

ALEX PRAGER
Part One: *The Mountain*

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London



Alex Prager, *High Noon*, 2021. Archival pigment print, 59 x 49.5 inches (149.9 x 125.7 cm)

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Lehmann Maupin London will present Part One: *The Mountain*, an exhibition of new work by artist Alex Prager. Both a photographer and filmmaker, Prager is known for her elaborately staged scenes that capture a moment frozen in time, inviting the viewer to “complete the story” and speculate about its narrative context. Prager cultivates an uncanny, dreamlike mood throughout her oeuvre—an effect heightened by her use of timeless costuming and richly saturated colors that recall technicolor films, as well as the mysterious or inexplicable happenings she often depicts. Her meticulously crafted photographs are filled with hyperreal details, from signatures on the cast of a high school football player or bandage on the nose of a woman running in terror, to the face in the reflection of a handheld mirror or figure revealed to be a cardboard cutout, firmly locating Prager’s images in the real world and belying the sense of the surreal that often pervades her work.

Although Prager’s immersive, large-scale photographs of crowds are among her best-known work the artist’s newest series evinces a return to portraiture, a genre she first explored early in her practice. Rendered on a smaller, more intimate scale that draws the viewer in, Part One: *The Mountain* features a series of stripped-down Americana portraits that capture the artist’s subjects in the midst of intense inner turmoil. The inspiration for Part One: *The Mountain* arose from Prager’s deep desire to examine the myriad emotional states we have all experienced during one of the greatest collective upheavals in modern society. Conceived as psychological portraits, these images visualize a private moment that is understood universally.

Prager’s subjects in Part One: *The Mountain* can be seen as archetypes, an update of sorts to those found in ancient Greek mythology. The series includes Prager’s quintessential characters, placed in a world that teeters between the fabricated and the familiar. In *High Noon* a traditionally styled cowboy is

seen falling to his knees in a scrubby, lifeless landscape, his revolver flying out of his hand towards the sky. The look on his face is difficult to decipher, and it is unclear whether his expression is one of despair and anguish or joy and release. In either case, his internal state has boiled over, manifesting in physical convulsions with his head thrown back and hat sailing towards the ground. Another image in the series, *Dawn*, features a contemporary female cherub, dressed only in white socks and earrings. The cherub’s arms and legs are outstretched, and she appears to be flying through the sky, but again the viewer cannot determine whether she is ascending in a state of elation or falling harshly back to earth. Each image in the series occupies similarly ambiguous territory, leaving space for the viewer to interpret each scene and draw their own conclusions about its narrative.

The title of the exhibition, Part One: *The Mountain*, is highly symbolic, with the idea of the mountain referenced throughout literature, religion, and psychology as a place where personal revelations, or reckonings, can occur. If the idea of summiting a peak has historically suggested a spiritual pilgrimage or intense physical challenge, it should be remembered that traversing mountainous terrain has often symbolized overcoming obstacles or making hard won progress. If we have found ourselves metaphorically on the mountain over the course of the past two years, Prager’s newest body of work prompts us to imagine what the world will look like when we finally come back down.



Alex Prager, *Dawn*, 2021. Archival pigment print, 48 x 36.9 inches (121.92 x 93.73 cm)

The silence of death and the mayhem of ecstasy. This archetypal dynamic is embodied in Dionysus, the god of wine. His Maenads (his female devotees), danced in the mountains with their backs bent to the sky in orgiastic revelry. Yet they were also savage.

Whether it be in death or ecstasy, time and ego are paralyzed—frozen in the moment of total release. Or as Nietzsche wrote, “Oh deathly quiet pandemonium!” Prager captures a soaring woman in wide-eyed rapture while a cowboy dies in agony. Vitality indistinct from terror. But through either experience, a catharsis to witness. And in witnessing, a participation, a knowledge of being able to go there—if only one day.

— Evans Wittenberg

Alex Prager (b. 1979, Los Angeles, CA; lives and works in Los Angeles, CA) is a photographer and filmmaker who creates elaborately staged scenes that draw inspiration from a wide range of influences and references, including Hollywood cinema, experimental films, 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. Her familiar yet uncanny images depict worlds that synthesize fiction and reality and evoke a sense of nostalgia. Prager cultivates the surreal in her photographs and films, creating emotional moments that feel like a fabricated memory or dream. Each photograph captures a moment frozen in time, inviting the viewer to “complete the story” and speculate about its narrative context. 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. The highly choreographed nature of her photographs and films exposes the way images are constructed and consumed in our media-saturated society.

Solo exhibitions of Prager’s work have been organized at Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Los Angeles, CA (2020); Fotografiska, Tallinn, Estonia (2020); Fotografiska, Stockholm, Sweden (2019); Fondazione Sozzani, Milan, Italy (2019); FOAM Fotografiemuseum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands (2019); Multimedia Art Museum, Moscow, Russia, (2019); Musée des Beaux-Arts Le Locle, Le Locle, Switzerland (2018); The Photographers’ Gallery, London, United Kingdom (2018); Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, IA (2017-2018); Saint Louis Art Museum, Saint Louis, MO (2015); Galerie des Galeries, Paris, France (2015); Goss Michael Foundation, Dallas, TX (2015); National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia (2014); Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (2013); SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, GA (2013); and the FOAM Photography Museum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands (2012). Select group exhibitions featuring her work include *Photography Is Art*, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, TX (2021); *Terminal*, City Gallery Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand (2020); *In Production: Art and the Studio System*, Yuz Museum, Shanghai, China (2019); *Good Night: Energy Flash*, Storage by Hyundai Card, Seoul, South Korea (2019); *Telling Tales: Contemporary Narrative Photography*, McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, TX (2016-2014); *Open*

Rhapsody, Beirut Exhibition Center, Lebanon (2015); *The Noir Effect*, Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles, CA (2014); *No Fashion, Please: Photography Between Gender and Lifestyle*, Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, Austria (2011); and *New Photography*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (2010).

Prager’s work is in numerous international public and private collections, including the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, TX; Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati, OH; Elgiz Museum of Contemporary Art, Istanbul, Turkey; Fondation Carmignac Gestion, Paris, France; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA; Hood Museum of Art, Hanover, NH; Igal Ahouvi Art Collection, Tel Aviv, Israel; Kunsthaus Zürich, Switzerland; K11 Art Foundation, Hong Kong; Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Los Angeles, CA; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY; Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden; Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia; North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, NC; Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton, NJ; Queensland Gallery of Modern Art, Queensland, Australia; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; The Sir Elton John Photography Collection, London, United Kingdom; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY.

Prager has received numerous awards, including the FOAM Paul Huf Award (2012), The Vevey International Photography Award (2009), and the London Photographic Award (2006). Her editorial work has been featured in prominent publications, including *Vogue*, *New York Magazine*, and *W*, and her film series *Touch of Evil*, commissioned by *The New York Times Magazine*, won a 2012 Emmy award. Her first major public commission, *Applause*, for Times Square Arts: Midnight Moment, New York, took place in summer 2017.

ABOUT THE GALLERY

Rachel Lehmann and David Maupin co-founded Lehmann Maupin in 1996 in New York. Since Inception, Lehmann Maupin has served as a leading contemporary art gallery with locations in the U.S., Europe, and Asia. For over 25 years, Lehmann Maupin has been instrumental in introducing international artists in new geographies and building long-lasting curatorial relationships. Known for championing diverse voices, the gallery's program proudly features artists whose work challenges notions of identity, and shapes international culture. Today, the gallery has locations in New York, Hong Kong, Seoul and London, as well as a team in mainland China. In the past year with growing opportunities in new markets, the gallery has opened seasonal spaces in Aspen, Palm Beach, Taipei, and Beijing.



Lehmann Maupin London at Cromwell Place. Photo by Alex Delfanne