

The New York Times

ART REVIEW

A Striking Balance of New and Rediscovered at the Independent Fair

In this year's whimsical edition, the 11-year-old art fair looks back to lesser-known work from the 1960s.

By Will Heinrich

March 5, 2020, 4:54 p.m. ET



Vikky Alexander, "Ecstasy" (1982). Chromogenic color photographs. Vikky Alexander, Downs & Ross and Independent Art Fair

Downs & Ross (Booth 5) The Canadian Pictures Generation artist Vikky Alexander, who has been exhibiting since the 1980s, comes roaring back into New York with a group of conceptual photography-based installations and a discreet but powerful sculpture at this [Bowery gallery](#). Airbrushed men and women in advertising-style tableaux, balanced against exposed black matting in black frames, feel curiously weightless, while a low glass table with sharp corners is positively disorienting. They're reminders of all the invisible forces, some benevolent, some not, that shape our lives.

BOMB

Reflections of Desire: Vikky Alexander Interviewed by Alison Sinkewicz

Installations and photographs that investigate the self and consumerism.

Apr 13, 2020



Vikky Alexander, *Nordic Rock*, 2020, Fonderie Darling. © Maxime Boisvert.

Vikky Alexander's photographs don't let you forget about your problems, particularly if one of your vices is buying shit you don't need. The artist, whose work is part of the Pictures Generation as well as the Vancouver School, dissects and reinterprets marketing imagery to usurp the myriad iterations of seduction. In doing so, Alexander doesn't just expose marketing manipulations or critique institutions but exposes our struggle to curtail our consumerist impulses.

Alexander moved from Halifax to New York City in 1979 after graduating from Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD), then to Vancouver in 1992, followed by Montreal in 2016, where she now lives and works. In producing text, sculpture, and installation, she creates her art almost entirely offline, pulling imagery from various catalogs, magazines, and other print materials.

Alexander's latest exhibition, *Nordic Rock*, at the Fonderie Darling in Montreal, follows closely on the artist's first museum survey, *Extreme Beauty*, at the Vancouver Art Gallery. Like a surreal retail showroom, *Nordic Rock* presents an idyllic interior. Vistas and contemporary furnishings are paired together to create a dream-like condo. Alexander's iridescent and minimal glass furniture nods to her own work like *Glass Chair and Table* (1990) as well as to the conceptual fragility and shortcomings of capital "M" minimalism as well as mainstream minimalist design which has now flooded fast fashion and fast design. But Alexander's utilization of reflective surfaces and discombobulating scale doesn't let viewers play house. She pierces the fantasy to expose it for what it is—a beautiful, elaborate ruse. And I want to buy it.

—Alison Sinkewicz

Alison Sinkewicz

Your new exhibition takes up luxury design and design marketing. Is your interest in the marketing of luxury real estate an extension of your interest in fashion marketing?

Vikky Alexander

I guess so. In the 1980s I had been looking at the commodification of sex; basically, sex is the thing that sells the luxury good. From that, I moved on to combining figure and landscape. I started to think about the commodification of nature: "the view" is a big part of architecture and what makes a place sell. I photographed places like the West Edmonton Mall where nature is incorporated to make it more of a pleasant environment. I've always been interested in that fusion, so it manifests itself in a number of ways.



Vikky Alexander, *Frozen Wall*, 2020, Fonderie Darling. © Maxime Boisvert.

AS

In works like *Lake in the Woods* (1996), you create vista collages that produce the kind of view that an architect would construct. Are you creating a space for desire?

VA

A lot of my work uses mirrors, which this exhibition does, so you are always projecting yourself into this idealized space. In the early 1980s, I used the frame as a mirroring device because the Plexi of the glass would be on top of the black mat, so it became like a black mirror. You would see yourself superimposed onto the model subjects that I was using.

Lake in the Woods (1986) is a piece that's empty otherwise—you need the viewer. It's like an eighteenth-century Claude glass, which is a convex mirror that tourists would use when they went to Switzerland. It was like an early selfie: you would see yourself projected into the sublime landscape behind you so that you could make it a more palatable composition, and it wouldn't be so overwhelming.

AS

Luxury, glass interiors are idealized and slick and clean, but when you use them in your work that falls apart.

VA

Exactly. They are these stage sets. With the fragility of the glass, it's not functional; it's completely idealized. When I told Caroline [Andrieux, founder and general and artistic director of Fonderie Darling] what I wanted to do she said, "That's perfect because there are all these condos going up around the Darling."



Vikky Alexander, *Dichroic benches* (front), *Frozen Wall* (back), 2020. © Maxime Boisvert.

AS

Glass high-rises have become the architecture of Vancouver, whereas in Montreal, it's very different. I feel like the bearer of bad news when I say this could possibly be Montreal's future.

VA

I know. But it's also harder to see it here. In Vancouver you're always going over a bridge; you have vantage points. Whereas here, I always feel like I'm below; and it's freezing cold, so I'm not really looking up and observing.

AS

How do you manipulate or dissect images of consumer culture? Are there certain things that you're looking for?

VA

The showroom series (*Istanbul Showrooms* [2013]) started because they were interior-design showrooms that someone had already staged. So I could re-stage the staging. With a glass window, the street becomes part of the stage. I think my photographs make you stand back. If you're just the viewer, you project yourself into the scene. You think that could be my room, my handbag; but when you see yourself on the street, it removes you.

AS

Turning to *The Design Office* projects (1979–80) you made with Kim Gordon and which Leah Pires describes in an essay on your work in *Vikky Alexander: Extreme Beauty* as offering design "solutions" for artists' "problems." What's funny to me is the postering of this service as a joke.

VA

Oh, was it ever. We didn't make a dime. (*laughter*)

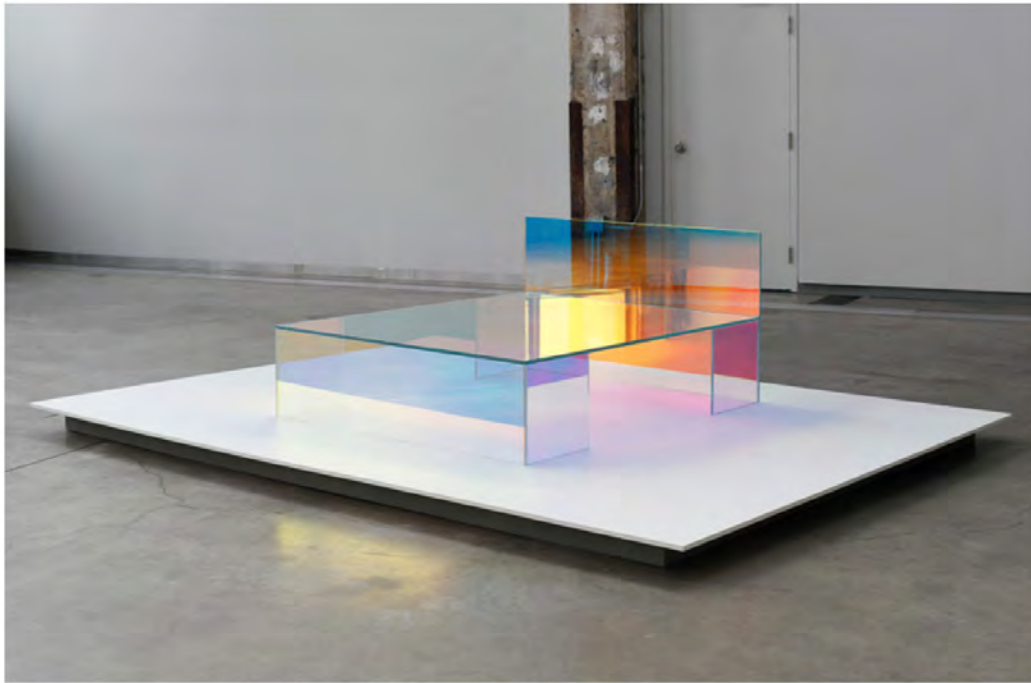
AS

And now it strikes me as something that people really actually do for a living.

VA

They do, definitely. We were both trying to make money, but we were both hopeless at it. We're not really commercially oriented in that way. So we just started to have fun. And I can't think of how that project got started because it was so long ago, but she was from LA, and I was from Canada, and it was a bit about meeting people? Not that we were looking for dates.

I was interested in design and architecture, and Kim was too. We liked the idea of design overlapping with art, and we didn't really know how to be artists. I think we had a business card or matches, and that seemed to be our only legitimate thing. We'd say, "We can solve your problem!" and we'd go to people's studios or lofts, and they'd go, "Um, problem. Yeah, I guess I don't have really good light in here?" But, of course, those people didn't have any money either, so it's not like we could go to something like Inform Interiors.



Vikky Alexander, *Dichroic bed*, 2020. © Simon Belleau.

AS

I'm wondering about the impact cities have had on your work. Do you feel any allegiance to certain ones that you've lived in or schools, like the Vancouver School?

VA

More so lately. You know, when you're living it you don't really think about it, but history makes it into more of a package. I met Dan Graham at NSCAD. Dan knew Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace, and Rodney Graham, so I knew the Vancouver School before it was the Vancouver School. I thought it was a good idea to move to Vancouver because the photo labs were so good. In New York, they weren't that good, weirdly enough. But the fact that there were so many female photographers working in New York was great. I didn't even think about that until I got to Vancouver and thought: Why are there all these guys here? You got to be kidding me.

AS

Coming from New York to Vancouver, did you feel like there was a lack of a feminist discourse?

VA

I think there was the theoretical feminism in Vancouver, but I'm not that theoretical. *(laughter)* I'm not a headbanger in that way. There was a group, but they went to some seminar at a point and bonded. I'm not kidding. *(laughter)* Some Mary Kelly thing or something like that.

AS

Did your Vancouver Art Gallery retrospective, *Extreme Beauty*, make you think about your work in a different way?

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VA

The things that tie it all together are interesting. I think that with most artists you just follow your nose. You don't know if it will add up with the thing you did last time, or maybe it will make sense with what you did ten years ago. Obviously, I like shiny glass—like a magpie. But I also like what it talks about. I'm interested in materials that are self-aware, where you think: I'm at a gallery, and I'm looking at myself in a work of art. I'm not getting lost in the sublime.

Vikky Alexander: Nordic Rock is on view at Fonderie Darling in Montreal until May 10. (Fonderie Darling is temporarily closed due to the coronavirus.)

Alison Sinkewicz is a Montreal-based art and design writer. Her work has appeared in Wallpaper, Dwell, Canadian Art, Azure Magazine, The Editorial Magazine, Pitchfork, among other publications.*

Art Fairs

'We're Protesting Against Forms of Forgetting': Why the Downs & Ross Gallery Is Bringing a Piece of New York History to the Independent Art Fair

Tara Downs and Alex Ross will present works by Pictures Generation artist Vikky Alexander.

Nate Freeman, March 4, 2020



Vikky Alexander, *Blue Noon*, 1980. Photo courtesy Downs & Ross.

Unlike fairs in convention centers—anonymous windowless vessels that make you feel like you could be in Topeka or Dubai—the Independent Art Fair, with aerial views of Tribeca's old Federal-style mansions and retrofitted factories exploding, is many glorious stories above the spiraling road to the Holland Tunnel.

But in case you get lost in the art and forget where you are, one work at Independent's VIP preview Thursday, in the booth of local outfit Downs & Ross, will snap you back to New York City: Vikky Alexander's *New* (1985/2020), vinyl signs that once hung in the windows of the original New Museum space on Mercer Street, just a few blocks away.

The location of Independent was definitely a factor that led Downs & Ross to stage a solo booth of Alexander, a Pictures Generation artist working in Manhattan in the '80s, at the fair, after years of participating in the Armory Show, which opens today at Piers 52 & 54. It also helped that fair founder Elizabeth Dee is a longtime fan of Alexander's work, and that her staff is well-versed in the artists who once lived in the area surrounding the fair.

"The project we had in mind was far better suited to a team that had such profound scholarship with regard to the myth and romance of Downtown New York in the '80s," said gallery cofounder Alex Ross.



Vikky Alexander, *New* (1985/2020). Courtesy Downs & Ross.

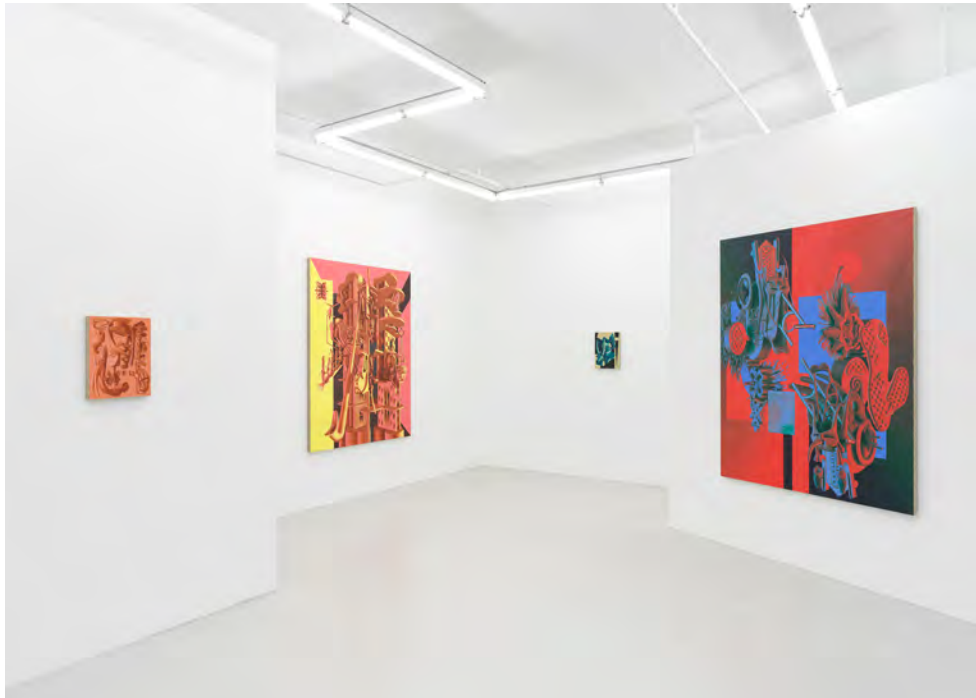
"I don't think the gallery's ever been about our biographic dimensions, or this conglomerate of our CVs," he said. "I don't think we'd want to romanticize our individual vanguard moments. We share a lot of similarities. We're always forward looking, we're protesting against forms of forgetting, and contextualizing nascent developments in visual culture within the context of New York's antecedence."

By presenting a solo booth of important works by Alexander, who has been working with Downs for years, they're holding their own at Independent, which is a thinking person's fair. Included in the presentation are works that were shown in landmark exhibitions, including Alexander's 1985 New Museum show and a two-person exhibition with her former husband, fellow Pictures Generation artist James Welling, held at the Kunsthalle Bern in Switzerland. The booth also includes her first-ever work, which comes from Welling's collection.

The involvement of Independent founder Dee, a longtime supporter of Alexander's work, helped as well.

"She's kind of been a continuum of interest, and when we approached her, she took it up right away," said Downs.

"It does have that curatorial focus," she said of the fair. "People go there because they want to go in deep. It's not just this blockbuster event."



Installation view of "Tom Waring: Consistent Estimator" at Downs & Ross on the Bowery. Photo courtesy Downs & Ross.

On Sunday, Downs & Ross opened the first-ever solo show of a young Brit named Tom Waring, who paints these wacked-out systems that wind through a series of gears, a reflection of a interconnected world bursting at the seams—apt painting for a month that will see the further global spread of a deadly disease, Ross noted.

The works were made over the last year, but were informed to some extent by *The Decameron*, the Italian novel that takes place outside of Florence during the Black Death, which may have killed as much as 60 percent of Europe's population. Like coronavirus, that plague originated in China before traveling to Northern Italy, where an outbreak occurred.

"It's kind of terrifyingly apposite," Ross said.

And next month, the gallery will stage a show of new work by the Berlin-based Rute Merk, who has made a series of paintings in collaboration with semi-reclusive fashion godhead Demna Gvasalia, the iconoclastic creative director of Balenciaga.

"It was instigated at the invitation of Balenciaga," Ross said, being charmingly evasive. "She was invited to produce a body of work that responds to and interpolates the collection for Spring/Summer 2020."

Balenciaga obsessives, take note: It opens April 17.

HYPERALLERGIC

Your Concise Guide to Armory Week 2020

Your useful guide to the fairs and exhibitions of interest this week.



Valentina Di Liscia March 2, 2020

To the delight of art lovers and exceedingly stressed gallery workers and art handlers alike, an unseasonably warm New York City (highs in the mid-50s!) will welcome throngs of local and out-of-town visitors for Armory Week 2020. Amid fears of the havoc coronavirus could wreak in large, crowded spaces, the Armory Show has issued a [statement](#) addressing concerns around its spread. (The show will go on as planned, but the fair says it will be closely monitoring updates.)

In happier news, the VOLTA fair will return after a one-year hiatus; Spring/Break will be taking over two whole floors of a new venue; and there are so many great exhibitions opening or already up that I had a mild aneurysm trying to pare this list down.

This Armory Week, let's commit to falling in love with one or two or ten artists we may not have heard of before. From Chioma Ebinama at the Fortnight Institute to Guo Fengyi at the Drawing Center, the next few days offer opportunities for discoveries at every corner. Below is our full list of Hyperallergic-recommended Armory Week fairs — along with shows, talks, performances, and more.

Independent New York

When: March 6–8

Where: Spring Studios, 50 Varick Street, Tribeca, Manhattan

Independent New York, hosted once again across several floors of Spring Studios in Tribeca, is an ocean of emerging talent sprinkled with mid-career names and rising stars shown by both galleries and nonprofits. As you're approaching the entrance on 50 Varick Street, look up: you'll see a site-specific revival of Vikky Alexander's 1985 [New Museum](#) installation, complementing the artist's career survey mounted by Downs & Ross on the ground floor.

The New York Times

Which Art Fair Is for You? Let Our Critic Be Your Guide

One of New York's busiest art fair seasons kicks off this week with the Art Show at the Park Avenue Armory. Nine sprawling exhibitions will follow next week. Here's our critic's guide.

By Will Heinrich

Published Feb. 27, 2020 Updated Feb. 28, 2020, 8:43 a.m. |



Vikky Alexander's "Ecstasy," photographs from 1982, at Downs & Ross, New York. Vikky Alexander, Downs & Ross and Independent Art Fair

This fair is for you if you want nothing but the best. Carefully curated and stylish to a fault, TriBeCa's [Independent](#) tends to feel more like a biennial than a trade show, with nearly a third of its exhibitors from outside the United States. The curation cuts both ways: You can be sure all the work will look good, but you won't get the gambler's high that comes from hunting through a noisy crowd for a piece that really strikes you. Look out this year for confidently colorful painting, especially the charming intricacies of the self-taught artist Dorothy Iannone, curvy brass sculpture by Hanna Sandin, and a reprise, in case you missed her show at Canada Gallery, of [Katherine Bernhardt's E.T. paintings](#). *March 6-8; Spring Studios at 50 Varick Street; independenthq.com/new-york.*

Frieze

Reviews /

BY KARINA IRVINE
12 DEC 2019

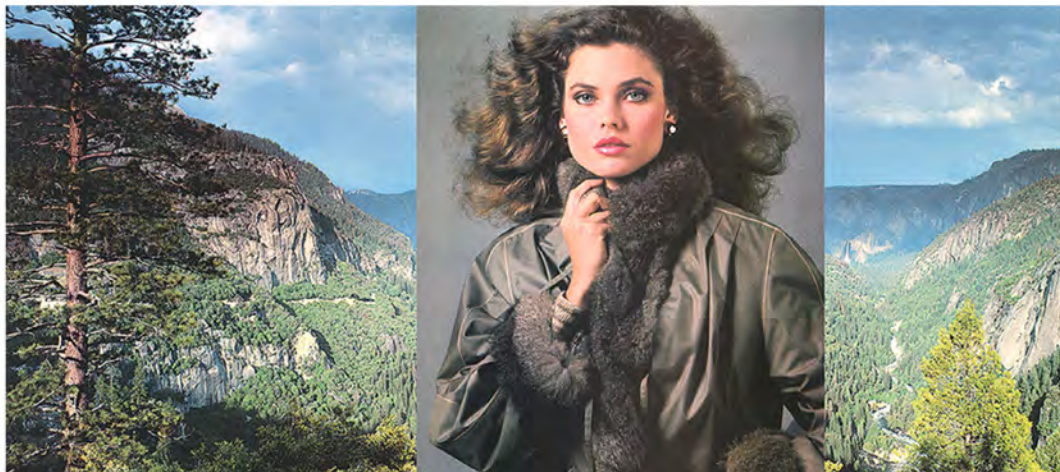
Vikky Alexander's 'Extreme Beauty' Is an Escapist Fantasy to Be Bought and Sold

In the artist's first museum survey at the Vancouver Art Gallery, appropriated advertising imagery exposes the hermetic loops of capitalism



Vikky Alexander, *Portage Glacier*, 1982/2017, inkjet print on metallic paper, 46 x 102 cm. Courtesy: RBC Art Collection

'Extreme Beauty', Vikky Alexander's first museum retrospective, tracks the artist's four-decade critique of consumer culture and the mediated landscape in collages, photographs, sculptures and installations. Best known for her appropriations of magazine advertisements, Alexander crops, rearranges, collages and enlarges images of models onto views of pristine wilderness. Her photographs similarly capture familiar commercial destinations – shopping centres, model display suites and theme parks – that employ idealized natural landscapes as atmospheric scenography or marketing devices. When grouped together, such images – designed to elicit feelings of longing and desire – reaffirm the alienating effects of capitalism.



Vikky Alexander, *Yosemite*,
1982/2017, inkjet print on metallic
paper, 56 × 102 cm. Courtesy: RBC
Art Collection

Many of the more than 80 works on display feature images of nature taken from commercial advertisements. Some employ the art-historically loaded format of the triptych: in *Portage Glacier* (1982/2017), for instance, a fashion model casts her gaze down demurely, her skin illuminated by the blue tinge of the ice formations flanking her portrait. In *Yosemite* (1982/2017), a model with windswept hair wearing a fur-lined leather coat appears to pose triumphantly atop a rocky precipice, in the tradition of Romantic painting. Resembling three-panelled altarpieces with female icons at their centre, these works satirize the quasi-religious devotion of consumerism. The model's unavoidable presence in the centre of the image recalls *Portage Glacier* and *Yosemite's* popularity as ecotourism destinations, reinforcing an anthropocentric view of nature as laden with commercial value.



Vikky Alexander,
*Disneyland, Anaheim,
California #25, 1991*,
chromogenic print, 61 ×
42 cm. Courtesy: the
artist

If Alexander's appropriations of landscapes – not unlike those seen in calendars or desktop wallpapers – court accusations of kitsch, they do so to parody the false promise that, by consuming more, individuals might be able to renounce capitalism. This paradox appears in stark relief in the series 'Disneyland, Anaheim, California' (1992), photographs depicting amusement park visitors wandering through a topiary maze and cruising on a boat through geometric garden plots neatly separated by shape and colour. Such artificial idylls offer brief, illusory escape in exchange for a fee.

Similarly, in *Model Suite: Overview* (2005), Alexander has taken a photograph of a condominium display room promising future tenants scenic views. The model feigns spaciousness with its slightly miniaturized furniture, made apparent by a bowl of oranges of extraordinary size. Completing the scene are fake lightbox windows displaying digitally-rendered views of the Vancouver skyline from the unbuilt condominium. As Vancouver continues to build its way skywards, views of nature remain a crucial selling point for luxury developments, despite the environmental degradation they cause. Alexander has lived in the city for over 20 years, coinciding with its development boom: in this context, illusions of 'extreme beauty' have papered over on-going gentrification and displacement.



Vikky Alexander, *Model Suite: Overview*, 2005, transmounted chromogenic print, 1 x 1.5 m.
Courtesy: the artist and TrépanierBaer, Calgary

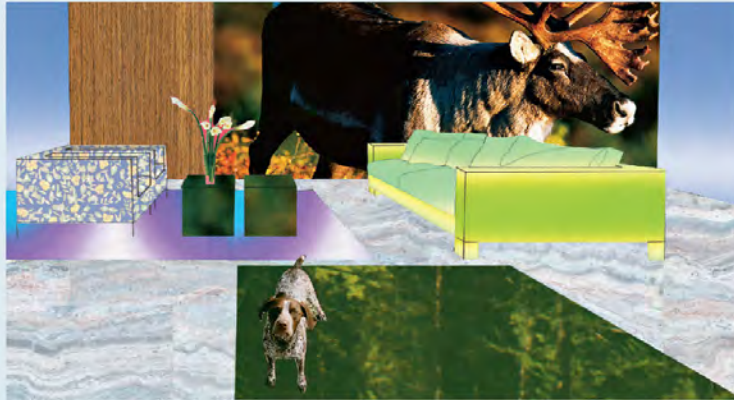
The advertising industry traffics in simulacra, fantasy images that appear more real than they actually are. Alexander's use of natural landscapes exposes these fantasies of escape as ploys to make us spend more. In the midst of climate catastrophe, such a wakeup call is long overdue.

'Extreme Beauty: Vikky Alexander' continues at Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, Canada, until 26 January 2020.

KARINA IRVINE

Karina Irvine is a writer based in Vancouver, Canada.

canadianart



Vikky Alexander *Heike's Room*
2004 Ink-jet print on canvas
1.36 m x 2.18 m x 3 cm
COLLECTION VANCOUVER ART GALLERY

VIKKY ALEXANDER

Vancouver Art Gallery

One of few Canadian artists associated with the Pictures Generation in 1980s New York, Alexander is known for her use of appropriation to critique the conventions of the advertising industry. That's where "Extreme Beauty," her first career-spanning retrospective, begins, with a series depicting '80s supermodel Christie Brinkley in cropped and enlarged images framed under yellow glass. Obsessive and voyeuristic, their overt manipulation still startles, raising questions around authorship and image ownership anew. Her use of highly reflective coloured glass (elsewhere it's black for full mirrored effect) implicates viewers too, such that one's own gaze becomes simultaneous with the model's, two sets of eyes staring back from within the frame.

Consumerism is a clear reference point but conceptually the works demonstrate how surface reflections produce images with no depth. That's critical. By expanding the boundaries of what constitutes a photograph—through sculpture, collage, Plexiglas, mirrors and murals—Alexander points out how advertising is vacant, even objectless. In our era of Instagram consumption, this continues to ring true: it's about selling the idea of the image and the desire of looking, not the product itself.

Surprising, to me, was how much of the work manipulated surface effects to confront the artificiality of nature, and reveal our desire for smooth images of "natural beauty." Forests and lakes get the same treatment as the supermodel or the showroom: reflective glass, high-gloss finish, lifestyle-marketing and product placement. Wall-size murals read like ads for national parks, reproductions of model condo suites look not-quite-right, modern interiors are furnished with fake wood panelling and boutique pets—all of it suggests that nature is something constructed, to be looked at from safe distance.

It's a body of work perfectly suited for Vancouver, whose flowering trees and snow-topped mountains and sunset beaches are impossible not to see, reflected as they are in the abundant blue-green glass of the city's mirrored modernism. Drawn to extremes of beauty, in nature or otherwise, we rarely seek truly unmediated experiences; Alexander pointed that out decades ago, and it's a lesson that's aged well. —**JAYNE WILKINSON**

Vikky Alexander's 1981–1983 by Wendy Vogel

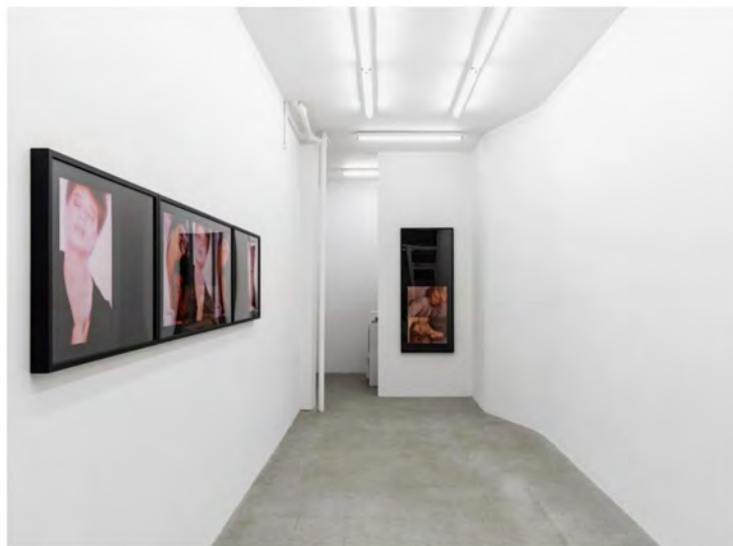
Women, objects of desire and artifice



Vikky Alexander. Detail of *Ecstasy*, 1982, type R prints. All images courtesy of the artist and Downs & Ross, New York.

In the years leading up to 1984, Canadian artist Vikky Alexander's confrontational works probed how the post-feminist backlash turned the hope of women's liberation into Orwellian freedom-as-slavery. This focused presentation of Alexander's work at Downs & Ross—the merger of two Lower East Side galleries formerly known as Tomorrow and Hester—includes seven framed, photo-based pieces from the early '80s. Alexander's compositions enlarge, repeat, and syntagmatically reshuffle advertising imagery of women in order to reveal its complexity and strangeness. In the pictures Alexander appropriates, the female beauty ideal on offer is the one favored in the '80s, the period of our current president's real-estate heyday: coiffed hair, unnatural makeup, big jewelry, spiked heels. It's an exaggerated version of femininity that promises a circulation of value between the symbolic capital of images, sex appeal, and economic capital—provided, of course, that one can afford to buy in.

Little known today in New York, Alexander arrived in the city in her early twenties, after graduating from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. She was associated with the Pictures Generation, though she is a half generation younger than those artists. Her work was in dialogue with artists like Richard Prince, who also re-photographed advertisements. But as Karen Archey's press release argues, Alexander is more aptly considered alongside the "allegorical procedures" of feminists like Dara Birnbaum and Martha Rosler. Like these artists, Alexander considers how gendered desire, including her own, operates in the consumption of images.



Installation view of *Ecstasy* (left) and *Pieta* (right), 1981, chromogenic color print.

BOMB – Artists in Conversation

Visible from the window of Downs & Ross's Eldridge Street location, the horizontal photomontage *Ecstasy* (1982)—a reference to Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*—appears like a lifesize film strip, framed in glossy Plexiglas. It includes two different ad-campaign images of a young Isabella Rossellini posing orgasmically in high-end sweaters. The pictures are repeated and interspersed with blank sections of black matting. In one image, Rossellini tugs at her black V-neck, eyes closed with her head rolling back. Another shows her in a white angora sweater, a man's head nestled at her breast. Black panels between the scenes of Rossellini alone and coupled insinuate a masturbatory fantasy sequence, and the "little death" (as they say in French literature) of climax. But the fantasy could equally be about inhabiting Rossellini's position as an object of desire, with one's visage reflected in the glass over the black panel-as-mirror. Adding to the photos' erotic charge is Rossellini's flushed skin in the black sweater. In fact, the pinkish color is due to a reflection from Rossellini's sweater—originally red—which Alexander altered to black.

Pieta (1981) demands a similar process of identification. In this piece, Alexander inserts a re-photographed ad of a blond woman laying in the lap of a blond man at the base of an insistently vertical, black-matted framed composition, 65 inches tall. One can see their own reflection imposed over either model's face.

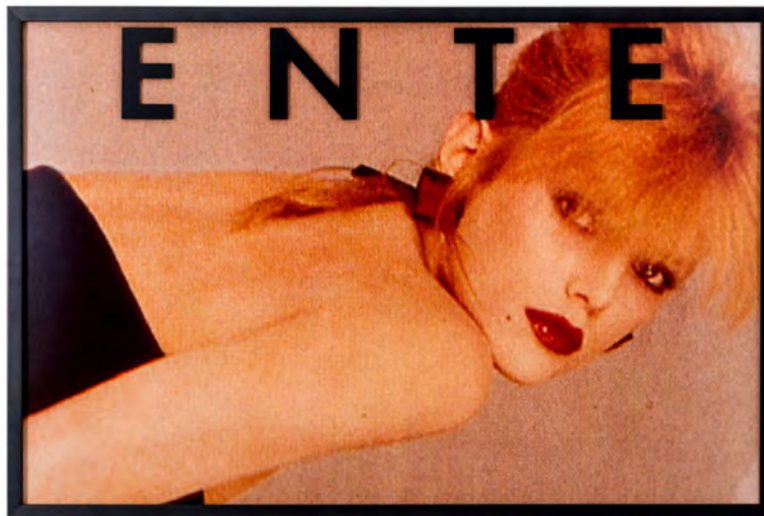


Installation view of *Yosemite*, 1982, digital print mounted on Dibond.

Among the artists grouped under the Pictures Generation label, few addressed how racial stereotypes were packaged and consumed—a blind spot that is all the more puzzling today. While Alexander's work doesn't exactly forefront race, it critically addresses the status of white womanhood. *Yosemite* and *Portage Glacier* (both 1982), feature images of stylish white models horizontally spliced between calendar pictures of unspoiled nature. In *Portage Glacier*, a Grace Kelly-esque figure shot in black-and-white appears between views of an icy mountain. *Yosemite* shows a big-haired glamazon in a coat of fur and satin, or artificial fabrics masquerading as such. It's difficult to parse out the pedigree of materials in Alexander's consistently grainy images, which reveal her lo-fi techniques. Here, the imperfect image quality reveals the constructed artifice of race, femininity, and "nature," despite the fact that these notions are aspirational and fetishized. *Yosemite's* installation, on a narrow wall in the Hester Street space between wide windows, reinforces this irony. The viewer cannot take in *Yosemite* without seeing the real-life space beyond it, of a clay soccer field behind an urban school.



Entertainment, 1983, chromogenic color prints mounted on acid-free museum board.



Detail of *Entertainment*, 1983, chromogenic color prints mounted on acid-free museum board

Entertainment (1983), also in the Hester Street space, telegraphs an even more urgent message about capitulation to patriarchy. This work breaks apart an image of a standing, spiky-banged blonde into a framed horizontal sequence of upper thighs, upper body, and lower legs. Read left to right, the model's thigh appears pressed into her back, her face looks out to the viewer, and to the right, we see her spread calves. In bold black letters, ENTERTAINMENT is printed on the glass frame. The message Alexander sends is clear: The model is compromising herself, even as she markets availability as power. Today, many people—not least the 53% of white women who voted for Trump—are still fucking themselves over for the comforts of protection under patriarchy. Alexander's work reminds us that just as images of passive women eternally return, so must the impulse to rewrite their meanings.

Vikky Alexander's 1981–1983 is on view at Downs & Ross, New York, through March 12, 2017.

Wendy Vogel is a writer and curator based in Brooklyn, NY.

Tags: feminism, commercial photography, photography, fashion photography, appropriation, advertising

Vikky Alexander

DOWNES & ROSS | 106 ELDRIDGE STREET

ARTFORUM



Vikky Alexander, *Ecstasy*
(detail), 1982, triptych,
framed C-prints, overall 24 x
102 3/4".

What happens to a copy as it ages? This show of Vikky Alexander's photographs from 1981 to 1983, produced at the apex of appropriation art, put the question front and center. Though Alexander's work was not included in 2009's lauded "Pictures Generation" overview at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, her photographic strategy from this period maps neatly onto that of the loosely affiliated group (most of whose members hailed from California and were slightly the Canadian artist's senior). Alexander culled these photographic images—pictures of leggy women—from fashion editorial spreads and advertisements; her works evidence the same discerning eye that Richard Prince trained on his clipped subjects, but she strategically deploys her selections in the service of a feminist mandate.

Time has bestowed upon these works the lush, Vaseline-smeared-lens look of the vintage—probably because most of us have never seen them before. (They reemerged only five years ago at galleries in Calgary and Toronto, some thirty years after they were first shown.) One looks at Prince's living rooms and cigarette smokers or at Sherrie Levine's airbrushed Amazons framed within silhouettes of presidential busts and thinks of the contextual underpinnings that gird them, the reams of discourse that now frame their reception. One looks at Alexander's angora-swathed model, however, and thinks of the 1980s (and perhaps of Isabella Rossellini, whom a keen eye will identify as the work's subject).

The triptych *Ecstasy*, 1982, located at the gallery's Eldridge Street space, is made up of two images. One is an overhead shot of angora Rossellini, whose neck arches toward the head of the partner kissing her breast, creating a sinuous line that draws attention down from her face, flushed with desire, to his. The other is a portrait from another shoot, in which the actress appears alone against a white background, eyes closed and head cocked at a similar angle, the framing additionally highlighting her relative lack. The work refers to Bernini's *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, 1647–52, whose marbled saint and seraph also swoon, their bodies leaning gently toward the right. According to Teresa's account, the angel's spear pierced her to her "very entrails," and when he withdrew it, she reeled from the "sweetness of this excessive pain." The artist thus saddles the central image with inadequacy: Compared to the rapture of Bernini's coital stand-in, who wouldn't feel less-than?

Other compositions now register as somewhat ham-fisted. Located at the gallery's Christie Street space, *Pieta*, 1981, which flips Michelangelo's titular rendering of Christ's body in Mary's arms to feature a male model gazing down at a reclining female, underwhelmed. Two other works, *Portage Glacier* and *Yosemite*, both 1982, featuring glamour shots superimposed on mountain ranges (arctic and temperate, respectively), were heavy-handed in their commentary on the constructedness of "natural" female and geographical beauty. Yet a reading informed solely by the selection and arrangement of the works' re-photographed source images and their inversions of classical references overlooks the materiality exterior to their frames. In a display strategy she would use throughout the decade, Alexander mounted the prints behind highly reflective Plexiglas so that viewers were met with their own reflections within the tableaux. By underscoring the images' physical presence in space and their relationship to our own, she complicates our conventional understanding of "straight" appropriation—and its attendant commentary on lived reality as a mediated, disembodied experience—showing instead that the body, far from unmoored and intangible, is ever more vulnerable to the pernicious effects of its reproduction. The work thus extends beyond the Pictures generation's strategy of preemptive collusion with commercial media, implicating maker and viewer alike. While the print succumbs to the indignities of age, the face reflected in its gaze retains its élan vital.

—Cat Kron



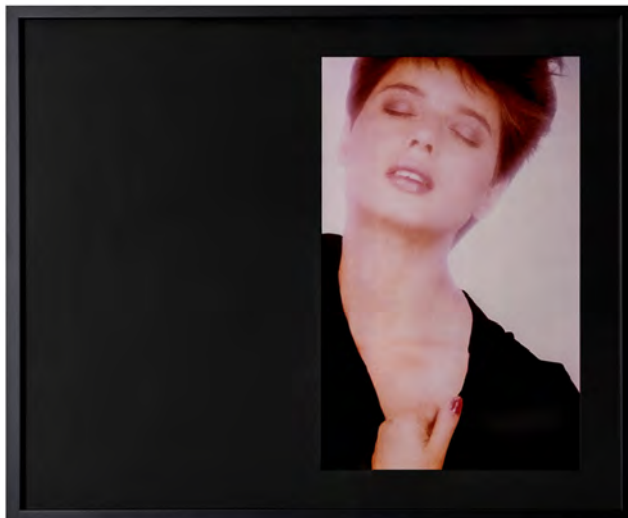
REVIEW - 20 MAY 2017

Vikky Alexander

Downs & Ross, New York, USA

BY AMY ZION

Tomorrow and Hester Galleries, located a short walking distance apart on Manhattan's Lower East Side, announced their merger in February as Downs & Ross, with an exhibition by Vikky Alexander spanning the two rebranded spaces. The considered selection includes seven photographic works produced between 1981 and 1983, when Alexander – born, educated and currently living in Canada – resided in New York and collaborated with the likes of Kim Gordon and Louise Lawler. As critic Karen Archey writes in the press release, Alexander is a 'sleeper' of the Pictures Generation: her reputation within the group has been eclipsed by Richard Prince and Cindy Sherman, both roughly ten years her senior. This exhibition clearly aims to reclaim Alexander's rightful spot among her fellow 1980s art-of-appropriation pioneers.



Vikky Alexander, *Ecstasy*, 1982 (detail), Type R prints, 60 x 260 cm. Courtesy: Downs & Ross, New York

Each of the works in the exhibition re-photographs advertisements of slim, young, classically beautiful Caucasian women in characteristically '80s-style dress, with their hair backcombed and their makeup overstated. In addition to re-photographing, Alexander enlarged the images, emphasizing their status as facsimiles by revealing their analogue grit. In two works she has blacked out red garments, leaving only a trace pink glow on the women's skin as evidence of her erasures.

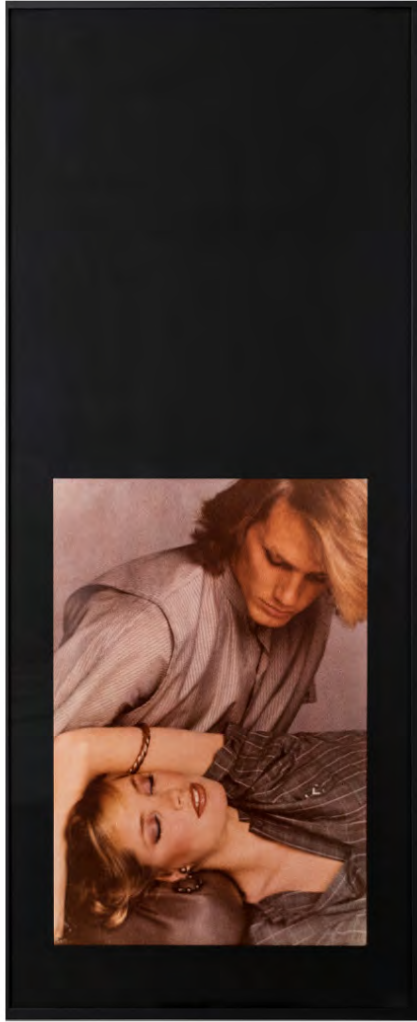
Two works installed in the front window can be seen from the street at the former Tomorrow Gallery. *Ecstasy* (1982) is a triptych of framed photographs, each containing the same image of an enraptured Isabella Rossellini. The actress seems displaced from a fragrance ad, as she grips the lapel of her blacked-out blouse to expose and emphasize her neck and collar bones, and tilts her head back, parting her lips and closing her eyelids. She presents herself to the camera in a now-familiar trope of fashion photography, signalling female desire and availability. In the outer two panels, the image fills half of a black background. In the centre panel, Rossellini takes up the middle third; she is flanked by facsimiles of a similar image, in which a different model adopts the same pose yet grips a man whose lips are pressed against the space that Rossellini exposes to the camera. In this panel, the absent object of desire materializes as a classically handsome Caucasian man.



Vikky Alexander, *Portage Glacier*, 1982, digital print on Moab Slickrock metallic pearl acid-free paper mounted on Dibond, 45 x 101 cm. Courtesy: Downs & Ross, New York

Pieta (1981) plays on a classic art-historical trope, gender-swapping a supine Jesus for a lithe, blonde female model, limp in the arms of another handsome Caucasian man. These two works are a reminder that image production has always been ideological, whether controlled by corporations or the Catholic Church. By removing the adverts' text or product images, the artist isolates their fabricated emotions, laying bare the nature of their seduction.

At the former Hester space, the second-floor gallery's four walls each bear a single work. *Yosemite* and *Portage Glacier* (both 1982) juxtapose commercial photographs of models with landscapes. In *Yosemite*, Alexander places the model's silhouette, including her triangular coif, as one more mountain in the national park's iconic range. In *Portage Glacier*, the white skin of a close-up female face bleeds into a floating icescape. Like advertising and religious art, landscape – from Ansel Adams in the US to Canada's Group of Seven – is a genre laden with ideology, as it played a historical role in forging national identities. And, like the female figures in the ads, natural landscapes are perceived as something to be awed, explored and ultimately conquered.



Vikky
Alexander,
Pieta, 1981,
C-type
prints, 165 x
68 cm.
Courtesy:
Downs &
Ross, New
York

Downs & Ross's strong presentation is only tempered by its over-emphasis on Alexander's New York years and lack of any reference to the potent work that she subsequently produced in Canada, where she remains an important artist. The exhibition sidesteps the glaring fact that it was not the evolution of the artist's work, but her decision to return home, that most affected her international legacy. And it does so purposefully, using New York and its myth-making capability to renew US interest in her work. In 'Vikky Alexander (1981-83)' the artist, like her subjects, is trapped forever in her 20s.

Main image: Vikky Alexander, Yosemite, 1982, digital print on moab slickrock metallic pearl acid-free paper mounted on Dibond, 55 x 101 cm. Courtesy: Downs & Ross, New York

AMY ZION

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