



Like her other works in the show, *4:01 PM, Sun Valley* and *Eye #3 (House Fire)* (diptych) combines a staged photo of a tragedy with a photo of an eye.

PHOTO COURTESY OF M+B

actually photographing real dead bodies," explains Prager, whose subjects only pretend to be dead. "He added beauty to the photos and really captured the feel of the spectators around the scene."

The self-taught Prager, who knew she wanted to be a photographer after catching a William Eggleston exhibit at age 20, continues to shoot with the same film and lights she learned on; Kodak Portrait Film and hot lights from Home Depot. "I don't know how to do tons of different types of photography," she admits. "I just know how to do my thing."

For her new short film, *La Petite Mort*, a French idiom for orgasm that literally means "small death," she examines how a climax and the act of dying are similar experiences. "It's the idea of being closest to death because all of your senses shut off," she explains.

The film opens with a male narrator explaining a woman's journey through childbirth: "She felt an unbearable pain... Then suddenly a calm came over her. The pain turned into pure ecstasy." We then see actress Godreche hit by a train, thrown underwater and watched by a crowd as she walks toward a man and collapses.

"No one really knows what happens after we die," Prager says. "Or what happens while you are dying. I wanted to explore that realm of feelings."

Prager's not just an artsy gallery chick; her commercial work is also in high demand. She shot Missoni's 1960s-inspired campaign for Target and luxury leather-goods maker Bottega Veneta's "The Art of Collaboration" spring 2011 campaign, and during this most recent awards season shot and directed the *New York Times Magazine* spread and short film series depicting movie villains, featuring Brad Pitt and George Clooney.

Though she's emerging as a powerful voice in the global art world — she scooped up Amsterdam's Foam Paul Huf Award for photography in March and has displayed at galleries in Shanghai and Vienna — Prager's L.A. roots continue to inform her work. "I keep expecting to think, 'I've shot here so many times, how can I stand one more blue sky?'" she jokes. "But it's so beautiful here, and so fucked up. That's the perfect balance to make endless amounts of art."

*"Compulsion"* is at M+B, 612 N. Almont Drive, W. Hlywd., through May 19; [mbart.com](http://mbart.com). It also can be seen at New York's Yancey Richardson Gallery and London's Michael Hoppen Contemporary.

**Arts //**

# I CAN'T BELIEVE WHAT I'M SEEING

Alex Prager is photography's queen voyeur with her new exhibit, "Compulsion"

BY JESSICA HERNDON

**W**hile I was driving to artist Alex Prager's Silver Lake studio, a fire truck's red lights halted traffic. There was a man lying in the middle of the road — his body twitching, the bike he was riding abandoned a few feet away. As terrible as the scene may be, it was impossible to look away.

Coincidentally, it's this type of voyeuristic impulse that inspired Prager's latest exhibit, "Compulsion," on view at M+B, along with her new short film, *La Petite Mort*, starring French actress Judith Godreche. "This word reminded me of driving by an accident and feeling compelled to look," says the demure photographer, unaware of the collision I just saw. "You want to be better than that, but you're just not, and we never really are."

Transfixed by tragedies shown in the media, Prager's collection reimagines the darker side of life, in works such as the haunting *11:45 PM, Griffith Park*, in which a woman kneels next to a body as smoke rises from the hood of a car beside them.

Her photography has become known for its use of vivid color and a surreal cinematic aesthetic, drawing comparisons to Alfred Hitchcock and David Lynch. Yet in this show she retreats from her previous shows' '50s- and '60s-inspired work, like 2010's exhibit "Week-End," where thick false eyelashes and paisley were emphasized. She was "sick of shooting girls from the knees up," she says, with rows of wigs and wardrobe behind her as she sits in her studio. "Now, I'm trying to be timeless."

Prager's loaded narratives leave us to

wonder just what's going on beyond each frame. They're permeated with social consciousness but touch on her sense of humor via bizarre staging and crafty digital manipulation. In *2:00 PM Interstate 110*, a smoggy downtown L.A. can be seen in the background as a Chevy sinks into the highway. "Sometimes when something is heavy, it's hard to know how you



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really feel about it," explains the 32-year-old artist. "Like when you're crying and you walk by a mirror and accidentally get a glimpse of yourself and you start laughing. The images do have a comedic aspect to them if you can see that."

She pairs each still with another photo — a close-up image of an eye. For example, *10:58 AM Bunker Hill* captures a loafer-wearing brunette plummeting toward a heap of flames; the work is accompanied by a picture of a female's eye looking up. For Prager, the eye emphasizes our inability to deflect our stare from an accident but also — because it's outside the photograph of the tragedy — our feeling of remove when observing a tragedy after it has happened. "It was almost like showing tragedy from a disconnected point of view," she says. "I can't quite connect to tragedies I see in the news because it's not happening in

the moment."

Work on "Compulsion" began about a year and a half ago, inspired by 1929's *Un Chien Andalou*, a surrealist silent short film by Salvador Dali and Spanish director Luis Buñuel; photographer Weegee, who captured a grim New York between the 1930s and '50s and Hollywood portraits from burlesque dancers to a photo of Marilyn Monroe manipulated to look grotesque; and photographer Enrique Metinides, who focused on crime in Mexico from the 1940s to the '70s.

Resembling Metinides' black-and-white photo of Jesus Bazaldua Barber, his dead body hanging in telephone wires after being electrocuted by 60,000 volts when installing a phone line, Prager's *7:12 PM Redcliff Ave.* portrays a woman tangled in similar wires as a group of male observers gaze up at her. "Metinides was doing exactly what I was trying to do without



From Prager's film *La Petite Mort*