

Karner, Tracy Xavia, 2009. “**Dualities of Gender and Transformation**” foreword pps. 12-20 in Shelley Calton’s Hard Knocks: Rolling with the Derby Girls. Heidelberg, Germany: Kehrer Verlag.



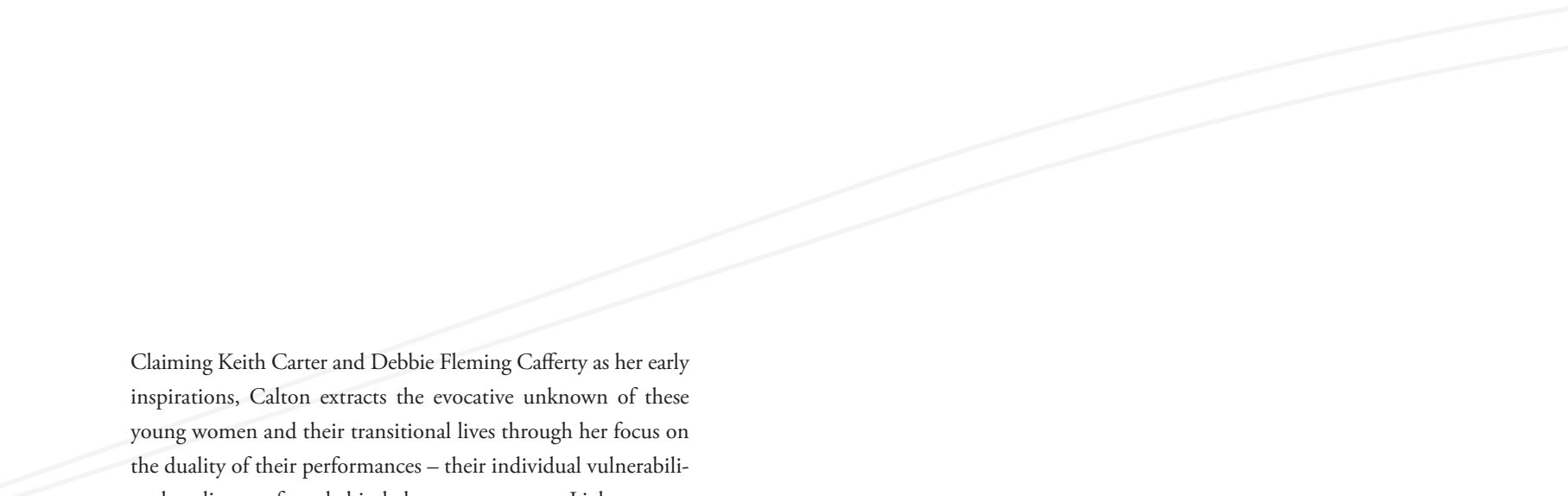
Shelley Calton's images can be seen at <http://www.shelleycalton.com/hardknocks.html>

FORE WORD


Dualities of Gender and Transformation

Shelley Calton photographs at the intersection of gender and sport. In her arresting and highly energetic series *Hard Knocks*, Calton immerses herself in the intense action of the Houston Roller Derby, following the skaters closely as they confront, disrupt and, ultimately, subvert traditional gender expectations. Female contact team sports are so uncommon that we have preconceptions of how women might act and what they might look like while engaged in competitive “play.” With tenacious documentary skill and unmistakable romantic verve, Calton captures the nascent phase of this new form of “femininity, diversity, spirit and strength,” photographing the women as they redefine both the game and themselves. Using a medium-format film camera, Calton suspends the women and the sport in a cinematic-style gaze cloaked with a nostalgic black and white, grainy *film noir* tonality that frames the action in historical context, referencing the departure of the new from the old. Thinking back to the late-night, 3:4 rectangle of the black and white television screen, today’s skaters surface from a history of sport which had previously been co-ed and achieved its highest popularity in the 1950s.

Calton, a native Houstonian and a skater in her youth, started photographing the Houston Roller Derby during their initial practice sessions in 2005. Mesmerized by the fast-paced skaters whirling around the track with raucous in-your-face sexuality, Calton found “role models” of empowered women testing their skills, honing their strengths, and competing aggressively. The sharply observed images in *Hard Knocks* appear firmly rooted in the traditions of social documentary photography, which illuminates the close affinity between the humanity of the photographer and the experiences of the subjects. This is perhaps epitomized in “Applying Lipstick, 2005”, as Calton shows how familiar female tropes like lipstick and irons, traditional symbols of previous female oppression and gender inequity, can be refashioned as props for a new kind of feminine performance. What emerges from Calton’s sensitive study is a duality of gender in transition – the female photographer and the women skaters – played out within the frame. Her stylistic noir, perfected in previous work (*Dreams of Geppetto* and *Escape*) finds full expression in this series.



Claiming Keith Carter and Debbie Fleming Cafferty as her early inspirations, Calton extracts the evocative unknown of these young women and their transitional lives through her focus on the duality of their performances – their individual vulnerability that slips out from behind alter ego costumes. Light streams down illuminating only a glimpse of the waiting performer in “Psycho Billie, 2005”, a pensive tranquility in her face as she waits to enter the rink. Calton’s admiration and appreciation for the women she photographs is evidenced in the detail and craft of each print. Immersed in the tactile process of traditional photography, Calton makes her own gelatin silver prints which are then selenium-toned for aesthetic as well as archival purposes, adding to their sense of depth and richness. There is an intrinsic symmetry in Calton’s own transformation into documentary work about women resurrecting and reconfiguring an all but forgotten sport. Her previous photographic work was in controlled and constructed environments – quite different from the action-packed arena of the roller derby.




In terms of its demands, the exertion, skill, and showmanship required, the new all-female Roller Derby has been compared to the traditionally male sports of football or wrestling.


Invented by Leo Seltzer in 1930s Chicago, roller derby was originally a co-ed sport that went through various phases of popularity. Contemporary all-female Roller Derby – the Houston Roller Derby being one example – has a new attitude of aggressive competition, spirited hijinx, sexuality, brawls, bruises and drama. Originating in 2001 in Austin, Texas, an imaginative, lively group put together their own DIY (do-it-yourself), skater-owned league (“By the skaters, for the skaters”) that has inspired more than 130 similar leagues all around the United States. Roller Derby bouts (games) consist of two twenty-minute periods where two teams of five skaters are on the track. Each team has three blockers, a pivot, and a jammer. Blockers clear the path for the jammer, who scores team points by passing the opponent blockers or the pivot. The pivot sets the pace of the “jam” (play) and blocks as well.

The bouts of the first season were held in the Arabia Shrine Temple with its luxurious crystal chandeliers and sweeping satin curtains, providing a visually striking backdrop, and an amusing contrast to the quad skates, risqué costumes, and sweaty athletes. Set within such a perfect theatrical venue, the cinematic narrative unfolds image by image providing a glimpse into this seemingly transgressive community. *The Rink 2006* sets the tenor for our viewing; we look down on the action as if in the opening scene of an old movie. The crystal chandelier glistens with lavish formality above the energetic swirl of skaters forming their initial lineup. In the cavernous space the light is uneven, and the shadows exaggerated as we are introduced to this spectacle. One expects the camera to pan closer, zooming from overhead, in a single shot bringing us intimately into the fray. Calton astutely plays on this desire, and perceptively positions viewers as voyeurs. We observe private moments in the dressing room, witness erotic warm-ups, watch as injuries are iced. We see Elle McFierce stretching, Agent Belligerent tightening her wheels, Tex Offender packing pistols, Vanna Whitetrash fixing her hair, Flame N' Rage jamming, Dolly Le Dukes lacing her skates, and Hardcora limping.

Indeed we are beguiled by the spectacle, hopelessly smitten with the possibility of joy and novelty. In sequined bustier, arms in the air, Patsy Crime (*Patsy Crime, 2006*) positively exudes delight and triumph in her new-found role. There is a carnival atmosphere as the announcers circle the track in costume. The Colonel, in his tan leisure suit with cowboy hat and boots, dances, runs, and drinks pickle juice; Cap'n Jack Sorrow in full pirate garb; Penalty Mistresses Monsta and Malice dressed in matching ruffled short skirts; even the referees in costume – it is a circus with one ring. We have peeked out from behind the curtains of gender norms to discover a femininity that manifests exuberance without apology; and we are captivated. There is nothing tame or measured in the Roller Derby. It is a high-energy sport. Loud, fast-paced music plays on track-side speakers during the game – it is a party with skaters at the center. The women in fishnet stockings and bustiers fly around the track with quads spinning. Bodies collide in competition and elation. Looks are exchanged; plays are executed, and points are won. Calton's film noir aesthetic distills but obscures the edges between life on and off the track.



We are drawn in by this murky nostalgic gaze as it illuminates new possibilities for competition and sisterhood. Flame N' Rage in lead jammer position, the Colonel with his arms outstretched, and the Penalty Mistresses Monsta and Malice sharing a knowing glance all call to mind the movie posters of the 1950s. *EXCITEMENT! SCREAMS! FEEL* the unbridled passion! *SEE* the hottest women on wheels! Women who skate symbolically rename themselves to establish their derby personas – Death by Chocolate, The Prosecutor, DisMae West, Carmen Gedit, Holla Pain Yo, Kerriza Kevorkian, Chewcifer, Flame N' Rage – and individualizes their team costume to suit their new selves. The uniforms are bold and flashy, designed for maximum movement with minimum fabric. Fishnets, torn t-shirts, boisterous sexuality, showgirl makeup, and lingerie predominate. With remarkable sensitivity, Calton captures the duality of the women and their skaters' alter egos in compelling and evocative portraits. Taken in available light and just before the women enter the track to skate in a bout, they express the liminal space between the private backstage and public frontstage of their skater performance.



The large-format Graflex camera with Polaroid type 55 film accentuates the gritty determination of an athlete in that pensive moment, revealed in seductive half light, before taking center stage. In *Agent Belligerent, 2006* we see her costumed and ready, yet somehow conveying deep vulnerability as she looks into the camera. Kerrizma Kevorkian's soulful eyes (*Kerrizma Kevorkian, 2006*) meet the camera's gaze with disarming and intense innocence. Calton's portraits are transfixing and enthralling, effectively revealing the women behind the performances.

Shelley Calton's *Hard Knocks* invites us into this energetic realm of dedicated yet playful, competitive yet supportive, retro yet progressive women. Through Calton's images, we see gender sensibilities subverted, inverted and remade into new, more inventive and fully realized identities. This work suggests possibilities for all of us.

Tracy Xavia Karner
University of Houston