



Katey Barrett: *The Art of Photography from a Cinematic Perspective*

By Mary Forney

“Katey Barrett gives us light and motion, the hot fuels of life, and wraps them in a package of inscrutable beauty, the horse. She takes us riding, faster than we’d like, as her Thoroughbreds careen around racetrack curves or launch themselves into the air, clearing mean fences. She offers quiet moments, thick with tension. And she gives us deep and lasting drama. A foal and its mother, a champion’s final hour.”

– Excerpt from Eclipse-award winning writer, Jay Hovdey’s introduction to Katey Barrett’s book, “The Light Touch.”



At the Wild Horse Sanctuary.

Katey Barrett is a beloved part of California horse racing. Her body of photographic work stands apart, uniquely identifiable by its artistic style and fearless use of non-traditional technique. Hovdey put it most accurately when he wrote, “What it comes down to is this: Katey Barrett is a painter in photographer’s drag.”

She was always an artist at heart, but it took time and a rather circuitous route for life to lead Barrett to her ultimate profession. Yet it was a route that shaped a very specific vision of the physical world and provided the ultimate form for her art.

“I was going to be in show biz,” said Barrett. “I was a music major. I read *The Fountainhead*, and at approximately the same time a road company came and did *Kiss Me Kate*, which blew me right out of the water. Then there was *Pajama Game*; and it was like God tapped on my shoulder and said, ‘Now do you see where you belong, little girl?’ I was convinced that that’s where I should be, that’s what I should be doing.”

Barrett, who was born and raised in northern Minnesota, was then faced with a decision: to go to New York or to Hollywood. “I ended up coming out here,” she said. “I drove out to California in an old Oldsmobile that was falling apart – me and Lorelei, my little yellow stuffed dog I had all the way through college!” Barrett made it to Hollywood and joined the Actor’s Studio, where pro-



Barrett at work.

fessional actors work together to develop their craft and experiment with new forms in creative theatre work.

“I was at the Actor’s Studio West in the Director’s Unit,” relates Barrett. “And while I was doing experimental stage work there I got to thinking if I had an opportunity to do film I needed to know something about a camera. So I bought a ‘cheapie’ at Sears and started working with the actors at the Studio, shooting their portraits.” Then life took her another direction – into the world of horses.

“One of my actor friends was riding horse shows and asked me to come out and take pictures,” explained Barrett. “So I was out there like ‘madam director,’ you understand, with my little cheapie camera. And I would look at things as I was setting up a scene as a director working with the camera, like a cinematographer. So everything that I was shooting was very different from what the horse show photographer was shooting.

I had not seen horse show photographs before. And basically what they’re doing is trying to get the horse to look good and the rider to look good; it doesn’t matter if there’s a pole coming out of their rear end in the background, or that the light is just pure light right on the subject. And I was out there looking at the lighting and background and angle and all kinds of different things.” It didn’t take long before other people were clamoring for Barrett to take pictures for them at the horse shows.

Photo by Steve Stidham

By the late 1960's, Barrett was working as a production assistant for a couple of writers/producers who were doing a pilot at MGM Studios. As she puts it, "In those days you had to pull teeth for a woman to get a job like that!" However, when the pilot didn't get picked up by the studio, Barrett decided to give full-time photography a shot.

"I got a better camera, I got some lenses, and I got some help from people for whom I was photographing their kids jumping their horses," Barrett said. Gradually she moved from photographing jumpers to racehorses. On the horse show circuit, she met Thoroughbred owner Ed Friendly whose daughter Brooke rode, John Sadler, Eddie and Gail Gregson and Darrell Vienna. Through her new connections, Barrett began visiting the racetrack and photographing racehorses. By the late seventies, she was shooting at Hollywood Park and Santa Anita as well as for the *Thoroughbred of California*, *Bloodhorse* and *Thoroughbred Record* magazines.

Another break came for Barrett in 1984, when the Summer Olympics were held in Los Angeles and she was commissioned to do several posters.

"There were a lot of magazines that used my photographs," she said. "*Spur Magazine*, *Texas Thoroughbred*, *Canadian Thoroughbred*. And the *L.A. Times* used

some for the articles they were putting out before the Olympics. So it was going very well."

Over the years, some of the most beautiful photographs of Santa Anita have been shot by Barrett, who has been featured on the track's wall calendars, street banners, media guides, condition books and catalogs for Champions! Gift Shop.

"These days I'm not able to get to some of the places that I could when I started out here," said Barrett, who is known for her extraordinary shots on the backstretch and hillside turf course. "I was rarely at the finish line because there were photographers doing that; why would I want to do that?" Barrett also began experimenting with different techniques. She got a 600 mm mirror lens, which produces what she likes to call "bloppies."

"There's no depth of field," she explained. "In other words, the

subject is in focus but everything in front of it and everything behind it is out of focus. And where the light is hitting, if you pay attention to the lighting, or the light is hitting and there are highlights, it turns into something like amoebas. It's really pretty." Barrett is also known for her slow shutter shots.

"That's lighting – that's how you use light," Barrett said. "I was thinking in terms of cinema. Everything that I was shooting was cinematic, only it was a still camera. It would be like if you were shooting something like that with that shutter speed and did a freeze frame.

"Maybe it's because of the way I started out," Barrett continued. "I was just flying by the seat of my pants, and shooting from the hip if you will – as opposed to going through all this education that you get about what you should do here and what you should do there. I was in the lab one time picking up a photograph that I had had printed, a slow shutter with all the streaks and light and stuff, and this other photographer, an older guy, came over and looked at it and said, 'How did you do that?' And I told him what I did, and he looked at me and he looked at the picture, and he said, 'You can't do that.' Because it was something that they didn't teach you. But it's a fabulous effect, you use your camera like you're painting, using brush on a canvas."

Barrett has felt a deep connection with horses since her early days growing

up in the north woods of Hibbing, Minnesota, where her grandfather at

one time owned a livery stable. She rode horses on a family dairy farm from the time she was about five years old and was a regular visitor to the fairgrounds in Hibbing when the trotters and pacers were running.

"I loved horses," she said. "And I would cut the lawn and take all the grass and put it in a basket on my bike and peddle off to the fairgrounds to give it to the horses." These days the spot in her heart once occupied by the trotters and pacers of Hibbing has been filled by her passion for the western wild horses and their plight.

"I was making a living photographing horses, and I figured I really needed to give something back, especially with what's going on with the environment," she said. After receiving a donation request in the mail from the Wild Horse Sanctuary, she sent them a check along with an offer to photograph the horses. They were delight-



Cobre, one of Barrett's adopted horses at the Wild Horse Sanctuary.



Barrett uses a mirror lens to produce racing shots such as this with an “amoeba” effect in the background.

ed, so Barrett made a trip to the sanctuary in Northern California and was immediately struck by the beauty and spirit of the wild horses.

The Wild Horse Sanctuary is dedicated to protecting and preserving America’s wild horses as a living national treasure in a publicly accessible and ecologically balanced environment with other wildlife for future generations. The horses come from existing wild horse populations in Nevada, Oregon, Wyoming and Montana. Some of them are true mustangs, but many have been inter-bred with domesticated horses – possibly those that got loose from the early settlers coming across the plains. Some have had to be relocated because of urban expansion. According to Barrett, there are 200 to 300 horses now living on approximately 5,000 acres.

“I’ve been going up since 1984,” said Barrett. “You can adopt a specific horse, and they name it and take pictures of it for you, and keep you updated on the horse. They’re all very healthy looking.” Over the years, Barrett has adopted a chestnut stallion named Cobre, a filly she named Minnie and Shadow Catcher, a little paint colt with blue eyes.

“In my estimation, these horses are so full of spirit and life, and there’s just something very proud about them,” she said. The same could be said about Barrett.

For more information about Katey Barrett and to view her gallery of photos, visit her website at kateybarret.com. For additional information about the wild horses, visit wildhorsesanctuary.org.

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