her own private hell who's on the verge of giving up, or in some cases, already has.

**You title many photographs with people's names. What goes into the nomenclature for your art? Do you jot down the first name that comes to mind, when viewing the image? Do you name the photos after people you know?**

Usually, I will just look at the finished photograph and the character in it will tell me her name. It will just make sense and once I have it, no other name will work. Every once and a while, I'll run across a difficult one and it will take me days sometimes to come up with a name that suits her.

**Anne Wilkes Tucker, a curator of photographic art, once wrote of Brassai: "He sought neither to judge nor to change, but to fathom the living arrangements of the world." The same could be said of your photography for *America Motel*. Could the same be said of *Week-end*? How so?**

Yes, it could be said of *Week-end*. I'm documenting a world that exists and doesn't exist at the same time; the world in which these girls live in is made up, but the illusion they've created is so constant that it became more real to them than the world they actually live in. That's L.A. for you!



**What risks, as an artist, did you take with *Week-end* that you didn't with *The Big Valley* and *Polyester*?**

My risks for this show were more about the production side of things. For me, the story is sort of the end of a trilogy, *Polyester* and *The Big Valley* being the first two parts. Also the models I chose for this are slightly different.

**Photographer, William Eggleston, said, "I am at war with the obvious." What are you at war with?**

That's secret.

**Lucian Freud said, "What do I ask of a painting? I ask it to astonish, disturb, seduce, convince." What do you ask of a photograph?**

To change the direction my thoughts or my life was going before seeing the photograph -- either/or.



*Eva*

**The models in Lucian Freud's paintings -- they carry so much weight in their expressions -- the world is in their faces. I feel that your models possess this emotional magnitude, too. With "Eva," what did you feel when you were shooting it on set, and what did you feel after you developed the photo? Were both moments stirring? Did they provoke you in separate ways?**

I felt nervous. I always feel nervous, when I have a beautiful model in front of me, waiting for me to make an interesting picture of her, and I have no idea what to do. This is when I have to let go and hope that my instincts take over. It's a scary process, because sometimes I'm left with nothing, and my instincts don't kick in and I get stuck. Other times, something will happen between the model and me, and a story will develop into a picture.

This is what happened with "Eva."

When I saw the picture the first time, I thought maybe it was too subtle to use, but I looked at it again, a month later, and realized there was something very interesting going on in it.

**In *Devil Got Religion*, Mercedes Helnwein wrote, "Beth and I generally woke up with dislocated bones; when Alex woke up, the sun was always bright and the birds were singing. I've never been able to figure out where she gets her full-night's sleep from. I'm convinced she could get cozy on a toothpick if necessary. She just jumps out of bed in the mornings whistling, and by time I made my first effort to 'lift neck off pillow,' she'd already been in and out of the [motel] room about five times, collected the free coffee and donuts, taken pictures of the cleaning staff and stood by the door ready to wrestle the day into resignation."**

**Is this an accurate portrayal? Where do you get all your energy from? And how do you sustain it throughout the waking hours?**

Yes, ha, this is how our road trips went. What can I say? I was excited about the day ahead of us. We were pioneers, breaking into a new world. I wanted to make sure I caught all of it on my camera. Plus, we were on a pretty crazy deadline to get to my family reunion in Missouri, which we ended up missing by a whole day, so that added to the time pressure.

**You once remarked, "The light here [in L.A.] is so specific, it's warm, and mixed with all the smog, it's actually really beautiful. I don't see light like this in any other part of the world."**

**In *Catching the Big Fish*, David Lynch wrote: "I arrived in L.A. at night, so it wasn't until the next morning, when I stepped out of a small apartment on San Vicente Boulevard, that I saw this light. And it thrilled my soul. I feel lucky to live with that light. I love Los Angeles. I know a lot of people go there and they see just a huge sprawl of sameness. But when you're there for a while, you realize that each section has its own mood. The golden age of cinema is still alive there, in the smell of jasmine at night and the beautiful weather. And the light is inspiring and energizing. Even with smog, there's something about that light that's not harsh, but bright and smooth. It fills me with the feeling that all possibilities are available. I don't know why. It's different from the light in other places. The light in Philadelphia, even in the summer, is not nearly as bright. It was the light that brought everybody to L.A. to make films in the early days. It's still a beautiful place."**

**The light fills Lynch with this feeling that all possibilities are available, so what possibilities do you feel, when you're inspired by the warmth and the glow of the Los Angeles sky? How are these feelings reflected in your work?**

Wow, I've never read that before -- kind of interesting how we're saying the same thing (although he's saying it in a much more poetic way).

This series is, in a major part, inspired by Los Angeles. Yes, Los Angeles is a beautiful place. The magic is still here. Everything is possible, but there is a very dark element here too. I think that's what makes Los Angeles so inspiring. You can feel it when you've been here for a few months at a time. The sky is always blue, the birds are always singing -- it's a strange picture of perfection -- but there is this eerie monotony that creeps in after a while. I think it can slowly drive people crazy -- that sense of unease under the surface of all this beauty and promise.

I stage my pictures with this place in mind -- a place where dreams die quietly.



**You've collaborated with artists before on projects like *America Motel* and *The Book of Disquiet*. What do you miss about those early days? What did you learn about yourself, when working with a team? How did you grow as an artist, working solo after that?**

I miss the challenge of collaborating with someone that might outdo me, if I don't work harder. It really pushed me to do the best I could do at the time. I was never tired. I learned that anything was possible, as long as you had an idea and were willing to work hard pursuing it. We would come up with impossible budgets and plans, and then we'd somehow get it to happen.

I still haven't managed to make Steve Martin to come to one of my openings, but that's one of the more outrageous plans we made -- maybe one of these days.

I still like doing collaborations. I'm just busier now with the solo stuff that it's not as easy to dedicate that much time to other things, but I definitely wouldn't rule out another collaboration in the near future.

**In general, how is photography contributing to the contemporary art scene? Is it moving forward? Are you moving with it? If not, where are you going?**

There are some contemporary photographers that I really like. Ryan McGinley, for one, has impressed me for the last couple of years. I don't really keep up with all that's happening in the contemporary art scene, but I do see some great art from time to time.

I'm sure the recession is really going to help with that too. I think a lot of the really affected art won't be selling as much because people will want art in their homes that actually moves them, rather than buying for the sake of a trendy investment. This is actually a really great time for art to flourish.

Where am I going? I'll know that when I get there.

**Let's fast-forward way into the future -- really far -- you're in the afterlife. The Admissions Office is reviewing your achievements, so you can end up in the right plane of existence. The thing is they can only examine one of your exhibitions; they're understaffed. Which solo exhibition do you provide and why?**

Interesting the way you've just killed me in this interview. Let's see...I've only done two solo shows so far, so this question is a little premature maybe, but I guess the one I have upcoming, *Week-end*, simply because it's got "end" in the title, so it seems fitting since I've just met mine.



**The storytelling in your photography has caught the attention of the world. We're all listening. What happens when you narrate in other ways: music, literature, campfire tales? Are you a good joke-teller?**

I tell terrible jokes. In fact, whenever I come across a great joke-telling moment, I can never remember any jokes! It's humiliating -- a disgrace. I'm a decent singer and I love to make clothes and draw, although I'd probably never take any of those past the hobby stage. I'd say the only thing I really know how to do is photography!

**Since you are naturally gifted with a camera, have you thought about becoming a filmmaker? If you have, what sort of films would you make?**

Yes, I've thought about it. It seems like a lot of pressure! I'd make romantic comedies. I love romantic comedies.

When it comes to being inspired, when it comes to creating art, you've said that you're "an absolute dreamer." Everyday events are moving. Do you have romantic ideals? Do you practice them?

Life isn't worth living without your dreams. You just might as well be dead.

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*Week-end* opens at M+B in West Hollywood, CA on January 30, 2010.

Stay tuned at [www.alexprager.com](http://www.alexprager.com)