

SEQUENCES:



Commuters, Chicago, 1978

Barbara Crane has been creating photographic images for 30 years. Throughout most of three decades, she has produced a body of work that is exceptional in its breadth and diversity—street photography, studies of the human figure, portraits, architectural landscapes, large scale commercial murals, and sequential imagery. Yet her name is little known within the New York City photographic community. Her work is rarely seen here, even though she has had over 60 shows in other parts of the country since 1966. Crane's explorations of "art" photography began during her years as a graduate student at the Institute of Design in Illinois. Her first completed photographic project was her Master's thesis, a series of 90 studies of the nude entitled "The Search for Form in the Human Figure." Soon after graduation, she began working with a Deardorff 4x5 view camera, and realized that if she sawed the wooden slide in the camera in half she could make a number of exposures on the film. Shortly thereafter, she began to create the "sequential" photographs that, to my mind, constitute her most original and most significant body of work (and that will soon be published in a book).

These black-and-white sequential works, which Crane has produced steadily for over ten

PHOTOGRAPHIC STUDIES BY BARBARA CRANE

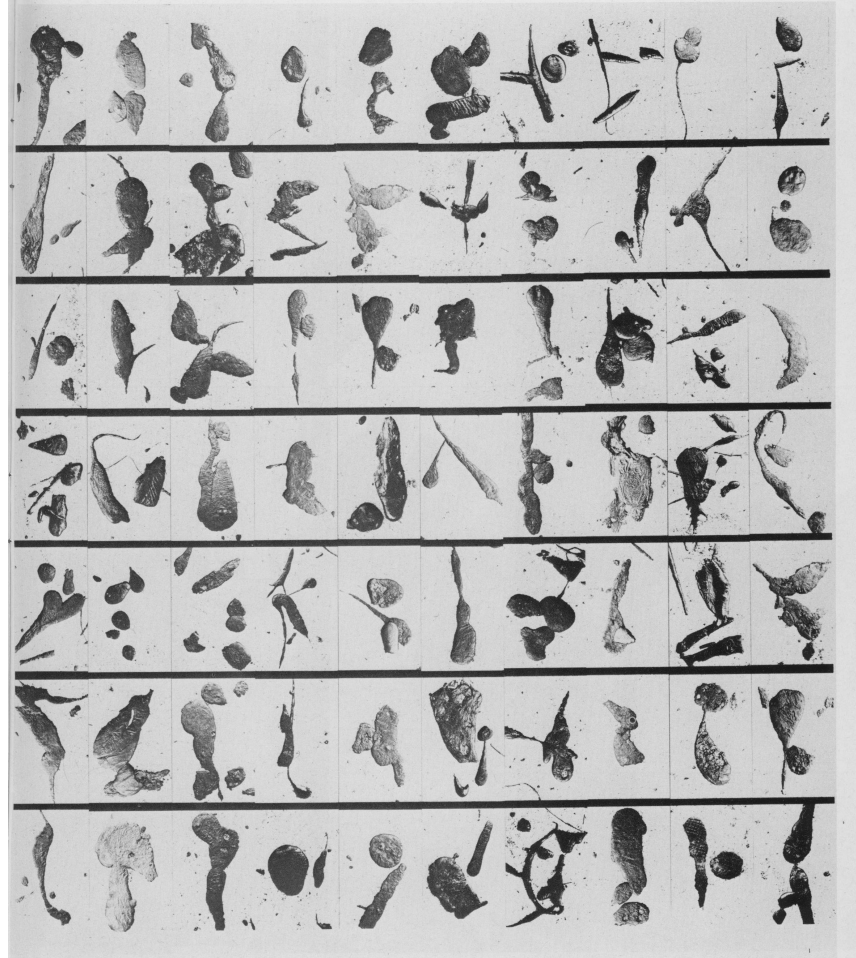


years, vary enormously in subject matter and formal design. Some of the images include the human figure, others "natural" forms such as clouds, rocks, landscapes, plants and animals, others fabrics, "found" objects and urban debris, and still others industrial and technological forms that are scattered throughout the urban environment. The formal designs range from arrangements which juxtapose 4x5 images with vertically-placed 35mm contact strips, to "horizontal" compositions comprised of two bands of such contacts floating on black or white fields, to "central" compositions in which the imagery radiates outward from a central horizon line, to images in which a large central form floats on a black or white field, to overall compositions comprised of several whole rolls of contact film that fill the rectangular field with random designs structured only by a grid-like format.

The tight rectangular structures characteristic of grids underline most of Crane's sequential works. Crane's grids function almost as metaphors: they are conceived, and operate, like abstract musical compositions (in fact, Crane has worked from "notes" taken at symphony concerts. Each grid is a rhythmic design that expresses the photographer's vision of natural → 80



Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina, 1971



Tar Findings, Chicago, 1974



Albanian Soccer Team, Chicago, 1975



Sequences cont. from p. 59

harmonies and life cycles. So to be experienced fully, each of the sequential works must be read on at least three levels: the first is that of the subject matter, the second the abstract patterns of pure formal design, and the third the inter-relationship of the two.

Structure and content interpenetrate in Crane's sequential works—the metaphoric "meaning" of an image is a function of them both. Crane chooses her format anew each time she does a sequence, and the structure of her images always depends on the subject matter and the feelings it evokes in her. "Each concept I have requires its own technique," she has said. Once she chooses a format, it sets up a tight organization that defines the scaffolding of her pictorial statement; within this organization, the rhythms, lines and forms of her subjects are variable and unpredictable.

"Tar Findings," for instance, is composed within a highly ordered gridlike structure. The image is comprised of two rolls of contact printed film, cut into seven strips and reassembled into a rectangular pattern that floats, without borders, on a larger white rectangular field. Yet the "order" of the composition is anthropomorphosized, made human, when it is contrasted with the "chaos" of variations created by the forms. Found on urban streets and seen out of context, these tar drippings become ambiguous symbols: they alternately resemble stones, broken artifacts of lost civilizations, and even biomorphic human forms that move sinuously and freely.

Crane realizes that the tightly controlled order of her sequences could easily degenerate into abstract concep-

tualism or bland formalism if she did not remain continually responsive to the external world of forms that create her working environment in Chicago. So, during the decade that she has been using sequential formats, she has simultaneously been working on projects that involve "straight" photographs taken with a hand-held press camera. She feels that these alternate projects keep her grounded in the reality that feeds her sequences by "linking her more directly to the world."

Crane enjoys juggling the insights gleaned from the convergence and inter-relationship of various projects, and more than once, her single image photographs have given her new ideas for sequential formats—and vice versa. The North Portal series, a series of "street" photographs taken in 1970-1, gave her the idea for her horizontal sequences by allowing her to perceive the flow of humanity on city streets as one ongoing "Dance of Life." Conversely, in her current, semi-abstract photographs of buildings in the Chicago area, she is seeking to find the formal arrangements she has used in her sequential images within the man-made urban environment.

Although Crane's "straight" photographs are, on the whole, less innovative than the sequences, they have played an important role in her development. She has done a number of series of "snapshots" of people round Chicago: the "North Portal" series of pedestrians passing through a public doorway, a series of photographs of people romping in Chicago parks, and a current series of commuters on their rush hour stampede to the train stations. She has also been interested in people living or vacationing

in rural areas, and has done a series on vacation lifestyles in Yellowstone National Park and on the inhabitants of the resort areas of Michigan. Her interest in architecture also runs throughout her work, from its earliest years to the present; her first major project, completed in 1950, was a detailed study of three New York city churches. In addition, she has completed numerous documentary projects and large-scale murals for commercial assignments—and these off-beat and unconventional commercial works often utilize the formal elements and relationships found in Crane's "artistic" work.

Crane's need for variety, and her interest in experimenting with different formal and technical approaches to the photographic medium, account for the almost bewildering diversity of her work—a diversity that some people will read, erroneously, as inconsistency and dilettantish superficiality. She becomes deeply involved in her projects, often obsessively so. "I work on whole bodies of work at a time; I work until I get the feeling of relief that comes when I've worked through an idea," she explains. And she never knows where each new project will ultimately lead her. Her insistence on leaving the "meanings" of her pictures open-ended and multi-faceted ("I don't believe in pictures that give an answer.") is translated as well into her working methods. "Unpredictability is an important word for me . . . I work by trial and error," she says, "All of my knowledge is empirical, and is based on the past and on hunches. Always, while I'm involved in solving a particular problem, another one comes up. Each thing leads to the next . . . For me, the process is always more exciting than the product." —Shelley Rice