

BOMB

Reflections of Desire: Vikky Alexander Interviewed by Alison Sinkewicz

Installations and photographs that investigate the self and consumerism.

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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."



Viky 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*)

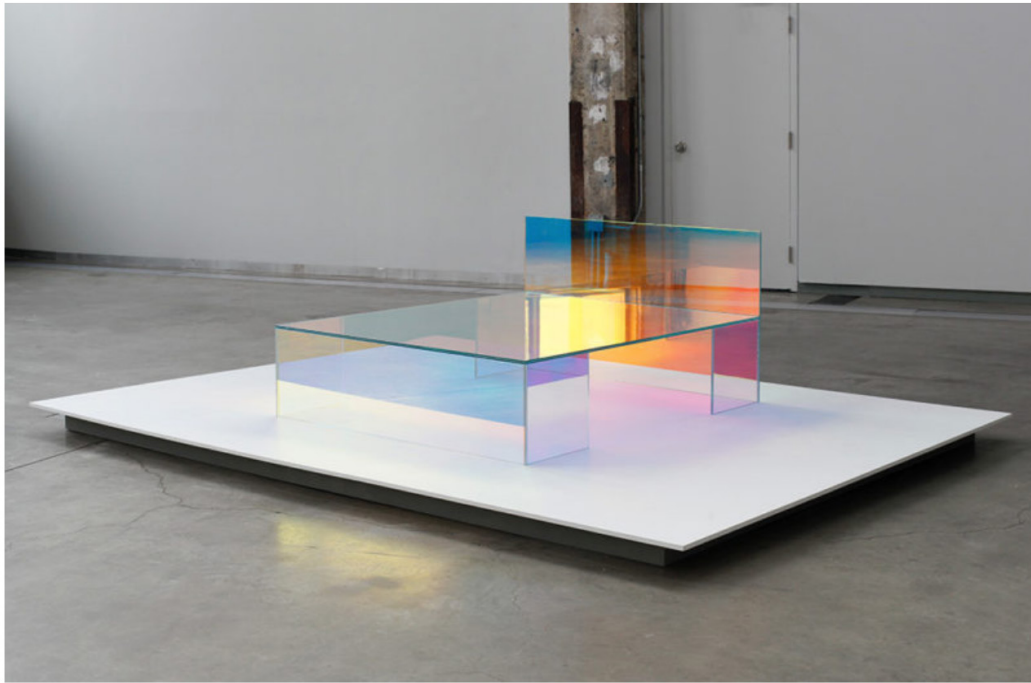
AS

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.

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

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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.*