

Alex Prager
Western Mechanics
May 9 — June 22, 2024
Seoul



Alex Prager, *Western Mechanics*, 2024

Lehmann Maupin is pleased to present *Western Mechanics*, Alex Prager's first exhibition with Lehmann Maupin in Seoul and her 8th solo exhibition with the gallery. The exhibition debuts a new body of photographic works that eschew linear narrative and instead focus on the presentation of emotionally charged vignettes. Her photographs, rich in cultural references and historical allegory, offer multiple entry points into evocative and imaginative worlds. Probing liminal space, Prager's saturated frames examine the human condition and contemporary experience. Imbued with similar themes, Prager created *Western Mechanics* in tandem with the production of her first feature film, *DreamQuil*, which will explore the rise of technology and the decline of natural order. Concurrent to *Western Mechanics*, Prager's commissioned installation *Play the Wind* (2019) is on view nearby on the exterior of Hyundai Card's Music Library in Seoul. Unveiled in 2020, the installation will remain on view through 2025. Additionally, Prager was recently commissioned by LAX to create a short-form film for the airport's internal electric train system, which will debut in 2025.

Working simultaneously across film, photography, and sculpture, Prager constructs highly emotional moments that feel like a fabricated memory or dream. Her distinctive use of archetypes, everyday objects, humor, and allegory—along with her signature technicolor facades—allow her to explore dark and complex topics. Existential concerns are central to her practice, including collective and individual identities and the impact of technology on society. Like the psychological works of artists including Edward Hopper, August Sanders, and Bill Viola, Prager's work invites the viewer to contemplate the human experience by revealing that the extraordinary lurks within the ordinary.

Across the exhibition, her photographs combine theatrical composition and cultural archetype to produce emotional narratives that traverse the boundaries of mythology and folklore, history and future. Exploring the threshold between states, Prager's compositions contemplate themes of transformation and uncertainty, transcending temporal constraint. In this way, the passage of time and the endurance of memory generate a certain tension within and between the works in *Western Mechanics*. As each composition reflects on the world in its often-dissonant present, Prager keenly identifies moments where our emotional ties to contemporary life are intertwined with the past. For Prager, this method of examining the present through the lens of the past offers a fresh perspective on contemporary discourse—with a hopeful

eye towards the future. Driven by artistic impulse, these vignettes showcase the malleability of time by collapsing the past and the present, underscoring the non-linear nature of the human experience.

Each image in the exhibition conveys this metanarrative, often illustrated through repeated motifs such as a falling woman or a moment frozen in time. In *Hollywood (Day)* (2024), a woman falls from the sky—a dramatic movement caught in stillness. This specific moment of suspense leaves the composition open to interpretation, reflecting the fragmentary yet enduring nature of memory. These varied degrees of suspension—emotional, psychological, and physical—underscore the sense of unpredictability present across the body of work.

Liminality and historical memory merge in Prager's titular *Western Mechanics* (2024). Evoking the traditional genre of history painting, *Western Mechanics* echoes a tableau vivant, portraying human bodies entangled in a dynamic composition akin to Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818—19) or Eugene Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830). In a chaotic yet meticulously organized frame, a mound of intertwined figures—some yelling, some fainting, and two kissing—is set against an Americana-inflected backdrop of horse, mountain, and sky. Prager disperses symbolic yet mundane objects throughout the composition, including the American flag, a globe, and women's undergarments, infusing the dramatic scene within the familiar visual language of everyday life. *Western Mechanics* captures a tumultuous blend of emotions against an ironic sense of calm, which stems from the composition's triangular framework. The intertwined figures are positioned in an intentionally geometric structure, evoking a sense of organization within a chaotic frame. This kind of staged disorder, at once intense, serene, and optimistic, gestures towards the contradictions inherent in contemporary existence. Echoing Friedrich Nietzsche's notion "we have art in order to not die of the truth," as well as history and genre paintings, Prager's careful composition acts as a symbolic window into our present, alluding to the heightened sense of dysfunction, control, and hope that we encounter in the modern world.

Navigating reality and artifice, Prager's newest body of work calls into question the very foundation of contemporary society, leaving viewers in a perpetual state of transition. In each photograph, carefully staged compositions become candid reflections of our liminal present—and in turn, they offer endless possibilities for our future.

Alex Prager (b. 1979, Los Angeles, California) is an American artist, director and screenwriter based in Los Angeles. Prager is known for her uncanny images and films that blur the line between artifice and reality to explore the human condition. Prager has spent over two decades honing her signature style, which draws on traditional movie making techniques from golden-era period styles (like film noir and Technicolor), classical mythology, and the allegorical works of Dutch Renaissance painters Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Brugel. Over time, large-scale productions have become synonymous with her work.

Working simultaneously across film, photography, and sculpture, Prager constructs highly emotional moments that feel like a fabricated memory or dream. Her distinctive use of archetypes, everyday objects, humor, and allegory—along with her signature technicolor facades—allow her to explore dark and complex topics. Existential concerns are central to her practice, including collective and individual identities and the impact of technology on society. Like the psychological works of artists including Alfred Hitchcock, Edward Hopper, Pipilotti

Rist, August Sanders, and Bill Viola, Prager's work invites the viewer to contemplate the human experience by revealing that the extraordinary lurks within the ordinary.

Prager's expansive oeuvre includes 10 short films, which feature classically-influenced and often original scores. "Despair" was included in the "New Photography 2010" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art and marks a career breakthrough for the artist. The Curator of Photography at MoMA, Roxana Marcoci, has described her work as "intentionally loaded," saying "it reminds me of silent movies—there is something pregnant, about to happen, a mix of desire and angst." In 2013, Prager debuted "Face in the Crowd" in her first solo museum exhibition in the United States at Washington D.C.'s Corcoran Gallery of Art. The following year, the film was selected for the New Directors/New Films festival at MoMA and Lincoln Center, New York, NY. In 2019, Prager exhibited her most autobiographical body of work to date, which consists of both photographs and the film "Play the Wind." Her most recent short film, "Run," premiered at the Santa Barbara Film Festival and was nominated for the 2023 SXSW Grand Jury Award. In 2023, Prager was named one of the 25 New Faces of Independent Film by Filmmaker Magazine. Prager is currently developing "DreamQuil," her debut feature film—a cautionary tale about identity, automation, and what makes us human.

Prager's work has been featured in countless museum exhibitions globally, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; The National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia; The Photographers' Gallery, London, United Kingdom; Fotografiska, Stockholm, Sweden; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA, among many others. Prager's work is held in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and many other international public and private collections.

She has received numerous awards for her work, including the FOAM Paul Huf Award (2012), an Emmy award (2012) for her short film series "Touch of Evil," (commissioned by The New York Times Magazine), the Vevey International Photography Award (2009) and the London Photographic Award (2006). Prager's most recent public commission features a large-scale installation of her photographs on the exterior of the Hyundai Card Music Library in Seoul, South Korea (2020-2025).

Artist portrait by Jeff Vespa



**LEHMANN MAUPIN**

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 permanent locations in New York, Seoul, and London, as well as team members based in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Singapore, and Palm Beach. In recent years, with growing opportunities in new markets, the gallery has opened seasonal spaces in Aspen, Palm Beach, Taipei, and Beijing.

SEOUL

213, Itaewon-ro
Yongsan-gu, Seoul 04349
+82 2 725 0094

CONTACT

Adriana Elgarresta, Global Director of Public Relations
adriana@lehmannmaupin.com

McKenna Quatro Johnson, Communications and Research Associate
mckenna@lehmannmaupin.com

General Inquiries
seoul@lehmannmaupin.com