

## FRED TORRES COLLABORATIONS

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Gretchen Ryan's "Tinley," portrays the artist's 7-year-old muse.  
Courtesy of Fred Torres Collaborations

### Art We Love Discovery: Gretchen Ryan, "Little Pretty"

By Andrew Goldstein

For the past several years, Los Angeles-based artist Gretchen Ryan has been exploring the uncomfortable issues related to the child beauty pageant industry in the jewel-like portraits she paints of young contestants. Her inspiration comes in part from the fact that she grew up in Boulder, Colorado, just four doors down from Jean Benét Ramsey, the child beauty

queen whose murder in 1996 cast a dark pall over the pageants. Now in "Little Pretty," her first New York show (running at Fred Torres Collaborations through May 12), the 33-year-old artist is displaying her work just as lawmakers are seeking to crack down on the excesses of pageant culture.

Ryan often depicts little girls whom she discovers on the pageant circuit and then stays in touch with as they grow older, painting them at different stages of their "careers." (Her primary muse, Tinley--a 7-year-old girl from Las Vegas who is blind in one eye--reappears in painting after painting.) Rendering her portraits in oil on canvas and expertly applied charcoal on paper, Ryan confronts the viewer with pictures that portray the girls as both empowered individuals and decorated objects. Lips, eyes, and jewels are painted in high gloss, lending a starlet-esque sheen to her subjects as they pose coquettishly, some in gowns, others in cowgirl outfits. For the most part Ryan--whose background as an illustrator is evidenced in her work's crisp lines--depicts the girls with a closely observed realism indebted to the likes of John Singer Sargent.

Ryan has already established a burgeoning reputation on the West Coast, where her paintings (which sell for between \$8,000 and \$3,500) are collected by celebrities like Demi Moore, Tobey Maguire, and Courtney Love. Staring back at these stars, Ryan's portraits critique the corrupting glow of the spotlight.

Perhaps the most striking painting of the show--and the only group portrait--is "Girls in Perils," where Ryan places two pink-clad contestants in a surreal burning wasteland that recalls the work of artists like Neo Rauch.



"Girls in Peril," by Gretchen Ryan, places the artist's subjects in a surreally menacing setting. Courtesy of Fred Torres Collaborations