

QUINTESSENTIAL PEOPLE

ELOQUENT

TENACIOUS

INSPIRATIONAL

REMARKABLE

PROMINENT

FORMIDABLE

INDOMITABLE

INTELLECTUAL

MENTOR

PHOTO: ABE ARONOW



Barbara Crane

The Empress of Images

By David Rutter

THE MERLE DEARDORFF CAMERA WAS CHICAGO'S MONSTER of the Midway long before Butkus. It was an elegant, mechanical beast, sort of a happy elephant wearing a pink tutu. It had nickel-plated metal parts and a mahogany frame at the front of an accordion bellows. The large glass window at the back peered through finely ground lenses into the reality of outside. It seldom missed seeing all there was to see.

The images the Deardorff reproduced were mostly through light directed to an 8- by 10-inch piece of photo paper. To get the behemoth contraption from one place to another required strength, balance, nerve and no sensitivity to embarrassment.

It could produce the most beautiful pictures the science and art of photography had ever imagined. It was a machine that could have been designed specifically for the Empress of Images. It has aged past usefulness now and sits in the corner, almost forlorn.

It was the only camera that Barbara Crane would ever truly love. Empresses bestow their love only rarely.

click ...

The Empress was 12. She was Barbara Bachmann then. The basement of her father's Sunset Boulevard home on the cul-de-sac in Winnetka was converted into a dark room, and there the sorcerer's apprentice was learning the craft, although dad was mostly an avid putzer with photography. Burton was an active amateur. He owned a folding box company.

But he knew all about taking and developing photos with his homemade darkroom equipment and did so with gusto. His apprentice was devout in her love for everything photographic, even "fixer," the acrid liquid of sodium thiosulfate and ammonium thiosulfate that banishes silver from the film emulsion and leaves perfectly clear images.

Before the digital camera arrived, serious photographers were alchemists in dark, odorous cubbyholes. They hid from the light as much as they sought it out.

And besides, the alchemists cloistered in deep basement hideouts were conspiratorial plotters by nature. And when the chemical permutations produced a clear image, they also produced Burton's standard response. "Abracadabra!"

click ...

Barbara Crane is pushing into her ninth decade now, a gray-topped pixie with intense green eyes that have been the main tool of her trade and passion. She is driven by a happy, delighted passion.

Is she a world-known art photographer? An arbiter of the thin line

between reality and abstraction? An artist? A teacher? A leader? A mentor and master? Revered?

The answer is yes.

Did she help invent modern academic photography as a serious art form? She would say no, but she stood at the front of that line with a hundred or so pioneers that included Ansel Adams for whom she taught workshops.

Everywhere on the planet where curators and appreciators of beauty display photographic art, her work is held in honor.

But she remains Burton Bachmann's inquisitive daughter who grew up on the cul-de-sac in Winnetka. Much the same as the New Trier High's Girls Club vice president. "In charge of magazine subscriptions and hot dogs," she recalls proudly.

She is a child of Winnetka even though the world has become her stage, her photographic laboratory. She graduated from New Trier High in

1945; her children graduated there as did her grandchildren.

She came back to Winnetka in 1964 to invent the high school's art photography department when it had languished as a bad boy's club in the basement. She made them artists — or at least opened their minds to artistry — along with hundreds who followed them to a university.

She has produced human masterpieces as well as stunning images on light sensitive paper.

Yes, she is a child of Winnetka, and she has gone very far.



Commuter Discourse, 1978, gelatin silver print by Barbara Crane.

click ...

How many photographs has Barbara Crane taken? Even she doesn't know. If you guess a million, it might be accurate. She has thousands that have been reproduced in dozens of collections. Many line her tall-ceilinged studio in Chicago's West Loop.

She's had 90 solo shows and a massive resume that only famous people can tote in their back pockets.

She has settled into abstractions as her comfortable language. "I've always thought that photography would be the next language," she says.

She shaped that language for 20 years as a professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago from which she has launched regiments of sharp-eyed graduates in all directions. She retired from teaching in 1995.

But she never retired from taking amazing images, and seems unlikely to stop now.

Her photos are at the same time comforting and unsettling. They show light and dark in patterns, intensities and ratios that defy easy focus.



Barbara Crane giving a gallery talk at the Chicago Cultural Center.

You can't quite decide what the image means, but it clearly means something you know, like a vague half-remembered dream. It's always just on the tip of your consciousness.

All are equally familiar and unknowable. You make of them what your mind can translate. As with all great art, truth is in the shadows.

Her first serious works in this canyon of images were photos of her then young children. They are abstract angles, but human and biological. They were strange and remarkable.

But she wasn't always a Picasso with a Darkroom.

Fifty years ago she was a young mom and portrait photographer who marketed her images in the front window of a meat market in Rye, N.Y. She took portraits of smiling brides and effusive Kiwanians for as long as she could stand it. "I got tired of all the smiling faces," she says.

She then came home and the offer to teach photography at New Trier was plopped at her feet, like a phone book thrown from a passing delivery truck. Someone had seen her portraits of smiling Kiwanians. She never asked for the job, nor would seek employment the rest of her life. Her life was thrust at her by a fate dedicated to purposeful career choices.

click ...

"My profession has been my friend," she says. "My family has been my friend too, but in troubled times I was able to turn to my work and get me through it. I am probably happiest with my cameras, discovering. I always work with an idea. Maybe it's a crack in the sidewalk. A mistake in a print I threw away but then pulled from the trash in the darkroom

and decided it was really cool. If I just sit in a chair, it doesn't come to me. I always try to capture what I've never seen before."

The unseen but palpable drive to Crane's life remains as strong now as ever. She is on a quest to find the perfect picture, though she knows no such thing exists. "The quest is the thing. That's why I take pictures in series; so I can go deeper into an idea."

Crane is most comfortable with large cameras that produce large images. The Deardorff is such a camera, and she is fascinated about the idea of a camera that encompasses an entire room. The clarity of large image photography can be alarming. But she sees beauty everywhere and in all sizes.

She picks up a small wooden picture frame from her workbench. Inside the frame is a barely 2-inch by 2-inch photo of a young woman cradling an infant. "My granddaughter and her newborn," Crane says softly and then smiles. "The importance of a picture isn't always about its size."

click ...

Barbara Crane takes her seat in the airliner as she has dozen dozens of times, on her way to Paris or London or New York for one of a hundred shows or seminars that feature her work. She is a star. A world figure. An empress.

The man in the adjacent seat eyes her. "You're a photographer?"

"Oh," she thinks. He knows who I am.

"Why, yes I am a photographer," she says, as she sits up just a little straighter. "How did you know?"

"You," he answers, "smell like fixer."





Wrightsville Beach, 1971, gelatin silver print by Barbara Crane.

QUINTESSENTIAL PEOPLE



Coloma to Covert Scroll, 1991-92, gelatin silver print by Barbara Crane.

Here are some words shared about Barbara Crane:

Meeting Barbara was a rare privilege — connecting with New Trier history as well as a prominent figure in the history of American photography. We sat for hours in late December and I listened as she told stories about people and places connected to the images we were considering for the exhibit as well as about her time at New Trier.

Barbara was hired to teach photography — until 1964 it had been an after school activity. As a condition of her coming to teach at the school, she insisted that the medium had to be offered in the art curriculum. The rest is history — one of the most vibrant and robust high school photography programs in the country — still dedicated to the wet darkroom though embracing the digital revolution in the medium (this year we have 13 sections of photography on both campuses). To hear that the enlargers still in use in Winnetka were used during World War II and acquired and adapted for use in our darkroom was both astounding and historically significant.

I had to contain my excitement at the prospect of her being back at New Trier, talking to students in the Brierly Gallery about an exhibit of work spanning her career, and casually offering a black and white bouquet to the next generation. I would say she is quietly indomitable.

Stephen Murphy
Art Department Chair
New Trier High School

I had the very good fortune, while in graduate studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, to be Barbara's Teaching Assistant one summer for a Polaroid Instant Imaging class. Barbara Crane is a formidable educator. Keenly attuned to her audience, her delivery is eloquent and refreshingly direct, understanding well the connections between media and message. Incorporating hands-on demonstration as illustration for either process or concept, Barbara's teaching is concise, clear and most notably — memorable. Small of stature, and large in spirit, Barbara Crane is living evidence to support the adage, "large

gifts may come in small packages." Criticism from a teacher with her remarkable qualities is a valued gift that continues to unfold as one discovers the many lenses at play in her assessments and awareness.

Mary Jo Toles
Professor of Photography, Cleveland Institute of Art



Schisms, 2001, archival pigment print by Barbara Crane.

Being blessed during one's life is the most wonderful feeling. Knowing Ms. Barbara Crane as a photography teacher during my tenure at New Trier and later in life was one of those blessed moments. My first encounter with Ms. Crane was not in person. Prior to attending New Trier, I had operated a photo lab out of my father's laundry. One day, my father gave to me a print washer and other darkroom items and he said it was from a customer of his. Years later I found out it was from Ms. Crane. Having her as a teacher and an artistic mentor has been truly one of those life-changing events. I had a chance to watch and work in her darkroom, prepare images for major shows and learn about her thought processes on many of her images. I am still amazed each time I attend a new show of hers, and see how unique and ever changing her vision is. I leave each show with renewed energy and I am still in awe.

Roth Mui
Helix Camera and former student
of Barbara Crane

Barbara Crane is a treasure. It would be difficult to find another photographer who has touched the lives of so many others at such a remarkable, aesthetically astute as well as inspirational level. Her keen eye, attention to detail, sense of exploration ... not to mention sheer tenacity ... all add up to give us the highest level of visual pleasure laced with the deepest of intellectual challenges. The privilege it has been to know and have worked with Barbara is immeasurable ... and she keeps on ticking!

Ken Burkhart
Photographer