

Julia Calfee: INTIMATE EXTREMES

BY CLAIRE SYKES

When Julia Calfee clicks the shutter of her camera, she doesn't just take a picture. She also makes contact. It's not about looking as much as feeling, not depicting, but rather delving.

"Photographing gives me access to people. If you show interest in other people, they'll generally respond by opening up," says Calfee. "Whatever the situation is, there's an interaction. And that's what I have to work with. If I want the interaction to be good, if I don't want someone to turn away from me or shut down, then I have to make that person understand that I'm not capturing him or her, but rather entering into their world and showing that it has a connection to the whole world. It's an interaction between that person, me and all of humanity. The only thing I can go on is to believe in the humanness of it all, and that we all have something to exchange with each other."

Calfee and her camera have traveled the common ground of humanity from Mongolian reindeer herders and prisoners to wealthy Chinese urbanites, residents of the famed Chelsea Hotel and Malaysian garbage-heap dwellers. "What I seem to be drawn to, in spite of myself, are situations and people who are somehow living on an edge that will disappear," she says. "I'm drawn to, or even called to, places where there's a great deal of intense life that's in a state of change."

In 1997, she started going to Central Asia, where over the



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Above left: Julia Calfee Working on the Laenta Glacier, September 2009

Above: Mongolia: Juvenile Section of the Penitentiary, 2006





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Chelsea Hotel: Behind the Door, 2006

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next five years she traveled 9,000 miles of countryside, spending months at a time photographing the people and places of Mongolia, Siberia, Kazakhstan, Ulan Bator and China. “In all of these different countries, the access I’ve had hasn’t been something I planned out,” says Calfee. “Some of the best situations have come along unexpectedly. They almost seem given to me as a gift.”

While working with a nongovernmental organization in the fall of 2000, she led a horse-drawn caravan delivering medical supplies through 2,000 miles of Mongolian steppes. One rainy November day at the end of that project, she rode her horse up into the mountains. “I came upon a tipi with reindeers all around it, and this woman who was beautifully dressed. We became friends.”

Enktoya was a shaman, born during the Communist era when the male shamans began passing down their knowledge to women in order to avoid the massacre of more men. Part of a Siberian household of eight people, 29 reindeer, 35 horses and three dogs, Enktoya and her family invited Calfee to join them for their annual 21-day migration — a journey from their winter grazing grounds at Mongolia’s northernmost tip to their southern base near Lake Hovsgol. Without a compass or maps, they trekked across 9,000-foot summits in minus 30-degree weather.



Chelsea Hotel: On the Way to My Room

Over a two-year period, Calfee photographed the family and the shaman's private séances. These photos appear in her book *Spirits and Ghosts: Journeys Through Mongolia* (powerHouse Books, 2003). Czech photographer Antonin Kratochvil writes in the preface, "As photography goes, especially photojournalism, her style is very contemporary, mixing blurs and shifting focus through the objects in her images, persuading you of a message or drawing out an emotion. And yet, with all this, the images remain direct, taking aim, giving the impression you exist in what sits open in front of you."

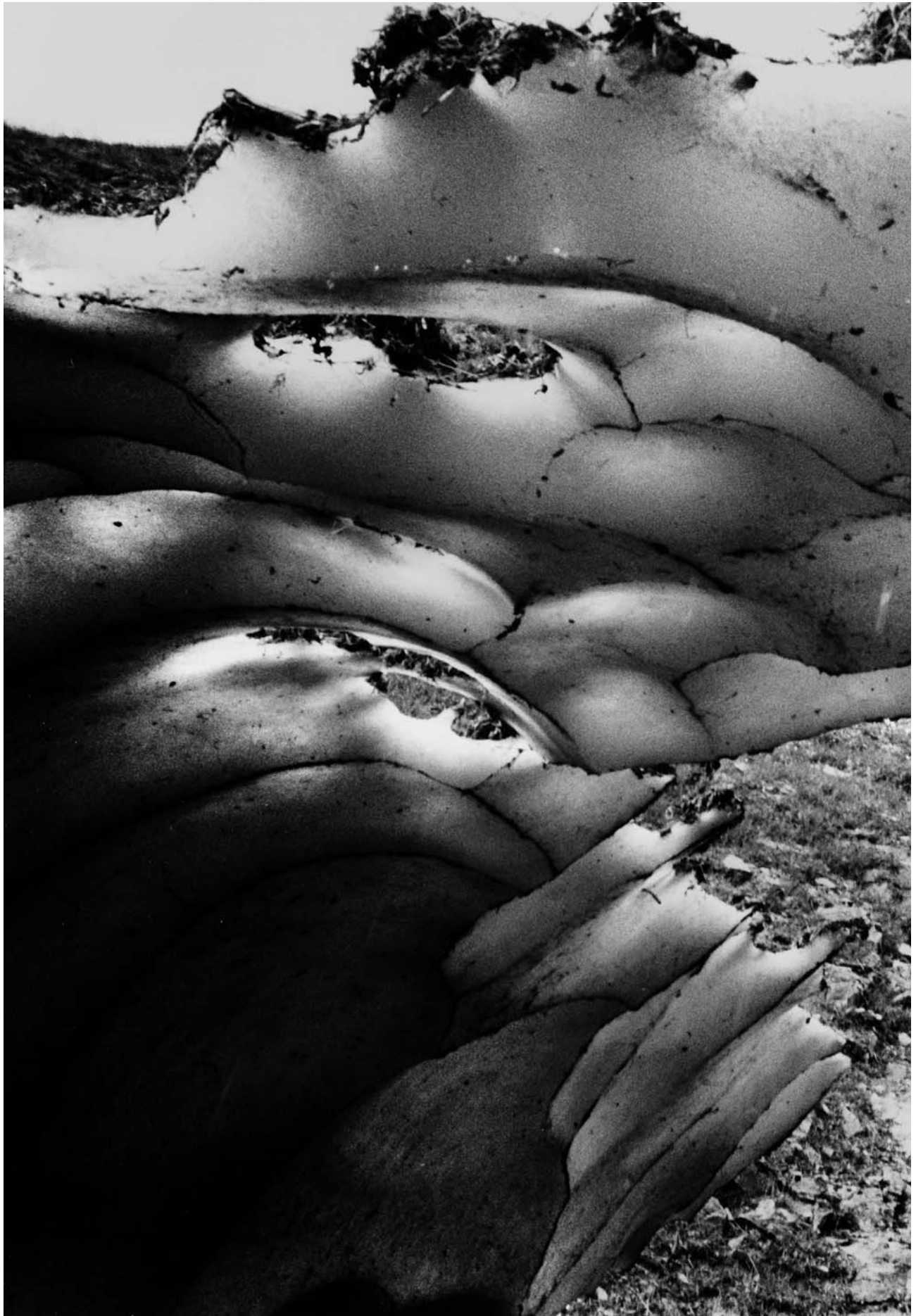
The book also includes her photos of the men and women in Mongolia's high-security prisons. "During my last years in Mongolia," says Calfee, "someone I'd known all that time had just met a woman named Margaret who was working under the protection of the military, devoting herself to improving conditions for the prisoners. She needed a photographer to go with her to document the situation. Many innocent people were unjustly held for years, and their families could visit them for only 20 minutes a year, an iron mesh curtain between them at all times."

Over the course of three years, Calfee lived in the prison compound for weeks at a time, photographing the inmates' lives. "Sometimes in these cells with 300 men accused of mur-

der, there'd be only three of us [nonprisoners] in there with them — Margaret, me and a guard. I was working with a 24mm lens, not big, so I needed to get close. Through a translator, I'd tell them, 'I need to get close enough to you so that anyone can see the anguish in your eyes — not only the pain and suffering, but also the doubt. Everyone in the world will see this. If you're willing to help me, then you can help all the prisoners in Mongolia right now who cannot have visits from their families.'" As a result of Calfee's and Margaret's work, prison conditions in Mongolia improved.

The "New China" came next for Calfee, who coined the term to describe the new wave of wealthy young people riding the crest of the latest technology and a booming real estate market. Since 2004, she has had access to their private lives, revealed in the pages of the book *Inside China* (National Geographic, 2007). In striking contrast, she also documented northwest China's ancient Silk Road, where traditions and lifestyles haven't changed in almost a thousand years.

Then there are her photographs of fashion models and celebrities, post-9/11 New York terrace gardens, and residents of the legendary Chelsea Hotel. Calfee was one of those residents from 2003 to 2008, when she wasn't traveling in Europe or Asia. Once the hub of artistic fervor and fame that housed



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Opposite: Honeycomb Glacier Above: Embryonic Glacier

the likes of Mark Twain, Frida Kahlo, Patti Smith and Jimi Hendrix, the Manhattan hotel is still partly a residence for artists — now memorialized in Calfee's book *Inside The Chelsea Hotel* (powerHouse Books, 2008).

In the book's essay, "Confessions of the Photographer," she writes, "Evoking atmospheres rather than describing situations and working in accordance with the anarchistic mood of the hotel, I avoided any formal, posed portraits and the use of tripods or artificial lighting." Calfee took more than 10,000 hand-held, black and white, high speed film photographs.

"When I'm taking pictures," she says, "I disarrange the situation as little as possible. And I stay in it for a very long time, so maybe I'll be forgotten. Maybe it's only for a second or minutes, but life will carry on as if I'm not there. Those are the moments I'm waiting for."

Calfee follows her gut while photographing. In 2008, she began walking, usually by herself, through the Vals Valley in southeast Switzerland, photographing one of its melting glaciers. She named it Honeycomb Glacier for its holes. In her essay, "Genesis," she writes, "I would lie under the igloo-like shape and watch the clouds go by until all became one vision. I heard many strange noises within the last rhythms of the melting ice, sounds like a heart beating very fast, beating des-

As you walk through the space, you can hear the recorded sounds of melting glaciers moaning and weeping.



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perately for its last oxygen. The ice continued to melt and was transformed into the shape of dolphins. I took photos of these survival attempts which were at the same time all-encompassing and pitiful.”

Calfee also recorded the sounds of the melting ice, “of this glacier disappearing forever, the ominous and unpoetic ugly sound of a washing machine in full cycle.” Over 500 recordings of ice, wind and snow join about 1,000 photographs in her newest multimedia project, “The Last Songs of the Glaciers.”

Some of these images can be found in the book *Honeycomb Glacier* (Hotel Therme, 2008), with her essay of the same title. They, and her photos from the high Alpine valleys and mountains of Switzerland, also are part of her installation, “The Chapel Which Sings Glacier Songs.” The photographs are pro-

jected on the inside and outside of a small Gothic stone chapel called the Johanniterkapelle, beside the Rhine River in the medieval city of Rheinfelden. As you walk through the space, you can hear the recorded sounds of melting glaciers moaning and weeping.

“I’m interested in the emotions of situations,” says Calfee. “Photography that simply illustrates is not something I care about. Why photograph something that can be seen in that way for real? I try to do the opposite. What I photograph is not something that can easily be seen. It’s not so easy to see emotions within a context, and that’s why I stay so long.

“When I have a camera in my hand and want to take a photograph, it doesn’t come from my eyes, but somewhere in myself. And because I don’t have to do some calculation and put it through some logical part of my brain, I have direct access to the emotional content. When I see those photographs afterwards, I say *yes*, this is what the feeling was at that time.” ▲

Claire Sykes is a freelance writer living in Portland, Oregon. Her articles on photography and other visual arts appear in Afterimage, Art on Paper, Camera Arts, Glass, Graphis, Photo District News, Photo Insider and Communication Arts, among others.