

BEAUTY and the FEAST

HIGH GLITZ BECOMES HIGH ART IN SUSAN ANDERSON'S PHOTOGRAPHS

BY TULSA KINNEY



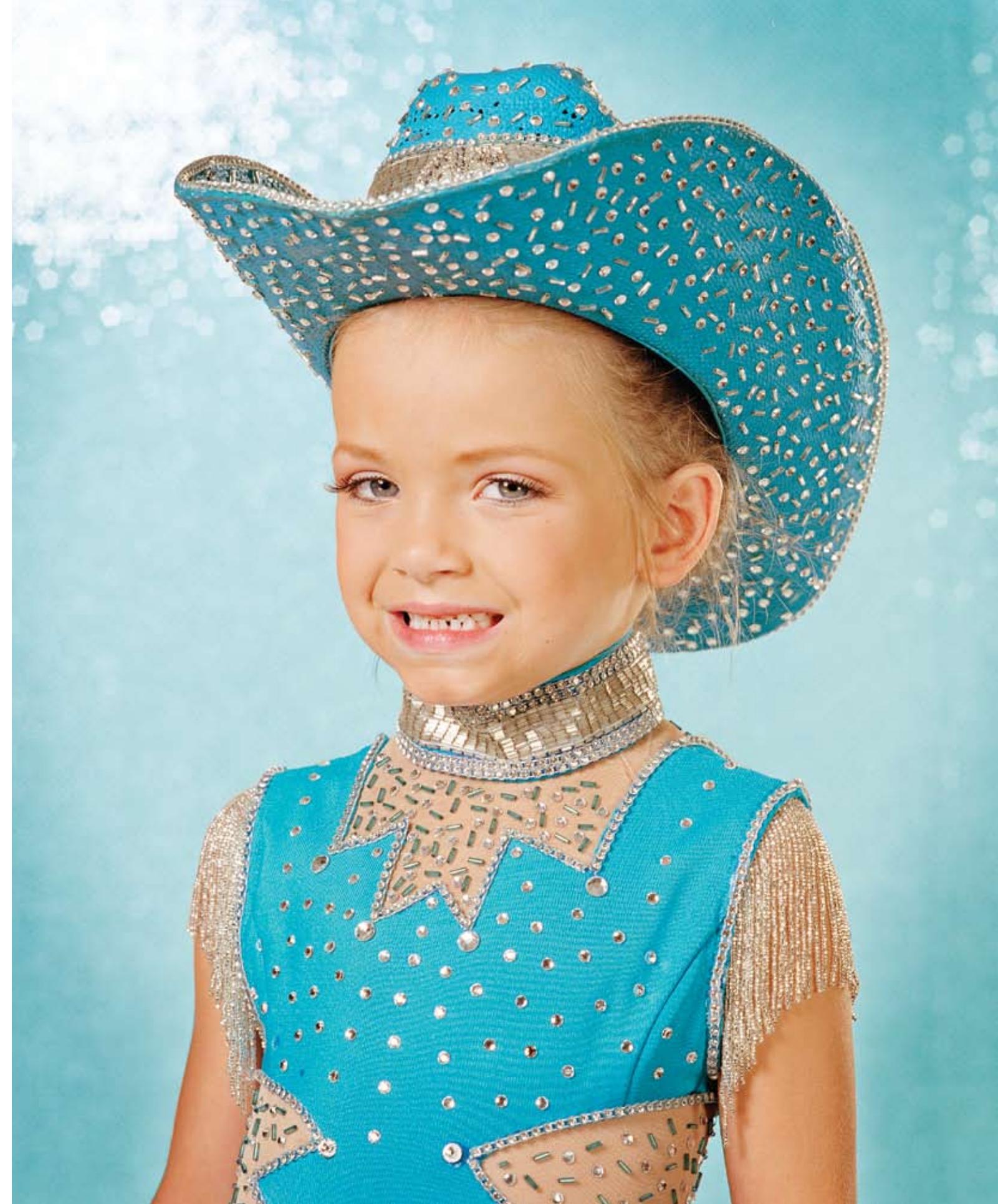
IT was two years ago when I first saw Susan Anderson's photographs at an art fair in New York. They were images of little girls all dolled up, seemingly for one of those kiddie beauty pageants. I was struck by the pictures for several reasons: The photographs displayed composition, skillful technique, over-the-top glamour and saturated color; the little-girl beauty pageants are fascinating for the sheer spectacle; and the models had an aloofness that invited more lingering.

Back then, Anderson was in the midst of attending and documenting "High Glitz" beauty pageants, a category specifically for little girls who go all out with the sequins, big hair, makeup and flippers (fake veneers for teeth) — the works. She was planning a book and a gallery exhibition of the photos. Those were her goals then. Now, two years later and with four pageants under her belt, her book, *High Glitz: The Extravagant World of Child Beauty Pageants*, is coming out in October. She already had a solo show with Torch Gallery in Amsterdam last winter and will show with Paul Kopeikin Gallery in Los Angeles this fall.

Curiously enough, I met Anderson on the flight back to LA after I'd first seen her work in New York. Suddenly she was everywhere; I frequently bumped into her at art functions in LA. Each time I would ask about her project. Each time she appeared to be making considerable progress. Each time I asked her if it was time for us to sit down for an interview. You could see that it was happening for her. The last time I saw her at an opening, she was passing out an art announcement from her show in Amsterdam. The cover shot was mesmerizing and caught everyone's eye. It was time for that interview.

Anderson greets me while talking on her cell, rolling her eyes, signaling to me just a few more minutes. With her cropped, mussy brunette locks and comely bespectacled looks, Anderson has an air of professionalism rarely associated with artists. She's tall and slender, poised and charming, and glides up the creaky wooden staircase in her Koreatown studio talking on the cell phone the entire time, with me following behind. Somehow she manages to make me feel comfortable while gracefully trying to end her phone conversation. This introduction to Anderson seemed to characterize her for me. I admired her many talents and her ability to juggle them all at the same time.

Her shared studio was neat and orderly, with lots of images pinned on the wall — not one of them crooked! Her latest project, the beauty pageant children, was represented in



Above: Elizabeth, age 9, Austin, Texas (2005); Right: Katarina, age 5, Las Vegas, Nevada (2006)

BEAUTY continued

various forms: small test photos, large prints, layouts for the book, images of tiaras, white Mary Janes and trophies. Everything on the wall was pink and blue. I was able to feast my eyes on a work in progress, including Anderson on the phone — herself a work in progress. Right now, her life is one meeting after another; she's featured in a lot of European publications and she sold some pieces to a museum in Amsterdam.

"The Dutch are just going crazy for it," she said dismissively, waving her hands. She showed me a poster that just arrived: "Achtung Baby!" It announced her Dutch exhibit with her photograph, *Danica*, as the literal "poster child."

Initially it was Anderson's photographs, her images, that drew me into her work. But moments later, after settling my eyes on the portraits, I also knew I wanted to know more about the artist herself — the person who chose to go around and take these photos. The person who found this subject matter worth documenting.

ANDERSON was raised in Minneapolis and received her BFA from the The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She stayed in Chicago and went immediately into TV, mainly as a production designer on high-end commercials. She came to LA in 2001 and began a career in fashion photography. One can see the high technical standards and skill she acquired working in the industry. She takes her craft very seriously, and brings that expertise to her fine art photography.

But something Anderson always did on the side was document live performances and publicity shots for local bands. One gig she got, with the Los Angeles burlesque troupe Velvet Hammer, was at the Mayan theater downtown. She set up her camera and lights in a room where the performers could stop in and get their photos taken on their way to and from the stage. She got some terrific shots, and Anderson liked the "ready-to-go" portraits that came out of that experience. That method eventually led to her beauty pageant photos.

Steeped in the commercial world of superficiality and blonde ambition, Anderson tells the story of how one day while working with a beautiful model on a shoot, she mused, "Do I like doing this? Maybe I need to do a project that somehow lets me think about what I'm doing. Or think about images of women who are going out there who have to deal with this ideal of beauty, or whatever that is. This preconceived idea that we're all aspiring to or being told we need to achieve."

Then one evening, still in her introspective

mode, she was watching a documentary on the history of beauty pageants and thought, Beauty pageants, that's kind of an interesting subject. She'd been reading a lot of books about beauty, something that has always intrigued her.

"So, I went online and I Googled 'beauty pageant' and this title came up, it was one of the top hits. It was 'Universal Royalty Beauty Pageants.' I just clicked on it and I started reading this thing. It was all blinking and there were photographs of these little girls with makeup and I was like, Oh my God. So I started writing the director this e-mail, 'Dear Annette, I'm a fashion/beauty photographer in Los Angeles,'" she told me, air-typing as she continued. "And, I'm thinking to myself, Wow, I won't have to do any retouches because these girls would be so young and their skin would be perfect! So, I immediately got the visual for what the exhibition would be like. I thought, What if I went to this thing and lit these girls like I would light the best beauty photograph I could ever light and show that in an art exhibit. And I saw it immediately! It was like, 'Bing!'"

Here's where Anderson's aforementioned ready-made portraits come in. "I thought, what if I went to one place and I could get a bunch of people at once already in hair and makeup — it was a dream! And, just from purely technical standpoints, since I do a lot of retouching on fashion and beauty things — I was doing so much skin retouching — I thought, I won't even have to retouch the photographs!"

Anderson's commercial art background seems to foster such pragmatic thinking. She continues, "So, on some level, it was economical. I could get a bunch of material at one full swoop, not even completely understanding what I was getting myself into.

"The director e-mailed back and said, 'Sure! Why don't you come to our state pageant in August?' — which was in Austin, Texas. So, I was working on this job, making a bunch of money, and I had one of my assistants with me and I looked at her and said, 'We're going to Texas! I just bought us two tickets!'"

That was the first pageant she went to in 2005, and it was held at the Double Tree Inn. "I said I'm a fine art photographer, I'm a beauty and fashion photographer. I want to do an exhibition and a book. I told everyone that from the very beginning." Her professional background benefits her on every level, it seems. Each model signed a photo release and everything was on the up and up. But there are always some skeptics lurking about: with a subject matter so loaded, especially after the TLC reality show *Toddlers and Tiaras* and the JonBenét tragedy highlighting every child beauty pageant. Anderson writes in an essay included in her book how she

felt it necessary to explain her process. She wanted to make sure viewers knew these photos were not staged. That's important to know, actually. "It's a very different story if I go to the pageant, set up a studio and photograph the girls as they are at that moment, rather than if I were to bring them to a studio and make them look that way."

Anderson knows exactly what she's doing on so many levels. I wondered what it is about these photos, and why so many people are attracted to them. She explains, "This is sort of my theory about it. I've been a photographer for a long time, and I'm someone who looks at images all the time. I love photography, I love painting. I think we have this collective, sort of unconscious history of the world of art in our heads that we're not aware of all the time. I think sometimes when I take the pictures, that later on I'm like, Oh, that reminds me of this. That's the *Marilyn Monroe* by Andy Warhol, only she's 4. There's something that's communicated, something that rings familiar, and I can't tell what it is. And I think that's how these pictures work.

"There's some kind of tie to our visual history of celebrity, glamour, beauty, portraiture. There's that in there too. I think there's also that double take. Like people look, then see that's she's 4. There's this shock-and-awe kinda thing. There's something not quite right. Maybe it's the teeth are too big, she looks older than she really is. There's this whole illusion of an older person on this small body. Also, they're just really beautiful. They're dimensional, they're colorful, they're saturated, they're sparkly. I think they're attractive, but then there's this push and pull thing that happens."

But what about the stigma attached to child beauty pageants? Is it exploitive, and does Anderson contribute to that? Anderson includes in her book essays by *NY Observer* columnist Simon Doonan and *The New York Times* best-selling author Robert Greene, who preempt any questions headed in that direction. The two articles are excellent, Doonan's being hilariously campy, and Greene's on the serious side.

But I wanted to hear what Anderson had to say about the oppressive nature of the pageants. Without missing a beat, she dismissed the idea, explaining how she's used to people looking like something they're not. "I'm fascinated by the transformational quality of cosmetics, and the illusion involved with photography. You know, you look at a photograph of a movie star and you know how much work has been done to that picture. It's not the way that person looks in real life."

Anderson's reply was convincing. After all, the pageants are voluntary events — at least for the stage mothers. Besides, she added reflectively, "It's really not about children, what I'm doing. They happen to be the



ANDERSON PHOTOGRAPHED BY TYLER HUBBY

This page, clockwise from top-left: *Kaylie*, age 3, *Austin, Texas* (2005); *Jacklyn*, age 7, *Las Vegas, Nevada* (2006); Susan Anderson in her studio; *Katy* (profile), age 5, *Las Vegas, Nevada* (2006); *Mary Ashton*, age 9, *Nashville, Tennessee* (2008); All Anderson images: © Susan Anderson Photography / Courtesy of Kopeikin Gallery

subject. The thing that fascinates me about the High Glitz aesthetic as long as I've been working on this project: I don't really understand it. I don't understand where it comes from. When I went to Nashville, it made the most sense to me."

ANDERSON had never been to the South, and there everything began to crystallize for her. She told the story about the emcee, Mr. Tim Whitmer. "He's like THE guy. He's the Bert Parks of little-girl pageants. When I heard him say, 'Welcome to Nash Vegas,' all of a sudden, High Glitz just made sense to me. You think Dolly Parton, you think the big hair, those country-western costumes with all the rhinestones encrusted. Maybe it is really about this showtime, the ruffled skirts. Everything gets out of control to a point. It's very American. Everything is bigger, sparklier, more is better."

Back to the subject of beauty, though. I keep thinking of the saying, "Truth is beauty,"

but these pageants seem exactly the opposite, like it's all fake. I put this to Anderson, and she replies, "Well, it's all fake, but there's something REAL about it. There are some girls that I've photographed that are beautiful." But youth can be beauty, I point out, especially with regard to her photos. "Well, that's what our society tells us. We're completely youth-obsessed," she admits.

But Anderson also notes that as much makeup and glitter as these little girls have on, their personalities still come through. She became close to the subject in a lot of ways. She told me she can remember the moment she took the photographs of each of her subjects. "I knew when I had a great shot. I thought, Oh my God, this is amazing. There's something happening right now, I don't know what this is ... but, CLICK!"

I notice two books on her desk, *The Symptom of Beauty*, by Francette Pacteau, and *History of Beauty*, by Umberto Eco and Alastair McEwen, and ask about them. "Beauty is something that changes over time.

It's always evolving. It's not a constant. And really young girls who know at a very young age that they want to be up on stage and performing, I think that's fascinating.

"I'm fascinated by people who want to be up in front of people on stage and perform. I know how to light and make women beautiful. Women are a subject for me, and something I'm always interested in photographing. In fact, I'm sure the next project I do will also be about beauty and women in some way."

But what makes this art and not fashion photography or photos in a costume catalog? Anderson's answer is evasive and savvy at the same time. "Well, that's not for me to answer: I leave that to you people who write about art," she laughs heartily. "I just started the project, and people responded to it."

Did Susan Anderson just define the age-old question, "What is Art?"

IN LA: See Anderson's work at Kopeikin Gallery, Oct. 24–Dec. 24; Book signing at Book Soup, Sept. 26. For more info: Highglitz.com