

## Visual Arts

# Second: So close and yet so far



Peter Goddard

At first glance, *Second* by Sandy Nicholson is a horror story for losers — and not just any losers.

In fact, the Tatar Gallery exhibition might well consist of the most embittered losers of them all, the jocks and the show dog owners who ended up finishing second in some contest or another. Coming last would have been so much easier to live with for any of them. There's no sweat to being last. It doesn't even come close to winning.

Some in these portraits of the "if-on-lys" are being stoic about it all. The oval-faced woman with the hoop earrings, pink choker and braces on her teeth in "2nd Place Ballroom Dancing (2006)" has her I'll-smile-'till-I-die grimace. And the young guy in "2nd Place Robot Lego League (2006)" has the sort of faraway look in his eye that suggests he was never aware of being in a contest in the first place.

"I did ask many of them if they knew there was a moment that made the difference for them," says the photographer.

And maybe there was. But it's too late. So now we have a lineup with faces filled with tears, stunned disbelief and a wide range of I-wanna-kill glares. Hollywood should digitize the icy glance from the blonde dancer in the dolled-up sky blue costume in "2nd Place Dance Sport (2006)" as some new form of death ray.

All of this is eerily fascinating — maybe even fun, if you've never been there — except maybe for the individuals involved. Yet there's another issue involved, as well. It's about how winning has come to define the very idea of beauty itself.

Even when you confront the second best, you instantly bring into the pic-



SANDY NICHOLSON

A second-place ballroom dancer keeps her smile in place.

ture what the winners must look like.

For generations the very conception of beauty has been up for grabs (see Oscar Wilde and Hugh Hefner, among others, on the subject).

Put simply, either it's seen (by fashion magazines, say) as some form of idealized exterior or as its opposite number as some sort of idealized "inner" quality that has nothing to do with whether you looked great in a little

black number from Chanel.

With *Second*, Nicholson suggests we believe winners — the first-placers, the richest, the sexiest or the most famous — now represent our standards of ideal beauty. With *Second*, we get to see what's missing.

The winner's look has become the contemporary definition of the ideal. And we sure know what the winners look like. Not a minute goes by on TV



SANDY NICHOLSON

A jockey remains stoic after failing to make it into the winners' circle.

without having some damned winner being shoved in front of our faces as we're told how "fabulous" they are — even if all that means is another look at Donald Trump and his hair.

Any sense of this kind of perfection has gone entirely missing from Nicholson's second-placers. We know it. They know it. There's no ideal represented by these portraits. There's just something raw.

"It is very much about identity," says Nicholson, an Australian-born photographer now based in Toronto with his third show at Tatar Gallery. "These are all people who are competing in something they love and want to be the best at but weren't. Some people are actually pleased they made it to second because they were new to the event, or this was the first big competition.

"Being second is always about being the forgotten person, the one who disappears in history. I don't know the name of the second guy who stepped on the moon. Does anyone?"

There is, however, a defiant quality to Nicholson's cast of second-placers. The photographer shows their body language theatrically defined against a gorgeous, painterly background.

An entire movie might well be de-

duced from "2nd Place Bull Rider (2006)," from the bloody raw rope burns on the cowpoke's bare neck, to the way his white Stetson is tilted back on his head. He's not the best. Yet he's not crushed by the realization. But what's the meaning of the bit of crumpled paper in his right hand? Did he just get the boot from a loved one, too?

Nicholson started out wanting to explore "different notions of constructed beauty starting off with ballroom dancers." (The different types of competitors were chosen from in and around the Toronto area.) "But there were so many people who were humbled and distraught at not having made it," he says. "That was more interesting."

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Debate continues following the decision made earlier this week awarding ownership of 85 key art works to the Beaverbrook Art Gallery following much rancorous and costly legal wrangling between the Frederickton institution and the heirs of Lord Beaverbrook, the original owner of the paintings in question, including Lucian Freud's *Hotel Bedroom* and J.M.W. Turner's *The Fountain of Indolence*.

Not unexpectedly, the Beaverbrook Foundation, now assured ownership of 48 other works given to the museum, plans to appeal the ruling by retired Supreme Court justice Peter Cory.

But the ruling already underlines the need for donors to be absolutely clear about the nature of their donations. What happens when a museum decided to de-access donated work in some future date from its collection, as Buffalo's Albright-Knox Art Gallery is currently doing with some 207 pieces? What happens if a donor is mistreated in some fashion by incoming museum management that had nothing to do with securing the original donation?

"We try to talk things out," was the best approach one museum spokesperson had to finding a resolution.

Second is at Tatar Gallery, 600 King St. W., 4th floor, until May 13. pgoddard@thestar.ca