

## SYMPTOMATIC GAZE

### Compulsion

By Alex Prager

M + B

Los Angeles

April 7–May 12, 2012

“Compulsion,” an exhibition of photographs and an accompanying short film by Los Angeles-based artist Alex Prager, opened nearly simultaneously in Los Angeles, New York City, and London.<sup>1</sup> The galleries coordinated their press releases and showed identical bodies of work. Prager, who has recently emerged as an artist of note, has quickly amassed a worldwide following, has been included in group exhibitions like MoMA’s “New Photography 2010,” and is the recipient of the 2012 Foam Paul Huf Award. Prager, however, is still a young, developing artist searching for the critical voice that will substantiate her vivid imagination and technical acuity. Her work is simultaneously derivative and fresh, acknowledging her antecedents, influences, and inspiration. In her current body of work, there are direct parallels to photographs by Joel Sternfeld and Enrique Metinides, and to Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel’s 1929 film *Un Chien Andalou*, as well as references to Weegee, Cindy Sherman, and Gregory Crewdson. Prager borrows freely from photography and film, appropriating the style and look of film noir in addition to a Technicolor-inspired palette.



In previous bodies of work similarly titled after films—“Polyester” (2007), “The Big Valley” (2008), and “Week-End” (2010)—Prager also engaged with the clichés of voyeurism, creating enigmatic photographs that carefully positioned her female models in potentially dangerous situations. In this work, her aim was to create a psychological portrait or a mysterious narrative; however, the images were high on camp and lacked real drama. That Prager would also turn to film came as no surprise. Her short movies elaborate upon the drama suggested in the photographs. *Despair* (2010), a four-minute melodrama inspired by *The Red Shoes* (1948), is about a woman’s anxiety, desire, and despair. The dreamlike qualities and fantasy within this film are further explored in *La Petite Mort* (2012), a short surreal exploration of sexual ecstasy and mortality.

To create her works, Prager directs actors on stage sets, orchestrating what later appears in the images as the impossible. Like her ability to direct actors, her use of digital technologies

#### Above

2 PM, Interstate 110 and Eye #6 (*Sinkhole*) (2010) by Alex Prager;  
© Alex Prager, courtesy M+B Gallery, Los Angeles



is remarkably skilled, though it is clear that her product results from the efforts of a team rather than an individual. In this way, her methodologies are similar to those of Crewdson, whose elaborate sets are akin to film productions. By choosing the loaded title “Compulsion,” Prager automatically links her body of work to Richard Fleischer’s 1959 film of the same name, which is an adaptation of the infamous Leopold and Loeb murder case and also the inspiration for Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rope* (1948). These films ask what compels individuals to kill, whereas Prager is more interested in voyeurism and what compels people to gravitate toward spectacles. Her introductory statement for the catalog of the show reads, “Mother Nature has always been stronger than us. Good and Evil have always contended. And there is always the compulsion to watch.”<sup>22</sup>

Prager constructs events to be watched. That her work is constructed, and not happened upon, separates her images from those of Weegee and Metinides, a Mexican photojournalist, both of whom she cites as influences. She remarks, “Metinides was doing exactly what I was trying to do without actually photographing real dead bodies. . . . He added beauty to the photographs and really captured the feel of the spectators at the scene.”<sup>23</sup> Prager’s subjects only pretend to be dead. She stages an event and uses Photoshop to composite her shots into hyperreal scenes that are more violent and explicit than anything Metinides documented. The difference between a Weegee or Metinides and a Prager is that the former scouted for what was sensational in life while the latter imagines and creates it. Prager’s work is all about artifice. Her scenarios often involve a woman in a dangerous predicament—hanging in mid-air from a car bumper that mysteriously falls from the sky, floating in water, or dangling from phone lines. These female subjects are victims. Prager is

not empowering women as much as presenting them as clichéd damsels in distress, albeit ones who are well dressed.

Each of the ten diptychs in “Compulsion” (2012) documents a disaster whose cause remains unknown. The titles include a specific time of day ranging from early morning to late night, and implying a day of doom. *7:12 pm, Redcliff Ave and Eye #10 (Telephone Wires)* is a recreation of a Metinides work documenting a dead man hanging in mid-air from telephone or electrical wires. In Metinides’s beautifully composed black-and-white image, there is no crowd, only the man hanging. Prager turns day into night and the man into a brightly clothed, blonde-haired, high-heeled woman who appears spotlit as she is caught in the grid of wires against a blue-black sky. Around the silhouetted telephone pole is a crowd of men shot from the back who gaze up at the helpless woman. *2 pm, Interstate 110 and Eye #6 (Sinkhole)* is more surreal. A gold Chevy sinks into a hole in the freeway on the approach to downtown Los Angeles. The smogless blue sky houses a passing airplane. The 55-mph speed limit sign is nestled against palm trees in what appears to be a tranquil, traffic-less image of LA. The veracity of the background is in sharp contrast to the absurdity of the foreground where the car mysteriously disappears into a huge puddle.

In the “Compulsion” diptychs, each large-scale color photograph is coupled with a smaller closeup of an eye. Prager states, “I felt too disconnected when examining the ‘scenes’ on their own, so

**Above**

*4:01 PM, Sun Valley and Eye #3 (House Fire)* (2012) by Alex Prager;  
© Alex Prager, courtesy M+B Gallery, Los Angeles

I felt it needed an added emotional aspect.”<sup>24</sup> These disembodied all-seeing eyes hypothetically belong to both victim and witness. While she presents a grid of six eyes in *Compulsion #1* and *Compulsion #2*, the way they augment the disaster photographs is divisive. In *3:14 pm, Pacific Ocean and Eye #9 (Passenger Casualties)*, victims and survivors of a plane crash or shipwreck drift in an expanse of bright green water. Some bodies are bloated while others appear to be swimming or treading water alongside hats and briefcases, desperate for help. A young woman’s brown eye stares intently, perhaps witnessing the disaster unfold. The size of the eye in proportion to the image makes its impact confrontational; this is not an intimate human-scaled eye (like Man Ray’s photograph of Lee Miller’s eye), but that of a horror film closeup.

Prager is not conceptually savvy enough to pull off the dialectical relationship set up between the eye and the images. She begs the question: Who is looking and who is watching whom? Yet the answer gets bogged down in the construction of the image and its illusionistic properties, rather than open up the possibility of a feminist critique. In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), Laura Mulvey famously discussed the cinematic gaze and

the relationship between looking and being looked at. It might behoove Prager to delve into both feminist theory and cultural criticism. Her works clearly show potential: she can make a compelling image, she can direct actors, she can insert what is not there using digital technologies. What is missing is the *why*. Why create disasters when they happen every day in the news? Why aestheticize victims when they lose their lives? In a world where both man-made and natural disasters are commonplace, a gifted artist like Prager should take more responsibility for what her work is about, over and beyond what it looks like, and the spectacle of its making.

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NOTES 1. Along with showing at M+B in Los Angeles, “Compulsion” was on view April 5–May 19, 2012, at Yancey Richardson Gallery in New York City and April 20–May 24, 2012, at Michael Hoppen Contemporary in London, U.K. 2. Alex Prager: *Compulsion*, Yancey Richardson Gallery, M+B Gallery, Michael Hoppen Gallery, 2012. 3. Quoted in Jessica Herndon, “Alex Prager Is Photography’s Queen Voyeur,” *LA Weekly*, April 19, 2012, [www.laweekly.com/2012-04-19/art-books/alex-prager-compulsion-m-b/](http://www.laweekly.com/2012-04-19/art-books/alex-prager-compulsion-m-b/). 4. Quoted in Adam Jacques, “Portfolio: Alex Prager,” *the Independent*, April 22, 2012, [www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/portfolio-alex-prager-7658254.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/portfolio-alex-prager-7658254.html).