Rhinestone cowgirls: the girls getting into rodeo

Deep in the heart of Texas, young girls are bucking the trend and breaking into the traditionally macho world of rodeo.

Chaynee, five, and Camree, seven, on their farm outside Canadian, Texas Photo: Ilona Szwarc

For her third birthday Tayln requested a green horse. Sure enough, when the day arrived, her father unloaded a pony from their trailer, its coat and mane a vivid shade of lime. 'I named her Electra,' said Tayln, who rode the horse without a saddle, without a break, for three days straight. On the fourth day it rained and washed the hair paint away. 'I was upset she wasn't green,' she said, 'but I loved her anyways.' Now seven, Tayln is a champion rider. It runs in the blood – her great-great-grandfather built the first rodeo ground in her home town of Canadian, Texas, and competed into his 70s. Her father rode the bulls; her brother rides junior bulls.

Karlie, 10, of Bushland, Texas. PHOTO: Ilona Szwarc

This is the world of junior rodeo, which the photographer Ilona Szwarc first encountered during a year at school in Canadian as a teenager. She was born in Warsaw, Poland, but her father's love of travel (he was a pilot) had instilled in her a familiarity with American culture – they holidayed there almost every year. 'Poland under the communist regime was grey and gloomy,' she recalls. 'Coming here was hyper-real, colourful, incredible.'

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Rylee, 11, outside Happy, Texas. PHOTO: Ilona Szwarc

Szwarc, 28, now lives in New York. Last year, visiting some of her female Texan friends, she was surprised to discover how many of them had fully embraced rodeo. 'I'd been a few times as a teenager, but I remembered it as a male thing. Now my friends had daughters who competed in the events.' She had recently finished a project photographing American Girl dolls – a popular range of toys in the US – with their teenage owners, and so her antennae were fully primed. 'I was fascinated: the rodeo girls had such different ideas about being female, such different priorities,' she says. 'They had embraced the male archetype of the cowboy, with its hard work and discipline, and enjoyed not having to look or behave in a feminine way.'

Szwarc's friends introduced her to other rodeo parents, until she had befriended a range of girls aged six to 16. Over the summer she spent six weeks following the group from competition to competition, photographing them both ringside and on their family ranches. She queried their ideas about being female, how they imagined their future and what they thought about their appearance. Many wanted to be vets, and many trotted out Bible Belt aphorisms, but the conversations were reassuringly normal too – they were concerned with freckles and spots, and their annoying brothers, and had profound feelings for their horses. 'I love my horse because when I ride him I feel free… He gives me so many reasons to smile and laugh!'

‘It was very dramatic and emotional,’ says Szwarc, who found herself wondering how she might have turned out if she had grown up in this tiny Texan town. ‘It made me think about what it means to be an American woman, what fires these girls. The cowboy way of life is in their bones, but it’s gradually disappearing.’

*Ilona Szwarc’s American Girls is at the Foley gallery, New York, June 5-July 3 (**foleygallery.com**) For more information see **www.ilonaszwarc.com***

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