



PURPLE



Shamim Momin // S/S 2009 Issue 11

In the mid-'90s ALEX BAG was a phenomenon. She appeared on the cover of magazines — Purple Prose and Artforum in the same month. She was the young, up-and-coming star of the new generation of video artists. People called her the Cindy Sherman of video for the way she played dress-up in her short, funny, and thought-provoking videos, acting out roles, throwing her ego and her voice in all different directions. She wasn't just an artist playing games with images and mass media, she was a comedian and a social critic. Now, after several years of laying low, she's back in the limelight. She's interviewed here by the curator of her current exhibition at the Whitney Museum.

SHAMIM MOMIN — This isn't the first time you've been featured in Purple, is it?

ALEX BAG — No, it isn't. I was on the cover once, a long time ago, and Patterson and I did two projects for the magazine. One was about the difficulties of being a Goth in the summertime. We portrayed a group of teenagers from upstate New York. Patterson and I worked together in our usual way: I came up with an idea and did the styling — I chose the clothes and stuff — and Patterson was the technical wizard with the photography.

SHAMIM MOMIN — Being a Goth in the summertime presents it's own set of issues.

ALEX BAG — Yeah. All that black clothing and caked-on make-up. It's very difficult to maintain that look in the broiling heat.

SHAMIM MOMIN — Were you ever a Goth?

ALEX BAG — Oh yeah.

SHAMIM MOMIN — Some people think I must have been a Super-Goth, because my aesthetic runs that way, but I was more pseudo-hippie-boarding-school. Were you a Goth throughout your teenage years?

ALEX BAG — Well, I got into Bowie early on, like in 7th grade or 8th grade, but by 9th grade I'd started my all-black period. Black on the outside, because black was how I felt on the inside. But now it's so much easier to define yourself aesthetically by your musical tastes.

SHAMIM MOMIN — It's also easier to find all the stuff.

ALEX BAG — Yeah, it's easier to track it all down. The looks are very clear. I saw this great book that breaks down all the different kinds of Goths. I didn't realize there were so many — like 50 different types: Emo-Goth, Hippie-Goth...

SHAMIM MOMIN — Really? I thought there was about five.

ALEX BAG — The book showed you how you're supposed to wear your hair.

SHAMIM MOMIN — It sounds like The Preppy Handbook.

ALEX BAG — Exactly. In my freshman year

I was told that if I didn't play a sport no college would touch me. I decided that cheerleading was the easiest way to go.

SHAMIM MOMIN — Wow, a Goth cheerleader!

ALEX BAG — Yeah. I had black hair and black eyeliner. I hated the football team and I hated the other cheerleaders. I think I was smoking by that point, too. It was really bad.

SHAMIM MOMIN — It's like one of your pieces.

ALEX BAG — Then I stopped wearing black and started wearing raggedy clothes. It was like pre-pre-Grunge. I was like every art school kid in the late '80s. Wearing ripped up dresses, lots of slips, and my hair was always a mess. I think things would've been a lot easier for me back in high school — and I would've had a lot more friends — if I'd had a straightening iron.

SHAMIM MOMIN — Is your hair naturally curly?

ALEX BAG — It's insanely curly, in a really bad way. Sometimes it looks pre-Raphaelite, but mostly it just looks like a rat's nest. Anyway, my misspent youth — and my misspent midlife crisis — was defined by music. In the ninth grade I was into The Dead Kennedys, The Butthole Surfers, The Cure, and The Smiths. The Aquarius-time shape-shifter in me goes back to 1977: then it was The Stooges, Joy Division, Gang of Four, Wire — mostly punk. And then it was Patti Smith, Suicide, and all that New York punk stuff. I really liked Television and I loved Richard Hell. I went through a lot of phases — music's always been super hard on me.

SHAMIM MOMIN — Where are you from?

ALEX BAG — Well, I was born on the Upper West Side. But when I was four or something we moved to glorious, glamorous New Jersey, the place I'm staying now. It's like 20 or 30 minutes away from the city.

SHAMIM MOMIN — Didn't you have an affair with your high school boyfriend or something like that?

ALEX BAG — Well, no. He was never my boy-friend. He was just someone I had a crush on.

SHAMIM MOMIN — Oh, that's even better. I love it.

ALEX BAG — It finally happened, 25 years later.

SHAMIM MOMIN — That's hilarious. Tell me the story!

ALEX BAG — My crush on him started when I was really young. Our parents were friends and one time we all went on vacation together. I was awkward and weird — surprise, surprise. I must have been 11 or 12 and he was two years older. He was really beautiful — and he still is. I asked him if he remembers all this, but he doesn't.

SHAMIM MOMIN — He doesn't remember that your families went on vacation together?

ALEX BAG — He kind of remembers that, but he doesn't remember this particular moment — it's one of those things that's etched in my memory bank — when we were sitting at a picnic table and he was singing along to a Beatles tape. He sang "Come Together" to me, all the way through. I couldn't remember what song it was, and then when I did, it totally cracked me up because that's what we'd been trying to do for the last four months. I think I might have bought some pot from him in high school a couple times. But it was a secret crush, because he was a Lothario.

SHAMIM MOMIN — Did you tell him all this when you saw him again?

ALEX BAG — Yes. After we started hooking up, I spilled my guts to him. I mean, it wasn't a freakish thing — I wasn't stalking him.

SHAMIM MOMIN — No, no, you just had a crush on him. Has he changed? Is he cuter? Is he lame?

ALEX BAG — Well, I was trying to get over breaking up with someone else, so the timing was right. It was a bad breakup. The man, who shall remain nameless, and I went out for eight years, and he broke up with me on New Year's Day, which was just great. I heard the death rattle before it happened but it was still really bad. Not that it's ever good. But he just sort of stopped speaking to me and wouldn't give me an explanation why. I kept saying, "Alright, alright, so you met someone else." And he was like, "No, it's not like that. That's not what's going on." I'm like, "So it's me, then!" But he wouldn't say anything. And I'm like, "What's wrong with me?" And he really knew me — what a vivid imagination I have, what a big ball of self-hatred I am. He should've known enough to at least offer me some kind of explanation, so that I wouldn't spend endless hours going over everything with a flea comb, like, "What did I say? What did I do?" I went into therapy again after that happened, and it was helping me. Then this other guy came along. I couldn't have sat down at a drawing board and come up with a better plan of action. My therapist agreed. He's just a nice guy. Another musician — another Gemini carpenter-musician. The first guy was also a Gemini carpenter-musician.

SHAMIM MOMIN — Are you a Gemini?

ALEX BAG — No, I'm an Aries.

SHAMIM MOMIN — What's Aries, again? May?

ALEX BAG — April, March/April. What are you?

SHAMIM MOMIN — A Leo. I'm characteristically Leo, meaning I only know my own sign.

ALEX BAG — Ah, we're both fire signs — that's good. Leos are cool. I like the fire signs. We look for air signs and then we burn them up. But it makes us shine brighter.

SHAMIM MOMIN — When did you move back in with your parents? And what's it like?

ALEX BAG — It's weird. I had the house to myself for the summer — actually longer than the summer; for six months while they were upstate — and it was lovely. Now they're back and it can be difficult at times. I'm a teenager again, in the belly of the beast.

SHAMIM MOMIN — I can only imagine. I love my parents, but going home was always freaky for me, because I felt like I couldn't stop myself from turning back into a child. I was very aware it was happening but I couldn't stop it. Our connotative and associative responses are just too strong. But you've been living back with your folks for a while now so maybe you can develop new responses and supercede the past.

ALEX BAG — I'm still working out the kinks. My brother lives about five minutes away.

SHAMIM MOMIN — Isn't he in some of your videos?

ALEX BAG — Yeah, he's in a lot of them. He's one of my favorite people to work with.

SHAMIM MOMIN — He's the only one you let improvise, right?

ALEX BAG — Yeah, he's the only one I trust with improvisation. He's just a natural character-maker. I give him direction, we build characters together, and I give him a couple words or lines that I want him to throw in. I tell him what I want him to talk about and then I just let him go. I have to keep the number of takes to a minimum — two or three — because each one will be completely different; there'll be great things in each one and I try to avoid editing nightmares.

SHAMIM MOMIN — You're very specific about your scripts, correct?

ALEX BAG — Yeah. Everything is written out.

SHAMIM MOMIN — Which is surprising because there's such a dynamic, spontaneous feel to the dialogue. How do you make that happen? Is it just the nature of your scripts? Do you want the dialogue to feel improvised?

ALEX BAG — I never work with professional actors, thank God. And usually everything is done at the last minute. My procrastinating tendencies create part of the dynamic of things being rushed. I work with friends and I try to make things simple. There's no crew to speak of. It's usually just me and a camera and the actors, so people tend to be a lot more natural. People who might have suffered from stage fright or who aren't used to acting tend to relax somewhat. We use cue cards when it's necessary, when someone can't remember their lines.

SHAMIM MOMIN — I've never acted so I'm totally fascinated by it.

ALEX BAG — I'm not really an actress myself, either.

SHAMIM MOMIN — Don't be ridiculous! You're brilliant.

ALEX BAG — Please kill me. You can't really tell, but for my first art-school video I wrote my lines down on index cards that I placed in various parts of the room. It's an old trick Marlon Brando used. You'll notice I'm not always looking in one direction. Basically, I'm looking around the room for the cue cards — you'll see me staring off this way, looking off that way. I'm terrible at memorizing lines.

SHAMIM MOMIN — I can imagine you doing that in my head. But I thought that was the affect of the character — she never looked straight ahead. I was just talking to my performance department about your new play...

ALEX BAG — The Stage Fright Players.

SHAMIM MOMIN — Is that what you're calling it? Great name. I love the idea of a play cast entirely of folks with stage fright. I can't even imagine the awkward tenor of the space during the performance. Someone asked if I was going to be in it, to which someone else responded, "Oh, Shamim never has stage fright, ever. She loves to talk!" It's part of my job, obviously — I talk in front of people for a living. I just like people and I'm very social. But I'm a terrible, terrible actress. I freak out when it becomes real acting. But maybe I will try out for it.

ALEX BAG — You should.

SHAMIM MOMIN — In your new video piece for the Whitney show you use an interview format. Will you be sticking with that for the show?

ALEX BAG — There'll be a host and guests. It's based on the '70s children's show, The Patchwork Family, which, as you know, my mom was the host of. Basically, there'll be a short introduction of the guests, and then an audience-guest exchange. Have you seen any of the original episodes my mom was in?

SHAMIM MOMIN — No. I tried to look them up but they're really hard to find.

ALEX BAG — My mom sat behind a desk with a puppet. They sang songs and talked about things. Then they'd have the guests come on.

SHAMIM MOMIN — What kind of guests?

ALEX BAG — Well, it was progressive, '70s children's television, so they'd have a musician, a scientist, or a painter, and people who brought in creatures. I was on as a guest. I was really lucky because I was there when the animal guy was there.

SHAMIM MOMIN — Was he an animal trainer of some kind?

ALEX BAG — Just a guy who came on with pets. It was like presenting the spectrum of the animal kingdom.

SHAMIM MOMIN — Like the kind of thing David Letterman does.

ALEX BAG — Yeah. The day I was on he brought a monkey with him and I got to wheel it around in a stroller all day. I was seven or eight or something. It was the greatest day of my life.

SHAMIM MOMIN — Bizarre, but understandably fabulous. Was your mom the host of the show for its entire run? Was it her concept?

ALEX BAG — Yeah. She wrote it. She had a show on PIX, which is now Channel 11, called the Carol Corbett Show, from 1964 to '67. It was in black and white. She used a hand-held dog puppet named Doodly-Doo. She did drawings and stuff. The Patchwork Family ran from '72 to '78, and it was in reruns, at six o'clock in the morning on CBS, into the early '90s, when I was in college. I remember watching it after some really rough Saturday nights.

SHAMIM MOMIN — Was there a theme song?

ALEX BAG — Yes. [Singing] We want to have you as a member of the Patchwork Family! There's plenty to do as a member of the Patchwork Family! We're looking for sisters, and brothers, and all sorts of others, like nieces, nephews, uncles, cousins — We need members by the dozens! All kinds of people in the Patchwork Family!

We're gonna be happy as can be, because it's certified and stated that everyone's related in the Patchwork Family!

SHAMIM MOMIN — Are you going to have a theme song for your new piece?

ALEX BAG — There has to be a theme song. And I'm hoping to have animals — it's a new challenge to try and track down and rent some. The feel of the piece is going to be very dark, like a suicide note to the youth of today, so I've got to find the right animals, ones that shouldn't be around children.

SHAMIM MOMIN — Like a ferret, maybe?

ALEX BAG — Fire ants and a poisonous spider — dangerous things that children shouldn't touch. I'm gathering talent as well. Spencer Sweeney and Tom Borghese are going to be in it. So is my brother. A lot of people are volunteering. I want to do the commercials for the breaks, too, and that's going to require more actors than you can shake a stick at.

SHAMIM MOMIN — Are you working with local kids?

ALEX BAG — I've got friends who have kids. I don't need a lot of kids, fortunately.

SHAMIM MOMIN — But will the audience be made up entirely of kids? When we first spoke I thought you'd said the audience might be a mix of different characters.

ALEX BAG — Oh, no, just kids.

SHAMIM MOMIN — But the guests will be of all ages.

ALEX BAG — I don't imagine the kids are going to have a lot of lines. It will be reaction shots, mostly, and possibly them asking questions, but they won't really do a lot of talking.

SHAMIM MOMIN — And what will your puppet be like? Do you know yet?

ALEX BAG — Not yet.

SHAMIM MOMIN — Have you chosen any of the guests you'd like to have on?

ALEX BAG — Tom [Borghese] wants to be the art guest and do a painting with the kids — maybe a Rothko sort of thing.

SHAMIM MOMIN — That's good, seeing that Rothko killed himself — that's always charming.

ALEX BAG — We're going to have an animal guy, and a neuro-psychiatrist who'll talk about neurochemistry and brain disorders and hyperactivity. All those meds — if the kids aren't already taking them, they soon will be. I think Spencer would make a great wizard or magician — something to do with the darker art forms. I've got to get some chicks in there too, but I don't really know how yet. I'd also like to use my mom, at some point. There will definitely be some montage-like, dream-sequences. I'm going to use old footage from her show, move back and forth in time, and try to do double exposures of our faces, or something. I think that could be really fun. My mom is a real actress; I've wanted to work with her on something for a long time.

SHAMIM MOMIN — So you have tapes of the original show.

ALEX BAG — I just found them. I wish I had more episodes. I only have six.

SHAMIM MOMIN — Even a couple would be fine. It all sort of sounds familiar, but sometimes I don't remember things until I see them.

ALEX BAG — They used the puppeteer from The Magic Garden.

SHAMIM MOMIN — That makes sense. The Magic Garden is what I use as a reference for people who might not have seen The Patchwork Family.

ALEX BAG — Maybe when you see it it'll spark a memory.

SHAMIM MOMIN — It probably will — when you sang the theme song I did remember something.

Was it the first time a real spate of kids took part in a TV show?

ALEX BAG — I don't know the entire history of children's television, but I know that the show didn't look like other shows that were on at the time. It was very much geared towards education, rather than just showing cartoons. It was empowerment-based and really instructive. The creative arts were really pushed, too — there was always a guest musician or painter on.

SHAMIM MOMIN — Seems like a hippie kind of thing, coming as it did out of that timeframe.

ALEX BAG — Yeah, my mom's background is so psychedelic it hurts. I've been trying to watch children's television now as part of my research and I'm not very impressed.

SHAMIM MOMIN — This may be a bit of a tangent, but I think it relates to the time period we're talking about: I'm obsessed with girl's survivalist books from that era, books like A Wrinkle in Time, Julie of the Wolves, From The Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler, and Harriet the Spy — individualist epics in which girls were the protagonists. They were very important to me in my formative years. I remember them so well I can actually still tell you what pages certain things were on.

ALEX BAG — Did you like Judy Bloom books, as well?

SHAMIM MOMIN — Yeah, some of them. All these books were about girls becoming super-empowered — although not in the way boys can be — and without being a girl in a traditional sense. It seems like the books clearly come out of the feminist moment and tried to impart its values to girls. It also seems significant that they were written around the same time and a lot of them were about girls who suddenly had to take care of themselves. Like in From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler, which is maybe the most obscure of them, a girl runs away from home — not because she hates her parents, but because she wants to have an adventure. She takes her little brother with her; they break into the Metropolitan Museum and they live there. They live from the coins they take from the fountain. In Harriet The Spy, a girl's secret book was found. It's not moralistic; rather it's about the power of creativity and the power of information. Island of the Blue Dolphins was another book from that era. A girl gets stranded alone on an island, which is ostensibly a true story. Anyway, I thought maybe there might have been a similar shift in kids' television in this period, in terms of its educational value, perhaps. I mean — kids' books really suck right now. They're insanely bad. Television for adults has become very sophisticated, but it's totally lost its shit as far as kids go. It's really strange.

ALEX BAG — Kids are definitely heavily marketed, too; this seems to be the *raison d'être* of all their television shows. There's always a doll, books, toys, or games that go along with a show, things being sold to the kids.

SHAMIM MOMIN — Have you seen Gossip Girl?

ALEX BAG — No.

SHAMIM MOMIN — I'm kind of obsessed with it: it's so bad and totally awesome — so over the top. It's about the ludicrous life of super-rich Upper East Siders. One of the main characters' apartments is full of art — not Picassos, but art by people we know, like the Prada Marfa store photographs, or that Elmgreen and Dragset piece. Agathe Snow did a piece for one episode — which was fucking hilarious — and Ryan McGinley did one for another.

ALEX BAG — So there's somebody with some savvy involved in it.

SHAMIM MOMIN — Yeah, but at the same time, it's totally wack. Their marketing ability is so sophisticated, they don't even need cool-finders — those people who try to figure out what the kids on the street think is really cool, and then use it as a capitalist tool — that whole thing Naomi Klein wrote about. They don't need to bother with that. What's really shocking is that the marketing people are as sophisticated as the kids.

ALEX BAG — When I was in college I read a great essay about the percentage of people who go to art school to study fine art but eventually wind up in advertising. I think it was like 80 percent, but don't quote me on that. I dropped the book when I read that. And I'm sure the statistics are even scarier now. My dad was in advertising. He worked for Time-Life for a long time and for a big agency on 23rd Street. He did the Chrysler Cordoba commercials with Ricardo Montalban and his Corinthian leather.

SHAMIM MOMIN — Which were hilarious.

ALEX BAG — They really were. My dad went to Cooper Union, too. The gulf between art and advertising has always been interesting to me. There's always been some kind of crossover. I see art stolen and used in ads all the time, especially in America. Like in the movie, *The Cell*, for example.

SHAMIM MOMIN — *The Cell* is the most egregious example. There's a scene in it that's literally a recreation of an Odd Nerdrum painting. This is my best LA story ever: When *The Cell* came out we were all pretty shocked and felt like the artists they ripped off, like Damien Hirst and Matthew Barney, should sue the producers. I was talking about it with friends at a bar in Los Angeles and I got so worked up I had to go outside to have a cigarette and calm down. A guy standing next to me said, "Hey, I overheard you at the table in there." And I was like, "Oh, yeah, sorry, I just feel really strongly about it because I'm a curator, blah blah blah." And he said, "Well, I'm actually the guy."

ALEX BAG — What guy?

SHAMIM MOMIN — That's what I said. He said, "I'm the guy they hired to pick the artists they used in that scene." And I was like, "Why would you tell me that when you just heard what I think about it?" He said, "Because out here, to be stolen from is the greatest compliment an artist can get. Everybody wanted their stuff recreated in that scene." I guess on one hand it's kind of awesome to advocate an artist and then two years later — actually, not even two years later because I feel like it's almost simultaneous — to see the aesthetics of that artist circulating in the world. But this guy really didn't have any idea that to be stolen from could be anything other than a major compliment. I sort of get his point, the thing about wholesale imitation being the greatest form of flattery. Maybe it really does come down to money — the millions and millions of dollars artists never get for inventing the things that people go ahead and steal from them.

ALEX BAG — I'd love to be an intellectual property lawyer. There's a lot of work for them right now.

SHAMIM MOMIN — No doubt. Anyway, it all just seems kind of crazy. I'm curious about one of the last pieces you did, *Coven Services for Consumer Mesmerism, Product Sorcery, and the Necromantic Reimagination of Consumption*. I think you researched think tanks and corporations for it. Can you tell me about the process of working on it?

ALEX BAG — Yeah, corporate wrongdoings. Nefarious activity. I did so much research I became mired in it. I'm always reading, always trying to distract myself with information. The tip of the iceberg is as far as I got on that one. I tried to repackage and sell it with brutal honesty. I like to be educational, but I don't want to be didactic. There's the intention of ultimately informing people about something, but having them laugh at the slap in the face they're getting, grimacing at some horrifying new information. I think it kicks you harder, and you remember it. It's much better that way, when it's harder.

SHAMIM MOMIN — Maybe it's just me, but don't you think it's funny that people have a really hard time understanding something that's been a part of human communication for such a long time? I mean, the earliest plays — in Ancient Greece — used a similar satirical bent. It's always present and inherent in intelligent communication. There's something about a humorous analysis that is much more natural. I don't know what the right word is; I think that today the word "satire" is overused in the wrong way. But humor can resonate in a realer way than serious, earnest didacticism.

ALEX BAG — Your brain switches off when you're being preached to.

SHAMIM MOMIN — But it seems like people think they have to present things logistically in order to be convincing, which they think is most important, instead of just letting people see those things for themselves. I almost feel like it can't be done without using humor — or without something that keeps it from being preachy, like a lecture format. Humor is more communal, which is why your *Stage Fright Troupe* project is such a great idea: in a weird way it exacerbates the necessity of the audience and the players working together, so that when they don't — when it's difficult or awkward or embarrassing — the audience is implicated as a part of it. Yet we feel empathy for someone who's being humiliated. I feel more awkward and embarrassed in this situation than I do watching people being hurt, which is weird. Maybe I shouldn't say it, but it's awful how your body refuses to empathize with pain; we can't remember how much pain hurts. We can remember it intellectually but not physically. But when you watch someone fail, it's like it's happening to you. There's a great study in neuroscience that supports the idea that empathy isn't a notion but an actuality. Areas of your brain are activated when you watch people fucking, in love, laughing, or whatever. They are the same areas that are activated when you yourself experience such things. Which is why porn, the obvious example, is so effective. But the same thing happens with other emotions. But, as I understand it, much less so when physical pain is involved, because

we kind of block that out.

ALEX BAG — When the suspension of disbelief is shot to hell — this is almost like Beckett or something — you're left with theatre, and an awareness of the acting process. I've had such an experience watching a play or some kind of performance in which the performers are flailing and failing — it makes you feel sick.