One of the great pleasures of being a photographer is going places and meeting people. Having a camera is a license to peer beneath and make pictures that—through nuance, juxtaposition, lighting, and gesture—reveal ideas and issues unnoticed by the casual observer. When the subjects are marginal or ostracized, this action can become political; if they are mainstream, the photographer must delve deeper into issues that often go unquestioned. The subjects of photographer Susan Anderson’s “High Glitz,” for instance, are child beauty pageant contestants, illustrating the convergence of two worlds. The child pageant industry is extreme, aimed at grooming young girls to be trophy wives at best and sex workers at worst. On the other hand, the participants are often mainstream Americans, predominantly white southerners who espouse outdated values of beauty and female gender roles in an extremely competitive arena.

The exhibition at Kopeikin Gallery in West Hollywood handsomely showcases twenty Lightjet color photographs. They first appear to be publicity shots, but closer examination reveals telling details that suggest something deeper about the subjects. Sara (n.d.), age 5, is photographed from behind to highlight her oversized hair—perhaps uninteresting until one notices a scab on her right elbow, breaking with the pageant’s unrealistic expectation of perfection. Beauty (n.d.), age 4, is blonde and dressed in pink, resembling a cupcake. Her pained expression, however, shows that she is on the brink of tears, revealing a crack in her otherwise perfect façade. Katarina (n.d.), age 5, is a particularly poignant image. The girl’s forced smile is awkward, showing gaps in her baby teeth as she looks into the camera with the skepticism of someone not entirely convinced of her own beauty pageant persona. These images unveiling such tensions and imperfections are the exception in this exhibition; most of the photographs show a seamless presentation that fits the stereotypical notion of how pageant contestants should look. This lack of cognitive dissonance in the majority of the photographs suggests that Anderson has become part of the scene to such a degree that she is enmeshed in the beauty pageant ethos instead of being engaged in the issues it raises, which makes the portraits disconcerting for all the wrong reasons. With a few exceptions, they are not much more than publicity photographs that avoid the salient issue of harmful identity construction.

This blandness comes from the pictures’ uniformity: namely, their soft pastel backgrounds and cookie-cutter glare. Something as simple as seeing the contestants in a hotel lobby would have made a tremendous difference by allowing viewers to place the subjects in the context of the pageant environment. Anderson instead chose to follow an uninspired formula for each image, eschewing anything that might give viewers a peek behind the façade. This publicity photography strategy reveals her own timidity more than exposing anything about her subjects.

The exhibition catalog, published by powerHouse, bears a defensive tone by anticipating potential criticism of the project’s avoidance of the analytical assessment of the industry, or the parents who keep it alive. Simon Doonan’s essay focuses on how he wishes he could have been a child beauty queen, and states that the subjects’ futures will validate their pageant-filled childhood when they end up marrying local businessmen or reporting the weather on the local news. Perhaps Doonan’s essay is intentionally parodic, but, like most of the photographs, the effect is merely glib and unclear. Robert Greene’s essay is a more serious attempt to defend the child beauty pageant industry as no worse than aggressive parents pushing their kids into competitive sports. But he veers off into an intellectual ditch, claiming, “We humans live in a world of complete artificiality” as a justification for outdated notions about how girls “are particularly drawn to the plastic, artificial elements” and “like what is exaggerated, larger than life—colors a bit too bright, shapes too
asymmetrical . . .” (10). Such pre-feminist stereotypes are baffling and confine girls to an extremely narrow definition of womanhood based entirely on appearance. Greene would like us to think of pageants as nothing more than an empowering outlet for children playing dress-up. It is as if the significant financial costs were immaterial and that training young girls to strike cliché, sexual poses is a wholesome endeavor.

Greene goes on to claim that what Anderson has “achieved is to reflect the surface world—no easy task” (11). On the contrary, it is arguably a very easy task—that is what most amateur photographers do. It is far more difficult to make images in which the surface world is not simply reflected, but exposed. Gesture, juxtaposition, and context are the tools to do this and, when used intelligently, transform artificial pictures of the world into pictures about artifice. Important photographs are not simply images of a time and place, but objects about a time and place, an essential and challenging distinction lost in this body of work.

“High Glitz” should be fascinating, but generally shows a face of superficiality so carefully constructed for the camera that few insights are revealed. The potential for a deeper awareness regarding human perception and the mediated construction of identity exists within Anderson’s subject matter. Unfortunately, the investigation of what drives a parent to cultivate in their daughter such a cloying persona, dependent on unrealistic and suspect ideas of beauty, goes blithely unexamined.

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