

**REAL
ART WAYS**

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This exhibition is a result of Real Art Ways' "Don't Trust Anyone Over 30" competition in 2003, which requested proposals from emerging artists age thirty and younger, living in New York or New England. Under 30 was juried by Jennifer Gross, Curator of Contemporary Art, Yale University Art Gallery, Barbara Hunt, Executive Director, Artists Space, New York, and Barbara Krakow, President, Barbara Krakow Gallery.

The exhibition was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.



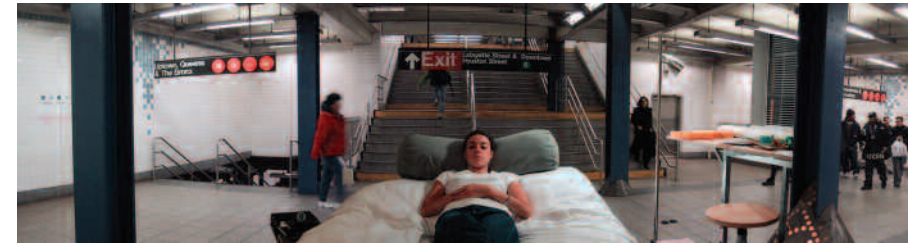
REAL ART WAYS, founded in 1975, is a nationally recognized, alternative multi-disciplinary arts organization that presents and supports contemporary artists and their work, facilitates the creation of new work, and creatively engages and informs audiences and communities. Real Art Ways is an active presenter of different art forms, including music, performance, spoken word, film, video and visual arts. Real Art Ways has a particular commitment to supporting the work of emerging artists.

On the cover: Mopping, digital photograph, 20 x 60", 2003 (detail)

Venia Bechrakis



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Subway, digital photograph, 20 x 60", 2003

Venia Bechrakis

By Holly Block

Venia Bechrakis's exhibition at Real Art Ways includes a new series of digitally-enhanced photographs entitled *Within and Without* (2003), as part of a series of emerging artist's exhibitions called *Don't Trust Anyone Over Thirty*.

What can we make of self-portraits in odd places that juxtapose ironic vignettes mocking our contemporary urban lives with everyday chores and mundane routines? In this series of new works, Bechrakis, a native of Athens, Greece who studied at New York University, sheds light on our complicated lives and shows us our current environment in which we are constantly bombarded with images.

Whether in a grocery store, the airport, the subway or on a Manhattan street, the artist's portraits remind us of women's work and that ever-tenuous balance between one's private and public life. Always seeking out and representing duality, Bechrakis offers composed theatrical performances using a documentary style of photography that investigates the spaces between autobiography and fiction, performance and reality, perhaps reflecting her own national bifurcation between Greece and New York.

Bechrakis's photography is a culmination of multiple techniques influenced by cinema. The long, narrow format is elongated to capture the duality of combined images. She creates fantastical sentences, stringing the viewer along with multiple ironies, and a tantalizing sense of humor emerges as the scenes become even more real. Fascinated with the artist becoming herself an art object, she stages various events that normally don't occur within public/private locales, prompting the viewer to ask, "Is this true or false?" The merging of images such as a portrait of the artist sitting in her living room, fruit in hand, (as though she needs to make a selection between apples and oranges) contrasts with an image from a local grocery store that highlights the orderliness of a mundane minimalist display of stacked fruit in the store's aisles.

Other images include the artist in a bathing suit, lounging with a drink in hand in an empty parking lot covered in snow. She is surrounded by two advertisements of famous people toasting with Skyy vodka. All three are holding cocktail glasses, totally unaware of their surroundings. It's almost as if she was reporting the weather for the evening news, live from her

Venia Bechrakis was born in Athens in 1974. She has studied painting in the Fine Arts School of Athens and received a scholarship from the Alexander Onassis Public Benefit Foundation for MFA studies at New York University. Along with the Alexander Onassis Foundation Scholarship in 2000, Bechrakis has received the Jack Goodman Award for Art and Technology in 2002 and a Gerondelis Foundation Grant in 2001.

Bechrakis has exhibited her work internationally, in venues including the Art Athina - International Artfair, Athens 2004, the "11th Biennial of Young Artists from Europe and the Mediterranean," Athens 2003, DNA Gallery, Provincetown Massachusetts 2003, "The Jack Goodman Award Show," Rosenberg Gallery, New York 2002, and "Deconstruction," Angel Orenanz Foundation for the Arts New York 2002. Her work is installed in the Eleftherios Venizelos New Airport of Athens. *Within/Without* is Bechrakis' first solo exhibition. She lives and works in New York and Athens.

lounge chair: "today's weather, it is snowing out." Some of the most contemplative images are from a series of portraits where she portrays herself doing everyday household chores, taking a bubble bath or washing the floor, contrasted with shots of an anonymous subway platform. With these, she creates unusual ambiguities of the kind that resonate throughout New York City.

Airports and subway stations, although basic transportation hubs for any major city, can also be scary, daunting locations in which normal routines can be irrevocably altered. Anxiety surrounding robberies and terrorist attacks can permeate these dark and gloomy sites. Bechrakis' images draw attention to how one navigates through such an urban terrain, alluding sometimes in obvious ways to these potential crimes, while at other times subtly allowing the viewer to reconsider what public space is.

In a typical arrangement, Bechrakis combines three frames that merge into a panoramic overview, overtly toying with the viewer's perception and gaze. Whether artificial or natural environments, she sometimes shoots through various glasses creating reflections that cause us to speculate on who the spectator is: the viewer, the setting, or the artist?

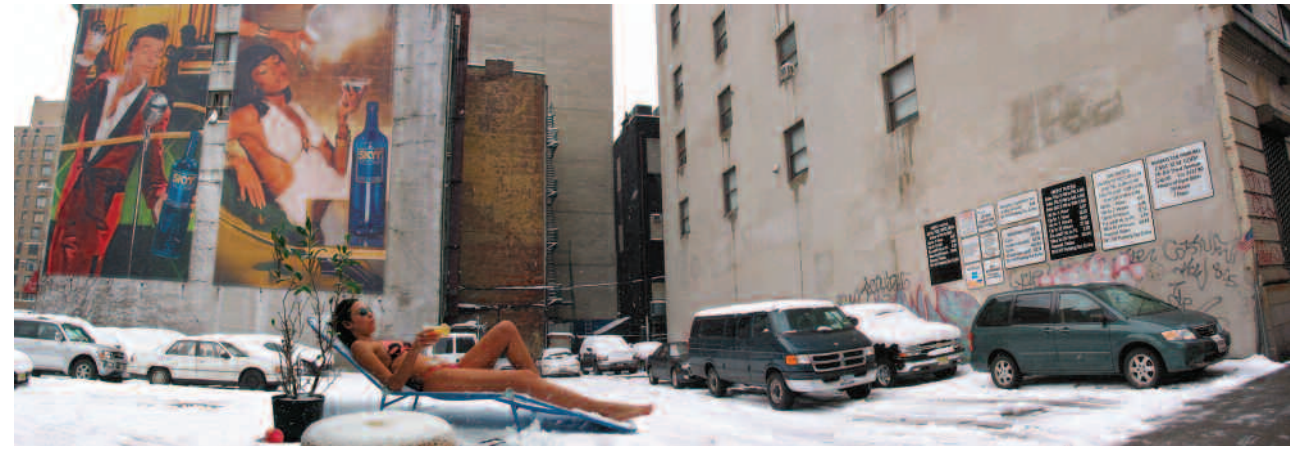
Holly Block is the executive director of Art in General, a leading nonprofit arts organization located in New York City. She has been the curator and organizer of numerous con-

temporary art exhibitions and projects and is the author and editor of ART CUBA: The New Generation (2001), a book on contemporary art from Cuba published by Harry N. Abrams.

Venia Bechrakis

By Paul Evans

There is a stunning scene in the 1978 movie *The Eyes of Laura Mars* where a mysterious and very fashionable photographer, played by Faye Dunaway, orchestrates detailed tableaux of super-models in the midst of violent altercations right smack dab in the middle of New York's Columbus Circle. What's so memorable about this scene lies in its theatricality. New York is the stage and, for a brief moment, we forget we are watching a silly B-movie, disguised as a high end vehicle for a then box office queen. What we *do* witness is just how a city can act as a muse. In this work of ridiculous fiction, New York City is not just the locale; it is a living and breathing character. From that scene of fighting fashionistas to Dunaway running down cobblestoned Green Street in stiletto boots, car chases in Hell's Kitchen to abandoned warehouses on the Hudson, every scene speaks of a lost time, when New York looked run-down but Studio 54 reigned and anything seemed possible.



Parking, digital photograph, 20 x 60", 2003

When first viewing the work of Venia Bechrakis, I was immediately reminded of *The Eyes of Laura Mars*. But where Laura Mars used her images for pure spectacle and titillation, Bechrakis is working with a different intention. It should be said that the artist does incorporate New York in her work. Or, I should say, the artist places herself in very public spaces, performing various private tasks or rituals via digital photography and creates personal yet epic dioramas that offer much more than what is initially seen.

For instance, in "Subway", the artist places herself, laying on a futon, at the bottom of the stairwell in the Houston/Lafayette subway station. With a devil-may-care stare, the artist is confronting the viewer, as if to say, "I'm staying right here. Deal with it". The same confrontation goes for the poor straphangers. Is the artist asking us to slow down? Does she want us to join her? The scenario would seem to put her in a vulnerable place, but one gets the

feeling that she is quite safe in her sanctum. No harm will come to her. It seems she is blatantly ignoring Petula Clark's song "Don't Sleep in the Subway", but Petula Clark never lived in the East Village. Behind the surface silliness, the real question is, where will our young dreamer go? Brooklyn? Uptown/Queens? Or will she stay in the once hub of the art world, now a shopping Mecca for the rich and fabulous where young artists can no longer afford to live or work.

In each composed and meticulously thought out photograph, the element of time is always present. A beginning, middle and end can be successfully mapped out here. The photos *seem* right but the scenario will change. Snow will melt, rush hour will occur, tourists will invade, terror alerts can bring it all to a grinding halt. But it will all start over. New York will continue to thrive and always seem like it's *not* quite right. It is a place that seems like fiction. Bechrakis' images are quite possible yet feel slightly off-kilter. In reality, these scenarios can certainly occur but will anyone take the time to look? These works are about us and somewhere in all of the confusion and chaos, a lone voice is trying to make sense of it all. Venia Bechrakis is raising her voice.

Paul Evans, a painter and video artist, trained at the School of Visual Arts and writes frequently about contemporary art. He currently resides in Los Angeles.

Grocery, digital photograph, 20 x 60", 2003

