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Highfliers, Sitting Still

By COREY KILGANNON, MAY 2, 2015



Melissa Cacciola doesn't skateboard, but she has long marveled at the brash physicality of thrill-seekers hurtling themselves along New York City sidewalks, streaking through space and piercing the urban landscape on a board with wheels.

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[Ms. Cacciola's favored method of making portraits is the tintype](#), in which a direct positive of the subject is imprinted onto a thin sheet of metal.

This 19th-century format would hardly be suitable for the fast, raw action shots seen in skateboard magazines. Those photos rely on shutter speeds in the thousandths-of-a-second range, while [Ms. Cacciola's tintype portraits can require exposure times of about 12 seconds](#), the time it might take a good skater to do an ollie, then kick-flip and pull off a backside grind down a railing on a municipal building downtown.

But Ms. Cacciola was more interested in capturing the essence of New York City's skaters than their specific tricks. "That confidence, that spirit, I really wanted to do something with that," she said.

Hoping to capture some of that kinetic energy in a static way, she got the skaters off their boards and sat them completely still for head-shot portraits.

"I wanted to stop motion and that's what tintype does," said Ms. Cacciola, who sought out avid skaters — from sponsored pros to impassioned amateurs with day jobs like bartending and teaching — to sit in front of her large-format camera with its 19th-century brass lens.

"These guys are in constant motion, up against gravity and playing around with physics," she said. "And to have them actually stay still for 12 seconds, to capture an expression for that length of time, is significant."

She shot the skaters in a rented studio last year, inviting a few she had met and then asking them to refer their friends.

"If someone didn't show up, they'd put the word out, like, 'Who's in Brooklyn?' and someone just rolled in," recalled Ms. Cacciola, who grew up in Brooklyn, lives on Staten Island and works as an art conservator.

In the end, she collected 35 portraits for her "Flip It and Reverse It" series, which taught a lot about the skating mind-set, if not technique.

"I don't know what that feels like," to pull off a great move, she said. "But the one thing I can relate to is their spirit."

"Like them," she said, "I do my own thing and don't care what people think."