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Young Girls Grow Up Too Fast

By Deepika Shetty



An accident in her teenage years left American illustrator-turned-artist Gretchen Ryan wheelchair-bound. "I felt that a part of me remained a child after the car accident left me using a wheelchair," says the 36-year-old artist. "From then on, I have always looked up at people – like a child – and feel that people often see me as someone who is dependent, like a child." She started doing paintings using photographs of herself as a little girl, but soon ran out of good images.

It was quite by chance that she hit upon the idea of beauty pageants for young girls. Using traditional portraiture techniques to probe into their world, she produced detailed pictures capturing expressions of fear and dismay that traditional pageant imagery glosses over. Depictions of her subjects' vulnerability allude to the darker side of youthful beauty. The little princesses are placed on pedestals but are

depicted as if they are in danger.

About 20 of these works can be viewed at her solo show, Hearts for Eyes, which is held at Galerie Steph till April 28. The works include oils on linen, works on paper and new photography works, with prices starting from \$4,000.

Ryan, who has used a wheelchair since the age of 16 when a jeep she was in drove off a cliff in the mountains of Colorado, says she is not making judgments about the pageants in her work. "Though personally, I think I would have had a hard time being put in pageants as I was a very sensitive girl," says the blonde-haired Ryan, who is based in Los Angeles. What she wants to do with her images is talk about the transition from childhood to adulthood, from innocence to experience, and how this seemingly natural transition could sometimes be rather traumatic. "They wear these amazing dresses and are trained to pose for a camera, and I think the experience that they have competing is somewhat of a condensed, exaggerated version of what any woman goes through, where she is being judged on her beauty," says Ryan, who studied at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California.

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In a painting, *Desire*, which took her almost five years to complete, she shows twin girls wearing frilly, hot pink pageant dresses in a moody winter landscape. At their feet, young Arabian horses and a white unicorn run through the snow. "I am involved in helping animals and feel similarly about them as I do about children – they are innocent and often victimized." In another work, the oil on linen *Jaylynn*, she shows a young pageant contestant fully dressed and made up for the show. Yet missing from the little girl's face is the innocence of childhood.

Ms. Stephanie Tham of Galerie Steph brought in the works in collaboration with Fred Torres, a New York-based gallerist. He had introduced her to Ryan's work in 2010. Ms. Tham, 42, says: "I like the way Gretchen captures the dichotomy of purity and superficiality in the child pageant contestants, without losing the child-like quality and vulnerability of her subjects. She never lets the ornate glamour of pageantry overshadow the innocent girls." Through her art, she investigates the innocence and precious sexuality of childhood and youth. It is concise, trenchant illumination which is aesthetically and artistically appealing.

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