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ARTS

Culture Monster

ALL THE ARTS, ALL THE TIME



Art review: Susan Anderson at Kopeikin Gallery

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Forget slasher flicks and gore fests. The scariest images in Hollywood right now are photographs of pint-size beauty contestants hanging at the [Kopeikin Gallery](#).

Susan Anderson's pictures are straight shots, mostly head-and-shoulders portraits of little girls (as young as 4) in their competitive finery. The special effects have all been put to work earlier, in readying the kids for their moment before the judges – and the camera. Artifice runs so high it verges on the grotesque. "Little Miss Sunshine" has been bested by Little Miss

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Spray Tan.

Consider 5-year-old Danica, lips painted glossy pink and blue eyes rimmed by the long, dark tendrils of fake eyelashes. Or the disturbingly sultry Mary Ashton, 9, her lime green bikini top stretched tight across her tiny flat chest.

Anderson, a commercial photographer specializing in portraiture and fashion, traveled to beauty pageant sites around the country for the last three years, shooting the girls in portable studios, against pastel backgrounds glimmering with paparazzi-flash bursts of light. Her clean, slick style suits the subjects; nothing distracts from the human spectacle. Though Anderson invites the subjects to pose themselves and says she intervenes only minimally, that doesn't mean the girls look natural or relaxed. Competition has expunged the natural from their vocabulary of behavior and appearance. Image is all, and whatever it takes to achieve the "High Glitz" look these competitions favor is fair game: false fingernails, brilliant white veneers on the teeth, makeup to turn an already smooth cheek into a surface of flawless – and frightening – uniformity.

Stylists sculpt the girls' hair into ornately piled, curled, extended, amended and stiffened extravaganzas. Costumes tend toward candy colors and pinks, liberally augmented by sequins, rhinestones, ruffles, pearls, feathers and lace.

There is a strange retro glamour to the look achieved by the kids and their handlers – part country music star, part vixen housewife. Commercialized and sexualized all out of proportion to their age (contestants range from around 2 to 10), these children haven't just lost their innocence, they've had it packaged and sold.

Anderson seems motivated more by fascination than repulsion, and her photographs manage to illustrate a sociological phenomenon without either celebrating or condemning it. It's possible, I suppose, to be charmed by the world of "High Glitz," with its towering tiaras and unbuxom beauties. But for me, the horror quotient ran high, and I was grateful for the antidote offered (whether intentionally or simply ironically) by the gallery's smaller, second show of photographs of the Japanese bath by Mark Edward Harris.

In the rich charcoal tones of these pigment prints on washi paper, natural beauty prevails. After the excesses of the pageantry scene, Harris' pictures are a cleansing soak in the quiet, contemplative and pure.

– Leah Ollman

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Kopeikin Gallery, 8810 Melrose Ave., West Hollywood, (310) 385-5894, through Dec. 24.
Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.kopeikingallery.com.

Photo: Savannah. Credit: Susan Anderson, courtesy of the Kopeikin Gallery.