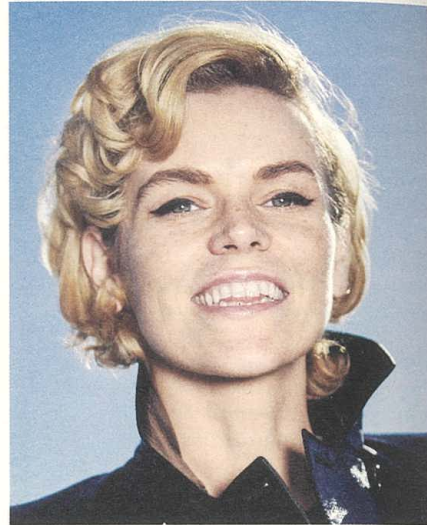


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art

SPLIT SCREEN

ALEX PRAGER *brings her snappy, catchy ambiguity to Hong Kong.*
STEPHEN SHORT *gets to know the cinematic starlet of the art world*





LOS ANGELES-BASED photographer and film-maker Alex Prager creates elaborately staged

scenes that draw inspiration from a wide range of influences and references, including Hollywood cinema, experimental film, popular culture and street photography. She deliberately casts and stages all of her works, merging past and contemporary sources to create a sense of ambiguity – take it as a more technicolour version of British photographer/artist Martin Parr. Prager’s work often makes the viewer aware of the voyeuristic nature of photography and film, establishing the uneasy feeling of intruding upon a potentially private moment.

In her striking images of crowds and individuals, she examines the conflicting emotions of claustrophobia and isolation, revealing an ominous and perpetual anxiety. The highly choreographed nature of her work exposes the way images are constructed and consumed in our media-saturated society. This puts her oeuvre in direct conversation with artists engaged in the tradition of staged photography, alongside the likes of Cindy Sherman, Gregory Crewdson and Thomas Demand.

Prager is bringing new work to Hong Kong’s Lehmann Maupin this month, which is distinguished by its more fragmented, episodic cropping and layering techniques, resulting in a more disorienting awareness of the real world. As she continues to straddle fiction and reality in an ever snappier, pizzazzier style, it’s no wonder that luxury fashion brands, Net-a-Porter and Chinese sculptor Qu Guangci are such fans. We spoke to Prager on the eve of her new show.

The new work has more of a “minimalism” feel to it than we’ve seen before – more like individual scenes than crowd scenes. Is narrative driving your work more these days?

Narrative has always been an important part of my work and process; it’s the way I’m able to achieve an emotional effect. Even my early still images had the essence that there was something that came before and after the moment I was capturing. The crowd imagery is something that is ever-evolving. What I love about getting groups of people together on a set are the unexpected moments that occur,



Top: Portrait of the artist, photographer and film-maker Alex Prager. Above: See’s Candies, Payless, Supercuts 1



even in a controlled environment. This goes back to my love and influence of street photography. In my newer work, I was interested in the ways I could subtly distort reality and play with perspective. By stripping down the images and taking away some of the more expected elements, it enabled me to amplify this idea further.

How has your relationship to photography and film-making changed since you last exhibited in Hong Kong in 2015?

I've fallen head over heels in love with film-making. Photography feels more and more separate from film-making to me, although I do like to work on photography and film simultaneously – the end product feels very much its own thing now, whereas before, my films felt like an extension of my photographs. The process of making films and the evolution of process has also become deeply interesting to me.

The ballet piece – what did you learn from that work? What did it evoke or stimulate in you that you hadn't anticipated from the outset?

La Grande Sortie was a really special project to me, which was commissioned by the Paris Opera Ballet. I've always loved the film *The Red Shoes* – but I hadn't been planning to make a body of work and a film that was so directly told through dance. This was my opportunity to make a love letter to [Michael] Powell and [Emeric] Pressburger. The

amount of work, passion and professionalism that goes into being a ballet dancer at that level is something I've never seen before, and something I will never forget. The little dramas that my work has always been about – love, fear, isolation and, most of all, artifice – are all key in the ballet. Even the element of comedy is part of the glue of theatre.

Are there distinct periods in your work you can identify? How do you see it evolving?

I can tell you exactly what was going on in my life through my imagery and in different bodies of work. As I'm evolving, my work is, too.

What's the most memorable response you've had to your work?

Probably the times younger people have come up to me at my openings and told me they started photography after seeing my photographs. It's how I began, and it means a great deal to me to be able to make someone else feel so strongly that they choose to follow that direction.

What things do you obsess over and what keeps you awake at night?

I try to shut off at night, read and watch movies. Currently, my newborn son has been keeping me awake at night, so I've been watching a lot of *The Sopranos* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, because it's easier to switch off and on more than a feature film.



Clockwise from left:
Hawkins Street;
Cats; Applause

“I try to shut off at night, read and watch movies. My newborn son has been keeping me awake at night, so I’ve been watching *The Sopranos* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*”

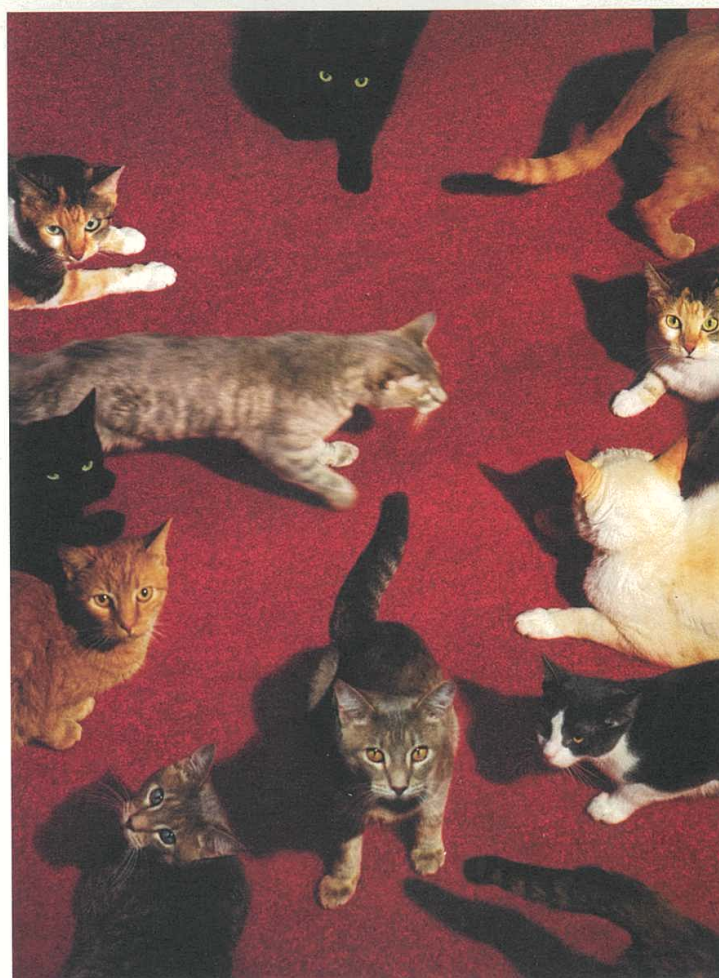
ALEX PRAGER

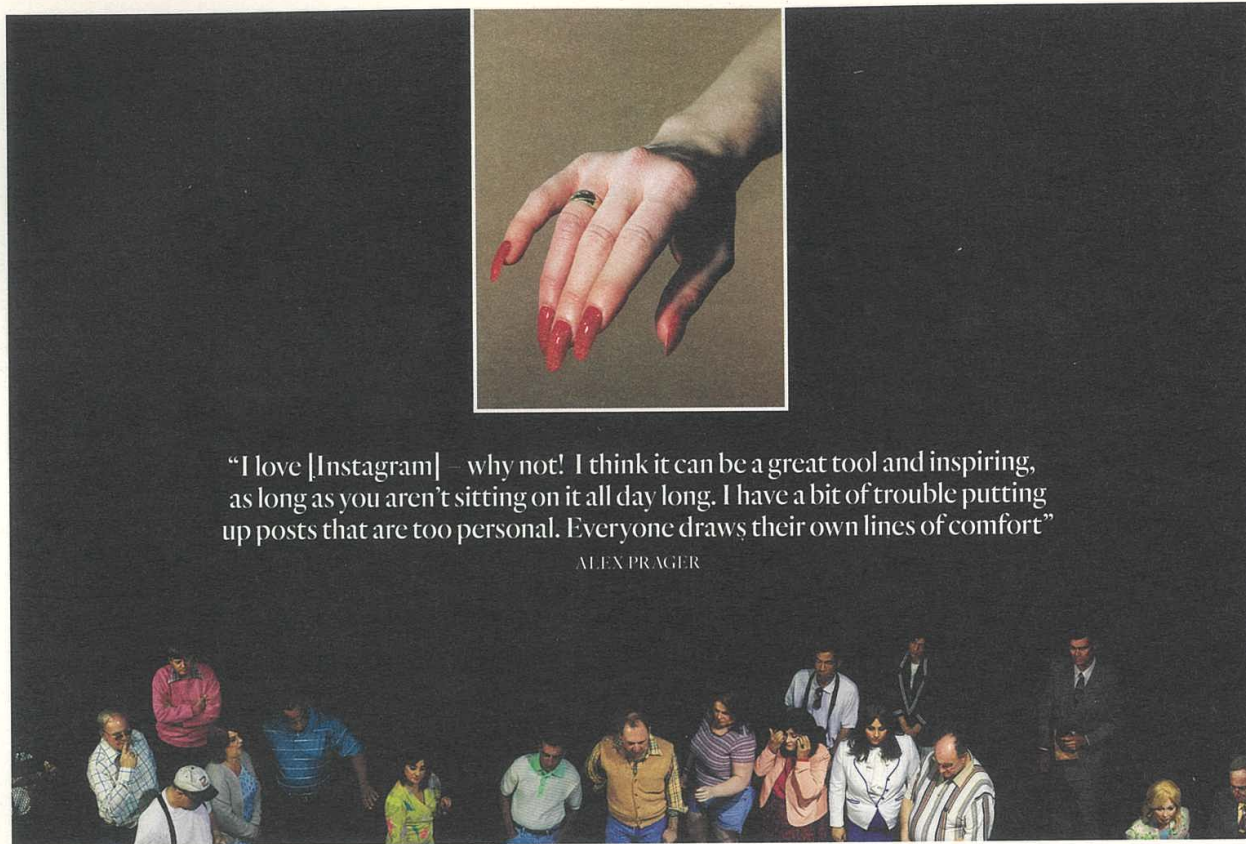
As a mother now, has that changed your approach to art?
My approach hasn’t changed, but I feel more creative than ever. I’m sure that motherhood will definitely be a source of inspiration.

What’s your favourite artwork in the world?
That’s an impossible question to answer, so I won’t even try, but I do love Erwin Wurm’s *Kiss*.

The last time we spoke, you told me you were a collector. Who’s the best art discovery you’ve made in recent years?
I think Justin John Greene is making some cool paintings and I really like Eric McHenry’s drawings.

How did you come to be doing crowd scenes in the first place?
The crowd scenes were a natural evolution in my work, but also something I’d been interested in for a long time. I had become comfortable shooting one subject, then two subjects, three, et cetera... I taught myself how to use lighting and composition, and to build characters and story through wardrobes and props. I kept following what interested me, and it led me to bigger and bigger sets. The different stories go on with each character in the crowd. How the crowd dynamic changes and how you perceive an individual within the crowd gets really interesting when I’m working on these.





“I love [Instagram] – why not! I think it can be a great tool and inspiring, as long as you aren’t sitting on it all day long. I have a bit of trouble putting up posts that are too personal. Everyone draws their own lines of comfort”

ALEX PRAGER

Above: *Shopping Plaza.*
Inset: *Hand Model*

How are the avocado trees doing since the last time we spoke? Do you have an avocado recipe you could share?

Plentiful! I love avocado toast. It’s simple and my mom makes her own sourdough bread, so it’s even better. Smash up some avocado, then add lemon, olive oil, salt and crushed pepper. I use the whole avocado, which should be enough for two pieces of avocado toast.

How’s your relationship with public speaking now? I remember you told me how sick it made you feel in the past – on Art Basel panels, for example. Has that improved, or is it still the same?

I think I’ll always get the jitters around public speaking, no matter how many times I do it! I’ve found a few tricks to make the experience more manageable, but it’s kind of a wild card.

What was the last thing that made you laugh?
My husband makes me laugh all the time.

Picasso said all children are artists. Do you agree with that sentiment?

Children have the most natural imaginations and, as far as I’ve observed, we all start out as artists to varying degrees. It’s life that gets in the way – and as we grow up, we are made to think our imaginations aren’t valuable or right. I think the friends of mine who have managed to keep being artists as adults always seem to me to be ageless.

If Alex Prager were a fashion brand, which would she be?

Hermès and Cartier – everything they make is so chic and timeless. I love the extremely high quality they both have managed to maintain.

If you were writing an autobiography, what would the title be?

This quote by Ingmar Bergman: “If I hadn’t been at work all the time, I would’ve been a lunatic.”

The best book about art you’ve ever read and would encourage others to read?

The book on the interviews [François] Truffaut did with [Alfred] Hitchcock.

Do you love or hate Instagram? Is it agony or ecstasy for artists at this point?

I love it – why not! I think it can be a great tool and inspiring, as long as you aren’t sitting on it all day long. I have a bit of trouble putting up posts that are too personal, though. Everyone draws their own lines of comfort.

Who’s your favourite Instagram artist? Amalia Ulman?
There are so many great ones. I like Harley Weir a lot.

What’s on your Spotify playlist right now?

Bedouine, Ultraísta, Frank Ocean, Autolux and Radiohead. #