

Innovators

Barbara Crane: The Mother of Invention

Words:

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An artist such as Barbara Crane comes along once in a lifetime. That she happens to use a camera and call herself a photographer is by no means incidental — but photography alone does not begin to suggest the scope of her achievement.

In a thoroughly original and prolific 60-year career, the Chicago-based Crane has produced close to 60 distinct bodies of work exploring territories through which few photographers have ever gone before. While her finished pieces happen to be photographic, one finds in Crane's work the influence of music, dance, Asian painting and poetry. Rhythm, pacing, pattern and repetition — notions not usually associated with still photography — are central to her "crazy quilt" of an oeuvre. A dozen images only hint at the breadth of her output, and any one of her pictures is worth at least a thousand words.

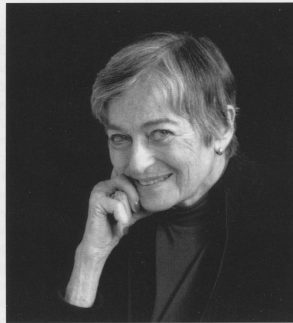
Blessed with boundless energy, the heart and soul of an artist and a hungry eye that notices everything under the sun, Crane is also a technical master of her medium. Though she has worked for the past ten years

primarily in digital color abstraction and has worked with color film, the great majority of her imagery was produced with large-format cameras in black and white. From the time she stopped "taking pictures" and began making photographic art in the 1960s, Crane has employed numerous dynamic multiple-image strategies, all well ahead of their time.

Her diverse bodies of work are related to each other more as cousins than as siblings. Some share thematic or formal concerns; others do not. While many photographers shoot a wide range of subject matter in different styles over the course of a career, very few invent new ways of seeing, and even fewer devise methods of presentation that enable others to share in their idiosyncratic visions. Crane has done both.

"I always want to transform the real world," says Crane from her Chicago studio. Satisfying this desire often leads her to grids of multi-image compositions. The creative play within that structure makes room for chance to play a role and manifests in myriad ways, including determined and purposeful (though not totally controlled) double exposures; the juxtaposition of two or more images related either by form or content (or both); the mirroring of identical strips of film, one right-side up opposite the other, upside-down; and printing entire rolls of film on one sheet of paper, to name but a few. Among the earliest examples are the sensual, multiply exposed "Textured Human Forms" (1967) and "Multiple Human Forms" (1969).

"I'm a strong believer in using what's around you," Crane says, "and I have a hard time throwing anything away." Her penchant



Barbara Crane (portrait by Abe Aranow)



Neon Series, 1969



Monkey's Paw (left), 2002



Monkey's Paw (right), 2002

Her penchant for saving creates some unusual photographic opportunities — from what her husband's cat may have dragged in, to what said cat has, literally, spit up.

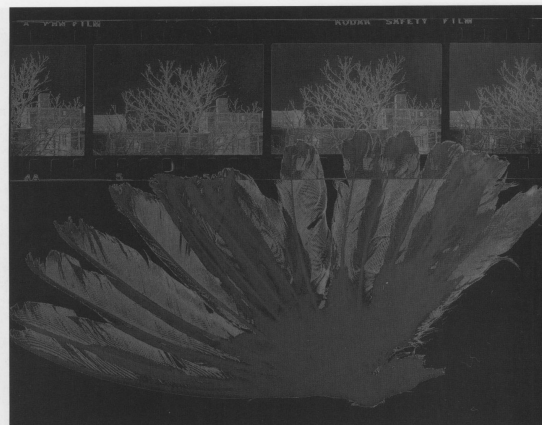
for saving creates some unusual photographic opportunities — from what her husband's cat may have dragged in, to what said cat has, literally, spit up. Refusing to let its regurgitated hairballs be tossed, she waited until they dried, then photographed them and made 24" x 20" gelatin silver prints. "Some people are repulsed when they read the title," she says with a laugh, "but it doesn't matter where source material comes from."

Crane's especially sharp eye for formal similarities, visual puns and dynamic shifts in scale have produced many beautiful and surprising images. Her arrangements on black fields include "Winged Tree" from her Combines series (1974), in which a solarized image of a bird's wing sits beneath a strip of discarded solarized treetops that Crane pulled from her studio wastebasket. The crown line of the trees and the edge line of the wing show us, as do so many of Crane's montages, that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

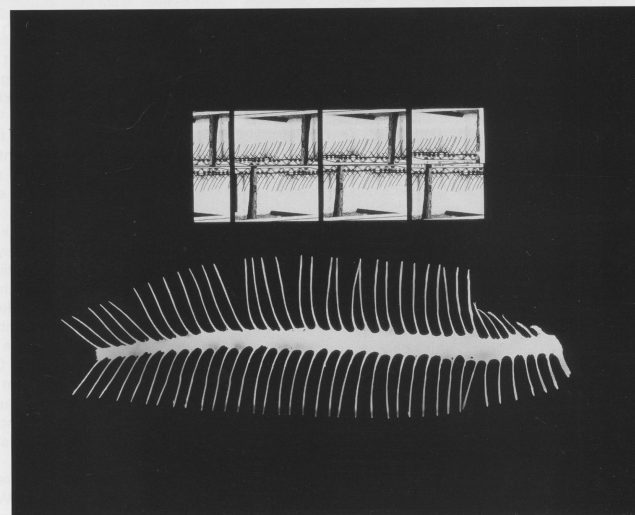
In a picture from her "Petites Choses" series (1974-75), she positions an image of a fish skeleton, with its delicately curved and pointed bones, below one of a spiked fence. It's not just the play between the fence and

skeleton that make the image so compelling; it's the perfection with which Crane executes the idea and shows us her discovery. In a three-tiered composition titled "Computer Revelation" (1974), the punning begins at the top of the frame at a tiny scale with five stacked rows of sprocket holes cut from rolls of 35mm film. It continues with the small rectangular holes in an early computer punch card, echoed by the shape of the card itself, mid-frame, and finishes at the bottom with a row of railroad track junction boxes.

In a more abstract vein is the tour de force titled "Tar Findings" (1974). On a morning walk through her neighborhood Crane happened upon a house at which shingles were being laid for a new roof. The small, squiggly shapes created by excess tar dripped onto the back stoop below caught her eye. How many of us have noticed similar phenomena, on windows or sidewalks, enjoyed the found "art" for a moment and walked on by? Crane returned to the site with a macro lens, and with an anthropologist's curiosity and archeologist's patience, she documented the drips. Challenged by focus, composition and exposure, it took two more shooting sessions



Winged Tree, from Combines Series, 1974



Petites Choses, 1974-75



Multiple Human Forms, 1969

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before she captured what was in her mind's eye. Back in the darkroom she sequenced strips of film from the final two rolls and contact printed them on one sheet of paper. The finished piece is a musical score for the eye; an elegant alphabet of abstract forms.

Crane's feminine sensibility is especially evident in her photographs of people. "Men," she says, "are either culturally trained or just don't like to show sentiment; but I look for moments of human tenderness — people touching each other, holding hands..." Cases in point include her *Beaches and Parks* series (1972-78) and "Private Views" (1980-1984), the latter shot on 4" x 5" color Polaroid film. Roses in varying stages of decay are more recent subjects close to her heart. "My husband [painter John Miller] brings me roses and I'm sentimental about them," she says. "I

save them, dry them and have recently made large photograms of them."

It's doubtful that a man could have produced the powerful series of 24 murals commissioned by Baxter Labs (1974-75). Contracted to include images of Baxter's pharmaceutical products in all but six of the 9' x 7' pieces forced Crane to invent yet another mode of multi-image presentation. In one, "Victorian Assembly" (1975), 30 images of seated Baxter employees flanking a conveyor belt repeat in five strips of 35mm film. Half the images are upside down, creating a quilt-like pattern of mirrored triangles, "fringed" on top and bottom with repeated photographs of Victorian row houses — their A-shaped roofs completing the triangular motif. Once again, Crane had found the perfect place for pictures previously discarded. The row houses were rejects from her work for the Chicago Landmark Commission, for which Crane documented the city's historically significant architecture over a seven-year period.

A survey of Crane's work must also touch on her nature studies, still lifes and diptychs (1997-2002). A series of stunning platinum-palladium prints of forest abstracts, part of a larger body of work titled "Coloma to Covert" (1987-98), were the result of yet another "happy accident." While printing an image made in the woods near her Michigan cabin, Crane was thrilled by the deep, "dense blacks and highlights bouncing all over the place." The realization that she had unintentionally double exposed the sheet of 8" x 10" film led to a series of intentional double exposures of the same subject.

A friend who knew Crane would cherish it sent her a paw of a dead monkey. Placing it on a black field, she shot two still lifes: one depicting the back of the paw, the other, the open palm. Each hair and wrinkle in the skin is rendered in razor-sharp detail with exquisite tonal range. Commenting on the power and mystery of this elegant diptych, Crane says simply, "After all, we came from them." Other subjects in the series include dead birds, bats, mice, pieces of branches with and without bark, and heart-shaped stones.

Barbara Dell Bachmann's creative journey began on the south side of the Windy City on March 19, 1928. Her family moved to Winnetka four years later, where her work with her



Chicago Beaches and Parks, 1972-78



Commuter Discourse, Chicago, 1978

"There's no 'right way' to make pictures. 'Wrong pictures' excite and challenge me; even disorientation can cause an emotional reaction."

father in his makeshift basement darkroom proved to be an important early influence. "Photography meant a lot to me early on. I grew up with it," she says. "Watching the image appear in the developer was magical, and it still is." Crane attended New Trier High School, and majored in art history at Mills College in Oakland. It was a design professor there who introduced her to György Kepes' *Language of Vision* and László Moholy-Nagy's *Vision in Motion*. After marriage, and a stint in New York during which she completed her Bachelors Degree at NYU and began a commercial portrait business, she returned to Chicago in 1952. In 1964 Crane started teaching photography at New Trier and enrolled at The Institute of Design, a graduate program of the Illinois Institute of Technology, where she studied photography under Aaron Siskind. Two years later, a single mother with three children, she was finally able to realize her commitment to photography on a full-time basis.

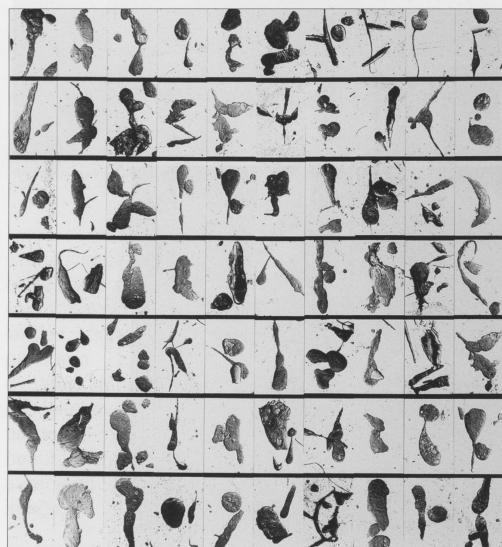
Crane purchased her first Deardorff view camera from a Chicago tollbooth attendant who'd spotted a tripod in the back seat of her car. "I love the scrutiny with such accuracy enabled by the view camera — especially the 8" x 10" format," she says. "I cried when I put mine away for the last time four years ago." Her 28-year tenure as professor of photography at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) brought her financial security, and the satisfaction of giving back.

"I loved the students and their energy; to touch a student's mind is wonderful," she says. Crane and former SAIC colleague Miller have been happily married for the past 16 years. She has an extensive exhibition history and her work resides in prominent collections throughout the world, including the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College and the Detroit Institute of Arts.

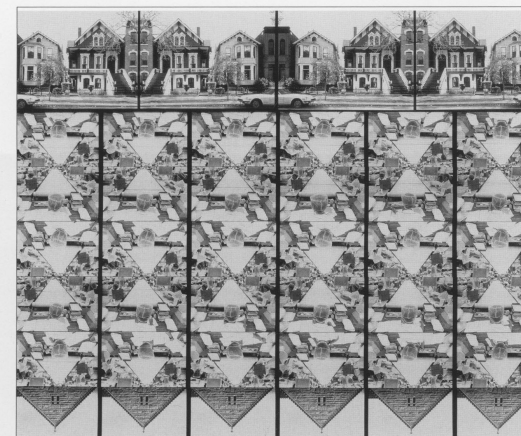
"I consider myself a purist," says Crane. "I love to chase the light at the end of the day...and love to play with focus. There's no 'right way' to make pictures. 'Wrong pictures' excite and challenge me; even disorientation can cause an emotional reaction. I've tried to touch people in some way — with humor or chaos... I guess my ultimate goal is to make one picture that says it all," she says with a laugh, "though I know it's really not possible." That's our good fortune, because at 84, Barbara Crane's search for the Holy Grail persists, and her passionate pursuit continues.

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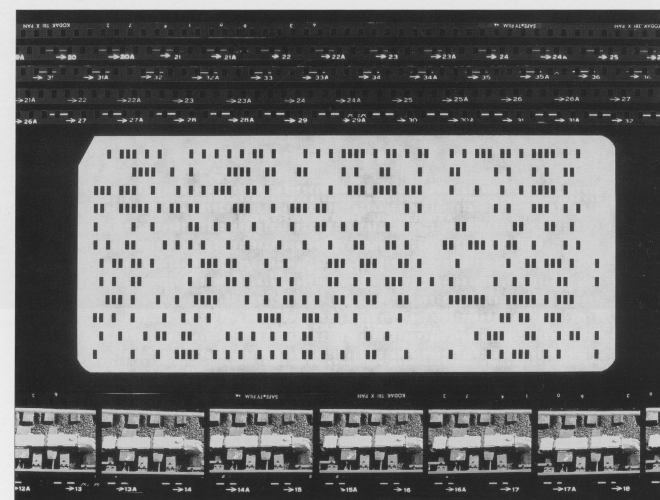
Barbara Crane is represented by the Stephen Daiter Gallery, Galerie Françoise Paviot, ThinkArt Salon and Higher Pictures Gallery. Her very unusual and interesting website is at: barbaracrane.desordre.net.



Tar Findings, 1975



Victorian Assembly, 1975



Computer Revelation, 1974



Coloma to Covert, 1987-98



Coloma to Covert, Wipe Outs, 1987-88