

Nigel Barker

# A SEALED FATE

By Jennifer Chen



"The Hero" from Nigel Barker's gallery exhibition, "A Sealed Fate?"



"Innocence" from Nigel Barker's gallery exhibition of "A Sealed Fate?"



Nigel being interviewed before the opening of "A Sealed Fate?" in NYC.



NIGEL BARKER

Nigel Barker is known around the world as a photographer and judge on *America's Next Top Model*. But Barker chooses to use his celebrity status with care. After all, Barker is, in his own words, "A photographer. That's who I really am." He comments, "You can't afford to be a celebrity and a photographer. You have to be careful because the secret to being a photographer is being approachable. You have to relate to your subject so if you get wrapped up too much in the celebrity status, you'll never be able to capture what you want. It's my juggling act. By dealing with very real world issues, it helps me deal with my celebrity."

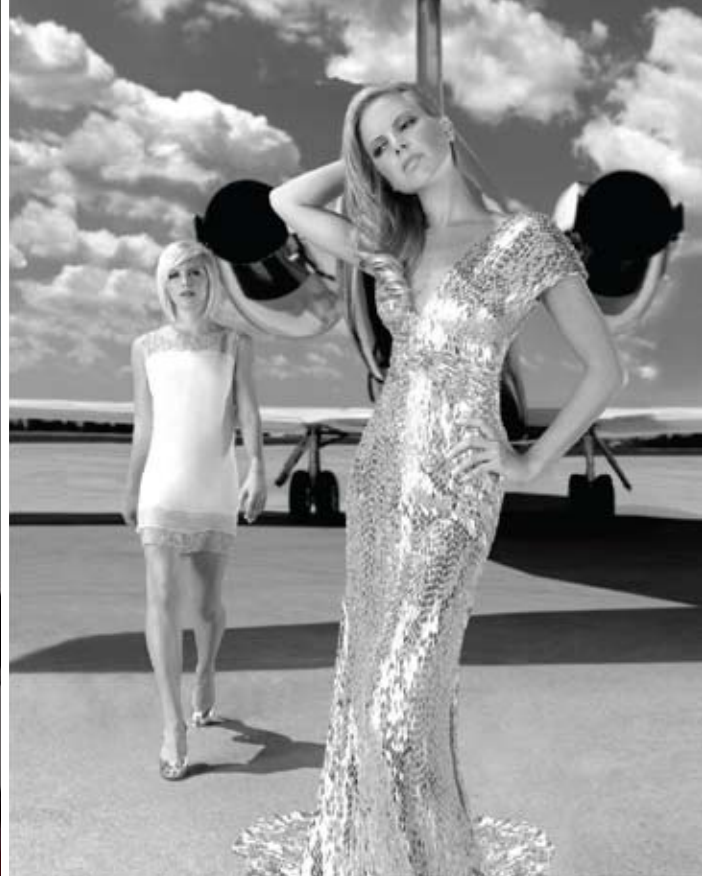
True to his word, Barker is involved with several charities, capitalizing on his celeb status to promote important causes. His most recent work involves bringing awareness to seal hunting in Canada. As the spokesperson for the Humane Society of the US and the Protect the Seals campaign, Barker jumped at the opportunity to utilize his photographic skills for good. Shares Barker, "You can use a word like barbaric or brutal but a photograph that you're looking at or a film that you're viewing is quite different." Springing into action, Barker volunteered to be the first spokesperson to witness and document the birth of the baby seals and the hunt. What he found was truly extraordinary.

## Documenting the Hunt

Barker wanted to shoot a documentary film of the hunt in progress as well as shoot still photos to illustrate how much the seals change from birth to two weeks old. As early as 12 days old, the seals are hunted because at two weeks, they start to learn how to swim, which makes killing them more difficult. Shares Barker, "Unfortunately, I viewed animals being skinned alive and beaten. I saw a sealer slip on the ice while the seal would try to scamper off, half-beaten, only to fall into the water and drown." Barker wisely chose to keep the hunting stills out of his photography exhibition—"A Sealed Fate?"—and instead featured images that were a celebration of the life of the seals and the ecosystem in which they live.

What is evident in the images in his exhibit are the emotions and playfulness of the young seals. Barker equates photographing seals to what it must be like to document children's portraits. "You can't necessarily direct them. You have to go out there, look, and wait and see." The seals showed off their personalities for Barker as he approached them. Some were noisy and precocious, barking at him while others were shy and nuzzled against their mothers. Shooting in subzero temperatures presents unique challenges, especially since Barker brought the same exact equipment he uses in his studio. He quips, "There were a few Reuters and AP photographers on the ice who said that in the 20 years they've been there, they've never seen anyone take up so much equipment. We

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**Left and above:** Advertisement for Pamela Roland  
**Bottom left:** Fashion editorial for Tatler Magazine



had one less passenger in the helicopter for the weight.” Thirty-five miles off the coast of Canada, Barker and his crew had to contend with seal-made blowholes, possible ice storms and finding safe places for the helicopter to land. The crew kept external batteries tucked close to their bodies so they wouldn’t drain battery power in the frigid environment.

The plus side to carrying so much equipment is the extraordinary images that Barker captured in unusual circumstances. Says Barker, “I decided to take all my medium format cameras there. We took a bunch of strobe equipment and beauty dishes, the same I use for models. I was able to conquer certain weather conditions because I could shoot through these conditions and create light, making sure to pick up light in the animals’ dark eyes.” With the strobes and self-contained batteries, Barker comments that he was able to photograph “something you’ve never seen before. It’s a style of photography with beautiful ground crystal lenses that has a portraiture feel, something you’d never normally see on the ice.”

### Photolanthropy

In addition to Barker’s charitable efforts with the Humane Society of the US, he has worked on behalf of the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation and the Edeyo Foundation. It is important to Barker that he uses his photography as a way to bring help to these important charities. Comments Barker, “Photography is invaluable with charitable efforts. When you think about moments in time, you can say words but in your mind’s eye, you think of a photograph, an image, a memory.” The Edeyo Foundation is an independent non-profit organization dedicated to improving the future of children in Haiti. On Barker’s blog, there is a video of his journey photographing Haiti on behalf of The Edeyo Foundation. [Editor’s Note: The video is shot before the January 12, 2010 earthquake.] He discusses facing dangerous situations while photographing, such as having



**Above left:** Beauty editorial shot for Cover Magazine

**Above:** Photo shot for America's Next Top Model

**Left:** Fashion editorial for Cover Magazine



guns pointed at him and a fight over photographing gambling. “Photographers have a history of putting themselves in harm’s way. I’m certainly not the first to have a gun pointed at me. Ironically, the images from the exhibition that are the most peaceful and serene are the ones in the cemetery,” says Barker. He continues, “[In the cemetery images] the sun is cresting over a tombstone and peeking around a cross and cascading rays of light across the image in a beautiful way. At the same time, there were people screaming and crying and guns were being pulled, but you obviously can’t hear that in a photograph.”

While Barker doesn’t purposely put himself in harm’s way, he dedicates himself to taking the shot and making every moment count. Instead of focusing on the despair of these situations, his images reflect the natural beauty and love that he maintains is always present even in the worst environments. “You are always going to find love and people who are trying to do their best to get out of the situation and that’s what I concentrate on.”

### Calling Card

Barker joined the judges’ panel of *America’s Next Top Model* back in September 2002 and has been giving advice and critiques, and photographing the models ever since. On the show, Barker lends his expertise as a photographer to help the models-in-training understand what a photographer wants and needs when working with a model. *Top Model* has been an extraordinary calling card for Barker who has been able to capitalize on the recognition. “With *Top Model*, people see me shooting all the time and talking to the talent and then get to see the results, week after week, for over seven years,” comments Barker. Currently, the show is in its 14th cycle and it is approaching Barker’s eighth year judging contestants. *Top Model* is all over the world in 128 countries. Barker promoted more awareness



Image from Haiti for the Edeyo Foundation.

## Barker Without the Bite

Barker shares some important points about starting out in the photography industry: “Photographers are always calling my studio and asking how do I get to do what I do. They want me to look at their work and give them feedback. The main thing I tell photographers is that there is no golden bullet for how to be successful. Be your own judge. I may hate your pictures, but someone else may love them. There are artists out there who have been ridiculed who have gone on to be the biggest successes of all time.

“You are the editor. You have to know when you’ve got the shot. And you have to be prepared that this may only be a hobby because any creative industry is always going to be risky.”

of seals by appearing on *Canada’s Next Top Model*. From his blog, he writes, “The concept for the shoot was ‘Faux, Not Fur.’ On the set, the contestants were surprised to see they each had to pose with another model, one who could easily steal the show: their partners were rescued animals from the Muskoka Wildlife Centre.” Three winners from the shoot won a trip to visit the baby harp seal nursery, courtesy of Humane Society International. Barker wanted to feature the special shoot on the show to motivate the Canadian audience and bring awareness to what was happening in their country. The wildlife shoot garnered the show its highest ratings.

## Studio NB

Inspired by Steve McCurry’s iconic image of a young Afghan girl with stunning green

eyes on the cover of *National Geographic*, Barker began photographing at the age of 12. Says Barker, “I preferred black and white and would do it for hours on end every day. I never thought it would be a career.” A stint as a professional model in the late 80s and early 90s and working with fashion photographers inspired Barker into believing that he could be a photographer for a living.

Opening his own studio in 1996 was a huge financial risk for Barker who stopped modeling and invested every penny from his past work into his photography. “I worked day and night, seven days a week from 7 a.m. to 10 o’clock at night, with my girlfriend (now wife). I took pictures and small assignments, learning the ropes and the business.” While the studio was a huge undertaking for him and his wife, he knew that he would be taken more seriously if he had a studio. “You have to use the mirage of success. Opening a studio meant to people on the outside that I must be doing

well.” Continues Barker, “I think sometimes people in the artistic community only put their artistic side forward. People who are buying your pictures and your art are from the other side of the world. You have to mix both worlds at once.”

Before officially opening his studio, Barker photographed in his New York City studio apartment. Each day he would move all the furniture and drop a backdrop over the furniture so clients would think it was a photo studio instead of an apartment. At night, he would take it all apart. Barker laughs now about the space that he used, commenting that even though he shoots now in massive studios that are “5000-square-foot places that you could march a tank in, but the reality is that I find myself piled up in the corner.” Adding, “Taking pictures is a relationship and if you are too far from your subjects, you can’t relate to them.”

Looking back at his career and looking forward, Barker feels extremely lucky to be working and living his dream as a photographer. Shares Barker, “I have a job that most people would be lucky to call a hobby. I get to travel the world and meet extraordinary people—everyone from presidents to young kids who have big issues. I’ve been able to get back to my roots and work with animals and philanthropic causes. I’m constantly inspired and it’s constantly a changing landscape for me. I couldn’t ask for more.”

View his work at [www.studionb.com](http://www.studionb.com) and his blog at [www.nigelbarker.tv/blog](http://www.nigelbarker.tv/blog).

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Image from Haiti for the Edeyo Foundation.

