



(<https://whitehotmagazine.com/>)

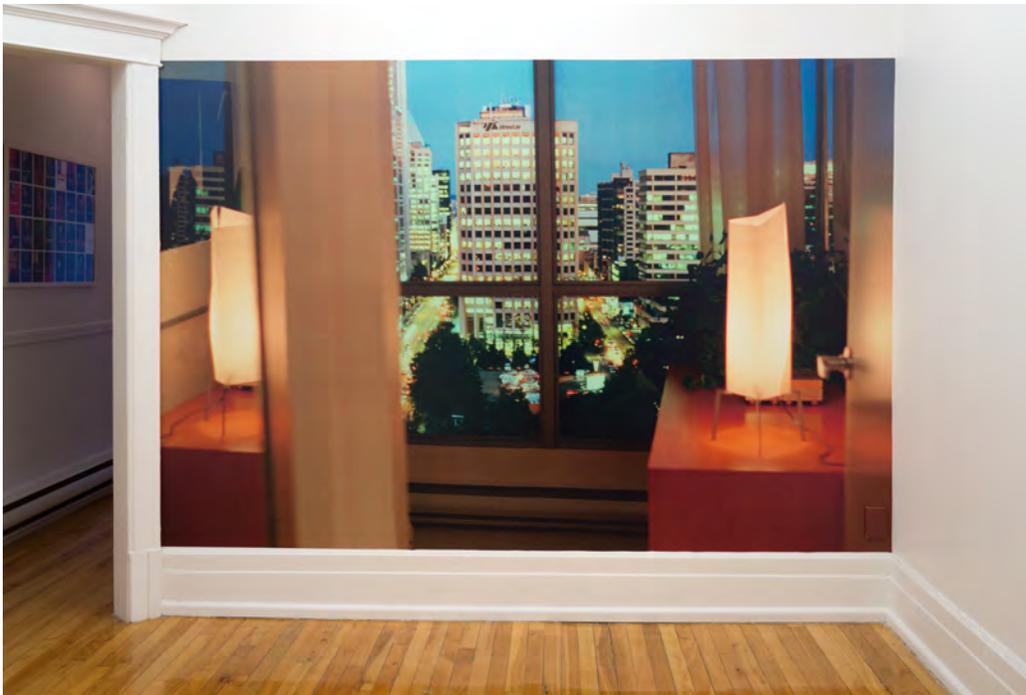


JANUARY 2018

"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

Vikky Alexander "Unnatural Horizon" L'Escalier

0



Installation view, Vikky Alexander: Unnatural Horizon, presented at L'escalier, 2017-2018. Vikky Alexander, Model Suites (Bedroom), 2005, adhesive vinyl on wall, 75 x 104 inches. Photo: Roy Hartling, 2017. © 2018 Vikky Alexander

Vikky Alexander

"Unnatural Horizon"

L'Escalier (<https://www.lescaliergallery.com>)

Dec. 9, 2017

Montreal

By **JAMES D. CAMPBELL**, JAN 2018

The thematic integrity of Vikky Alexander's art is always preserved, even when she pole vaults tenses with her trademark alacrity and calisthenic finesse. Her work at least since the late 1980s has in various iterations addressed the interaction or, better, the collision of nature

and architecture. For her *Lake in the Woods* installation in 1986, Alexander covered one of the walls of the New York CASH/Newhouse Gallery with a landscape photomural of sundry confined spaces. The installation is now in the collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery. In 2005, she executed the *Model Suite* series, with the *Bedroom* suite as one of its four modular articulations, shown to acclaim two years later at the Trepanier Baer in Calgary. Her *Model Suite [Sliding Door]* (2015-17), a large-scale photomural, generated extensive commentary when it was installed last year at the Yaletown-Roundhouse Station, Canada Line, in Vancouver, formerly the site of the Canadian Pacific rail yards and later the location of the 1986 World's Fair.

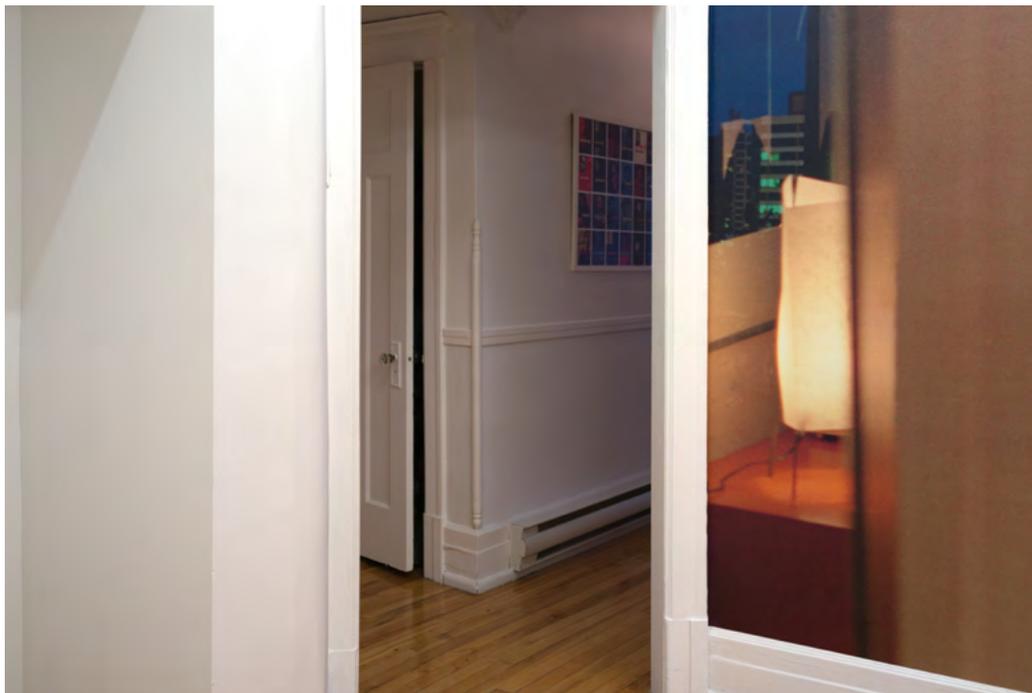


Installation view, Vikky Alexander: *Unnatural Horizon*, presented at L'escalier 2017-2018. Vikky Alexander, *Model Suites (Bedroom)*, detail, 2005, adhesive vinyl on wall, 75 x 104 inches. Photo: Roy Hartling, 2017. © 2018 Vikky Alexander

Alexander is a contemporary of such artists as Richard Prince, Sherrie Levine and James Welling who were also active in New York in the early 1980s, and she has been associated with the Pictures Generation in expansive commentary since but has radically exceeded its purview in recent years. Alexander draws upon an arresting repertoire of formal concerns, and she has looked closely at the histories of architecture, design and fashion in crafting work that is restless and interrogatory in its mien. Her images are often complicated through feints and parries of light, playing with reflections and refractions that speak to the apprehension and subversion of a set of presuppositions that contaminate the experience of looking. The layering in her work has a Hall of Mirrors resonance with labyrinthine depth.

Such is the case with the work exhibited now at L'escalier, one of Montreal's most promising and unique alternative spaces and curated by Lorna Bauer, Vincent Bonin and Jon Knowles. She revisits *Bedroom*, from the *Model Suite* series without any suggestion of redundancy or datedness but with the rare nuanced depth we have come to associate with her work. Alexander works from a haptic remove, often staggered through several orders of imaginal magnitude and formal complexity, as is the case here, but the wallpaper-like image

installed *in situ* in what seems an otherwise ordinary apartment – and the materials that underlie it both actually and metaphorically – are magnets for the hypertrophied sense of touch, as the voluptuous eye of the viewer palpates the full array of the available surface in search of secret areas. [2]



Installation view, Vikky Alexander: Unnatural Horizon, presented at L'escalier 2017-2018. Vikky Alexander, Model Suites (Bedroom), detail, 2005, adhesive vinyl on wall, 75 x 104 inches. Photo: Roy Hartling, 2017. © 2018 Vikky Alexander

For this installation, the artist enlarged *Bedroom* well beyond its initial framed print size (of 101.5 x 152 cm) so that it precisely corresponds to the surface of a wall in the apartment and becomes environmental. It mirrors a window at the rear of the apartment and is laminated on a wall that is the verso to the study of the lessee. It seems extrusive but of course it is not, and if it were a real view, it would subsume that study and overlook the street at the front of the apartment. The fluorescent lighting that illuminates the imagined inner sanctum of the bedroom and the *Bedroom* wall itself is a useful but far from definitive clue that this room is, after all, a gallery environment and not an apartment section *per se*.

Standing in front of *Bedroom*, one become aware of certain salient paradoxes not obvious at first but which reward – and trouble -- continued viewing. What seems static at first soon morphs into a state of epistemological flux, and the artist's play with optical effects and illusionary eidetic details leads us into unexpected depths. Like all of Alexander's work, *Bedroom* is at once playful and subversive.



Vikky Alexander, *Model Suites (Sliding Door)*, 2005. © 2018 Vikky Alexander

Inside *Bedroom*, we stand inside an open door, with a pair of sculptural lamps bracketing our view through the window of the inner city. Inside the bracketing of this reflection, the lamp a mirror image of another lamp across the room, we are caught up in radical indeterminacy. This symmetrical doubling, a classic strategy in Alexander's work, and one that can be traced back through the history of photography to Carleton Watkins's stereographic "best general views" of Yosemite (1866), leads us to question just what it is that we are looking at. Then, the view outside seems to morph a little, as though painted rather than photographed. We have been introduced into a space that is a snare, and the lintel on which we are standing is planar and seems to elevate us, as though placing us on a lintel, steep ledge. The image grows progressively more compressed, as though all its oxygen is being sucked out into a black hole somewhere. The black hole is, of course, the viewer's own optic.



Vikky Alexander, *Model Suites (Bedroom)*, 2005. © 2018 Vikky Alexander

As we step back from the brink of the abyss, as it were, we recognize that all is not as it seems here but rather, with an enviably David Lynchian gravitas, more, not less. *Bedroom* seems to ripple before a wind and to fold in on itself, a Venus Fly Trap for vision, if you will, and thus the represented dwelling space at the surface is a potent zone of the *Irrepresentable*, a many-layered projection zone for private lack. Alexander has said of

her work, and this is particularly true of *Bedroom* and the other modules of *Model Suites*: "I think of the photograph itself as a very slippery medium, with its high-gloss surface and implied depth. I gravitate towards subject matter where this is a feature, such as mirrors and reflections, especially in architecture—as a consequence, there are a lot of visual layers."



Vikky Alexander, *Model Suites (Dining Room)*, 2005. © 2018 Vikky Alexander

Alexander's goal is to provide a point of fulcrum in the viewing on which perception might involuntarily pirouette, bringing on a sort of self-realisation on the viewer's part as an ontological reward of looking – and then looking again. We realise that while we seem to be enjoying a voyeur's eye view, here we are in fact the manipulated subject of a still more sophisticated voyeur – the artist herself, who stands *in absentia* behind her images. We then become somewhat self-conscious, aware that this seemingly flat laminated view is in fact one surface of a full room, an imaginary prison with real depth, in which are trapped as though in amber by the artist. And we are knowingly complicit in our own capture. The sudden acquisition of this knowledge is, in its own way, nothing short of epiphany.



Vikky Alexander, *Model Suites (Overview)*, 2005. © 2018 Vikky Alexander

[1] *Unnatural Horizon*, the title given by Alexander to the event of reprinting one of her works at L'escalier, refers to the book by Allen S. Weiss addressing the contradictions of landscape as a representation of nature. See: Allen S. Weiss, *Unnatural Horizons: Paradox*

and Contradiction in Landscape Architecture (Hudson: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998).

[2] Alexander's photoworks are akin to video games insofar as they provide secret areas that encourage meticulous exploration of the photographic space. These areas are not immediately observable and must be discovered through extra concentration. In game environments, they contain a reward or 'easter egg' for the player who discovers them: a helpful item, a shortcut, a talisman, info on the backstory, or a crucial revelation. **WM**



JAMES D. CAMPBELL

James D. Campbell is a curator and writer on art based in Montreal. The author of over 150 books and catalogues on art, he contributes essays and reviews to *Frieze*, *Border Crossings* and other publications.

[view all articles from this author \(/contributors/james-d-campbell/978\)](/contributors/james-d-campbell/978)