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MISS WORLD

Who's the fairest of them all? Juergen Teller looks beyond the brilliant smiles.

By Aaron Gell

He is one of the foremost fashion photographers in the business, but that doesn't prevent Juergen Teller from raging against the industry like a radical-feminist firebrand. "This beauty ideal is everywhere," he says. "You can't escape it - TV, wallpaper, posters, billboards, magazines. They put on these crazy perceptions about what people should look like. It's really shocking the way everybody is striving for this one thing, this ultimate beauty, but what is it?"

It's a question Teller has been asking in one form or another throughout his career, and it turns up again in his latest work. "Tracht," a series of snapshot-style portraits of the contestants in last year's Miss World pageant, currently on display at Lehmann Maupin gallery in New York (a catalog will be published by Scalo).

Teller shot the series on the fly, capturing all 84 contestants, a quarter of whom appear in the exhibition, during a three-hour promotional luncheon in London last November, and he was struck by the brilliant smiles with which his subjects uniformly confronted his lens. "Eighty-four countries," he muses, "and they all look the same."

That parade of gleaming teeth and false eyelashes - seen in a series of towering C-prints on aluminum - offers an unsettling look at the system of conformity that's emerged in service to the beauty ideal. Buttons bearing the contestant's homelands are visible in some shots, lending an ironic counterpoint to the scrubbed homogeneity of their looks.

Many photographers would approach such a spectacle with a smirk, sneaking around on the hunt for gritty images that expose the pageant's "reality." That's not Teller's style. "I don't like taking a sly picture on the side," he says. "I like the

direct approach. I want to be as honest to myself and the subject as possible. And I'm depending on their humanness to come through."

As a result, Teller's camera captures a good deal more than the superficiality of the pageant world: His pictures practically throb with the swirl of emotions (ambition, coquetry, disdain, insecurity) that those carefully lipsticked smiles are meant to camouflage. Thus, we can't help but note Bulgaria's imperiously raised eyebrow, Italy's fierce glare, the United States' well-muscled shoulders, Yugoslavia's disconcertingly cheerful grin and so on.

"Tracht" will be displayed alongside Teller's previous project, "Go Sees," a year's worth of snapshots of the many young would-be models who periodically turn up on his London doorstep looking to be discovered. "It's all about beauty perceptions," he explains. "All these women want something - success and fame - and it's all built on beauty." In both series, women give the man behind the camera tremendous power to determine their value and destiny. Despite his misgivings, Teller willingly accepts that power, then lets us experience it as well. The result, despite all the makeup in the world, isn't always a pretty picture.