

## Seeing Life Differently

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Barbara Crane's photographs are stuffed into every corner of her West Loop Chicago studio, filling numerous flat files and hanging salon-style across every wall. As she and I pull pictures out for review, they quickly cover several large work tables. Small 4-by-5-inch prints peek out from below middle-size images and mural-size sheets. Polaroids, Polaroid transfers, and ink jet photographs pop up between gelatin silver and platinum-palladium prints. Images showing abstract sinuous lines flowing across stark white space jump to exposures blending busy Chicago street scenes into silhouettes of nude adults. Oversized grids intermix with tiny snapshot-like portraits. Escher-like views of building facades give way to woodland details composed of blasted-out light and circumscribed focus. Each group has its own often peculiar title like *Whole Roll*, *People of the North Portal*, *Commuter Discourse*, *Visions of Enarc*, and *Schisms*. Crane clearly is a restless and exceptionally prolific artist. Over her sixty-plus years of photographing, she has created more than forty-two distinct projects so far. At age eighty, she is still as active as ever.

Looking through all this material can be overwhelming if one does not give in to it. The works touch on all of photography's standard subjects—the loves, hates, fears, and delights of humanity, the glory and ugliness of the land, the calm elegance of still life, and even the bravura of painterly abstraction. But as immediately as one latches on to any one of these subjects, it mutates or disappears. Multiple overlapping investigations constantly succumb to distractions of new ideas or double back to reengage earlier lines

of inquiry. The photographs are not beautiful in the standard sense. Most of them are minute by today's standards. They gain their bulk by being set in grids or displayed as groupings. Even narrative is hard to identify. Her depictions of people coming out a door, walking down a street, or communing in a park do not open storylines into past or future. On one level the work is reminiscent of early snapshot photographs where people played with the camera rather than staidly following Kodak's dictates of family and vacation record-keeping. It also seems to mirror the enthusiastic experiments produced in the early days of digital photography. Yet Crane's goal has never been merely to play with technology. Rather it has been to critique our subservience to photographic realism and to suggest that we have fallen into a bad habit of giving undue preference to that part of photography's magical language.

Crane's whole approach to photography stems from her fortuitous enrollment in 1964 at the Institute of Design (ID), a division of the Illinois Institute of Technology.<sup>1</sup> She had become hooked on the medium decades earlier, when, as a young girl, she had accompanied her amateur photographer father into his darkroom, seen his prints come up in the clear developer, and helped ferrotype the final prints to give them a glossy surface. In college she had learned to process film and make enlarged prints, and through the 1950s and early 1960s she had gained modest success as a standard commercial portrait photographer. Yet she had long been interested in breaking free from those commercial strictures. The ID was a perfect antidote. Founded in 1937, the school was the brainchild

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<sup>1</sup> This essay's biographical information about Crane draws on the author's October 13–14, 2007 interview with the artist supplemented by Estelle Jussim, "Imagination, Phototechnics, and Chance: The Work of Barbara Crane" in *Barbara Crane: Photographs 1948–1980* (Tucson: Center for Creative Photography, 1981). See also Abigail Foerstner's essay in this book.

of a group of Chicago businessmen who had brought a version of the German Bauhaus to the Midwest with the intent of improving the quality of American industrial and commercial designs.<sup>2</sup> Almost immediately it had become a vigorous and influential bastion for exploring photography as a tool not for recording the world but for questioning and expanding the parameters of sight.

Crane knew what she was getting into at the ID. Twenty years earlier, her design professor at Mills College had enthusiastically introduced her to the work of the ID's originating professors László Moholy-Nagy and György Kepes and their innovative books *Vision in Motion* and *Language of Vision*. When in 1948 an early marriage had taken her to New York City for four years, she had made a point of frequenting museums and galleries, attending performances of modern dance and new music, and going to the Guggenheim mansion to watch nonobjective films. While raising three young children back in Chicago in the mid-and late 1950s, she had done her best to keep up with developments in art and creative photography by attending shows at local galleries and the Art Institute of Chicago and reading periodicals like *Popular Photography Annuals*, *Aperture*, and *Contemporary Photography*.<sup>3</sup> When the youngest of her three children enrolled in a full-day school program, she looked up Aaron Siskind after discovering that he lived only three blocks away. She had been following Siskind's career ever since seeing some of his photographs of paint-peeled walls in 1949 at The Museum of Modern

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<sup>2</sup> The history of the Institute of Design's photography program and the school's relationship to the Illinois Institute of Technology is related in David Travis and Elizabeth Siegel, eds., *Taken by Design: Photographs from the Institute of Design, 1937–1971* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago in association with The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> She hired a sitter one afternoon each week so that she could go to museum and gallery exhibitions around Chicago.

Art in New York. Now she asked him to tutor her. After looking through her portraits of businessmen and children Siskind explained that he did not take on private students. He described the program he ran at ID, and convinced her to apply.<sup>4</sup>

Crane enrolled at the ID as a graduate student. But she acceded to Siskind's request that she take the school's famous Foundation Course, a requirement for incoming undergraduates, recognizing that it would help her to expand her vision and improve her technical skills. The ID graduate program culminated with thesis portfolios that explored the formal properties of a subject of the student's choice through an extended series of images.<sup>5</sup> What the photographs depicted was less important than what each image revealed about the nature of photographic vision. Joseph Jachna, who now shared the graduate teaching duties with Siskind, provided a model with his 1961 ID thesis project exploring the photographic vocabulary of water. Since Crane had to be home by 3 p.m. each afternoon to attend to her children, she decided to use them as her thesis subject. Although they were still in elementary school, her children knew the protocol. They agreed to be photographed only if she would pay them 35 cents an hour and not show their faces.<sup>6</sup> By choosing to study the human form, Crane set herself the challenge of expanding upon Charles Swedlund's recent thesis on the same subject. But she took her ideas from media other than photography. Focusing on gesture rather than description, she distilled the outlines of her models into thin lines set against stark blank whiteness,

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<sup>4</sup> Crane joined four other graduate students: Thomas Barrow, Barbara Blondeau, Thomas Porett, and Penny Smiley.

<sup>5</sup> Travis and Siegel, *Taken by Design*, 88.

<sup>6</sup> Jussim, "Imagination, Phototechnics, and Chance," 4. Crane finished the project using adult models because her children grew tired of sitting for her.

giving her photographs the character of drawings (PLATE X: CCC Exhib #1).<sup>7</sup> These highly original, elegant works, created through extensive overexposure and overdevelopment of the film, are akin to the simple graphite outlines of plants that Ellsworth Kelly was drawing during these same years (Illustration X). But Crane's photographs are far more abstract. Each body almost dissolves, becoming like a sinuous river flowing across a snowy landscape. This unnerving disconnect between what is seen and what is known would become a central theme of her career.

Abigail Foerstner explicates Crane's personality and development in her essay for this book, including how within eighteen months of graduating from ID Crane was able to secure a tenure-track position at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Crane arrived there at a propitious time. Growing public interest in photography was inducing an increasing number of museums to devote gallery space to the medium, and the classical hegemony of work celebrating the perfectly focused direct depiction of the world that dated back to Alfred Stieglitz seemed to be cracking open. The long-established photography collecting programs at places like the George Eastman House, The Museum of Modern Art, and the Art Institute of Chicago still gave preference to the medium's traditional role as an inherently documentary medium. But graduates of the ID and sympathizers with its commitment to self-consciously explore and question the nature of sight were taking advantage of the shift of photography teaching—from photojournalism to fine art—to move into academic positions across the country. At the same time, Andy Warhol and other Pop artists, as well as conceptual artists, such as Edward Ruscha,

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<sup>7</sup> Crane's ID classmates Barbara Blondeau and later William Larson would further extend this play with human form with long roll-length images of stretched bodies and splintered forms that they created between 1966 and 1970. See Travis and Siegal, *Taken by Design*, 188–189, for several examples.

Robert Smithson, and Gordon Matta-Clark, were provocatively using photography as a purely instrumental tool that rejected outright many traditional tenets of the medium, including balanced composition, controlled lighting, detail, and fine printing.<sup>8</sup> For them, the photograph as object had become virtually irrelevant.

Crane enthusiastically placed herself on the conceptual side of this documentary-conceptual divide. In one of her first postgraduation projects, she used specially made thin wooden slides in her 4-x-5-inch Deardorf view camera to photograph sections of a negative at a time. She then double exposed her negatives, often layering exposures of nude men and women with views of people coming out a doorway (PLATE X: CCC Exhib #9). Some of the photographs were comprised of as many as seven exposures. The results present random layerings of disparate information similar to what one sees in Robert Rauschenberg's combines and transfer drawings and akin to John Cage's musical celebrations of chance (Illustration X). The connection is deliberate. Crane had seen Cage concerts in New York and Chicago and felt stimulated by them. Such play with layered photographic imagery dated back to the Surrealists, of course. It also was not unique to the late 1960s. Keith Smith, a graduate student at the School of the Art Institute where Crane now taught, was just then blending photographed figures into his drawings, and on the West Coast, Robert Heinecken had taken up Edmund Teske's longstanding fascination with overlapping exposures in his own ongoing *Are You Rea* series

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<sup>8</sup> Douglas Fogel, ed., *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960-1982* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2003).

(Illustration X).<sup>9</sup> Heinecken, like Crane, was exploring sexually charged imagery. But while he was focusing almost wholly on women, Crane, actively sympathetic to the burgeoning women's rights movement, was concerned more broadly with the tenuous nature of sexual relations between men and women.<sup>10</sup> Her photographs often present male and female nudes standing facing each other so that breasts and penises are randomly and closely juxtaposed. Yet the figures do not actively acknowledge each other. The buildings and heavily clothed pedestrians bleed through their bodies, emptying them of erotic possibility.

In late 1968, under the influence of the burgeoning neon art movement, Crane visited Las Vegas specifically to photograph signs along the strip, not as ends in themselves but as tools for more double exposures that she would make back in Chicago by running the film through the camera a second time. Having recently purchased an 8-by-10-inch Elwood enlarger, but not yet owning an 8-by-10-inch view camera, she decided to fill the enlarger's full-size negative carrier with an arrangement of the smaller negatives. The outcome became the photograph *Neon Cowboy, Las Vegas, Nevada* (1969), a highly innovative mosaic made up of thirty-three shots of a neon sign of a jaunty, beckoning cowboy, each embedded with a male nude (PLATE X: CCC Exhib #35).<sup>11</sup> Two rows each presenting three narrowly cropped 4-by-5-inch images of the cowboy sign dominate the right side of the photograph. The center and left side are filled with 35mm shots of the

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<sup>9</sup> Travis and Siegal, *Taken by Design*, 184–185; Julian Cox, *Spirit into Matter: The Photographs of Edmund Teske* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2004); Robert Heinecken, *Photographer: a Thirty-five Year Retrospective* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999), 52–59.

<sup>10</sup> Crane attended the first meeting of the Chicago chapter of the National Organization for Women in 1966, and she actively searched for meetings of women's organizations.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Crane, interview by the author, October 13–14, 2007.

torso section of the neon cowboy. Such shifting of the sizes of the individual images across this photograph dramatically undermines any inclination to read the work as a single, narrative whole, as does Crane's decision to vary her cropping of the cowboy and model. Bright white neon dominates the entire photograph until one notices in the two right-hand rows how the sullen model has in some cases pulled his head out and away from his cowboy counterpart, transforming the self-confident neon sign into an empty façade. Crane then further undermined any intent to celebrate America's classic Western hero by inverting the male model's torso in the 35 mm images, transforming the model's top-lit middle into a woman's stomach.

On the heels of this success, Crane used letters and patterns from other neon signs that she shot in Chicago as a framing device for head shots of people coming out of that city's Carson Pirie Scott department store. Taking advantage of her petite size, she moved in close to people, isolating their faces as they negotiated their way out of the dark doorway into the brilliant late afternoon sunlight (PLATE X: CCC Exhib #17). The images bring to mind Harry Callahan's early 1950s close-up photographs of people walking along Chicago's streets and even Paul Strand's innovative 1915 photographs of New York City street people (Illustration X).<sup>12</sup> But the overlay of neon across each face expands the meaning of Crane's images beyond those of her predecessors by more bluntly suggesting commerce's domination over the shoppers.

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<sup>12</sup> Callahan had taught at the ID, but he had left the school before Crane's arrival there. Thus, Crane never studied with him. She also did not follow his work, and does not consider him an influence.



Such layering had become one of Crane's hallmarks by 1970. From these foundations, she started making ever more elaborate mosaics of multiple images that change size, double back on each other, and shift in shape from rectangles and squares to long scrolls. Such manipulation ostensibly aligned her with ID graduate Ray Metzger, who was in Philadelphia working with repetition and image flipping (Illustration X). Yet where Metzger was mainly interested in pattern, Crane, at least initially, refused to let go of subject, even as she went out of her way to undercut any singular reading. Her *Wrightsville Beach* series of 1971 seems on its surface to be a diary of her vacation in this North Carolina seaside resort town (PLATE X: CCC Exhib #49). But she never intended that the images build the kind of narrative one finds in a diary. The 4-by-5-inch contact shots of Crane's friends, acquaintances, townspeople, and scenes around the community filling half of each piece instead fight for dominance with strips of half-frame 35mm shots of cottages.<sup>13</sup> Each half-frame shows a different house frontally composed and shot from a set distance as if clipped from a real estate brochure. The strips of half-frames bleed up and down off the ends of each photograph, projecting a cinematic flow that incessantly pulls one's attention off the page, suggestively providing the contextual backdrop for the larger images filling the other side of each print. But the larger images, do not relate to each other. On one side of each print one's eye moves up and down, while on the other one's eye moves in and out. Structure trumps storyline.

Crane's explicit play with photography's structures paralleled the blossoming of American interest in linguistics in the early 1970s. (She was aware of those

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<sup>13</sup> Crane photographed the fronts of the houses along the beach at sunrise and their backs at sunset. Barbara Crane, interview by the author, October 13–14, 2007.

developments, although not involved with them.) Roland Barthes' explications of semiotics, recently translated from French and published in the United States, were creating a stir among American academics.<sup>14</sup> Yet while Barthes and most of his American followers were preoccupied with unveiling cultural mores and beliefs, Crane preferred to focus on posing alternatives to standard practices. Her preoccupations matched those of a variety of younger European and American photographers who similarly were self-consciously rejecting photography's denotative customs by playing with perspective and explicitly pointing out the medium's structures.<sup>15</sup> They also connected to ongoing explorations among artists working in other media—for example in Dan Graham's *Homes for America* project, Dan Flavin's plays with fluorescent light, and Eva Hess' sculptural forms—that pointed explicitly to how the literalness of the art object might actively interfere with its metaphorical role and its position as a vehicle for narrative.<sup>16</sup>

Ever restless, Crane soon began to take up ideas that she was seeing in Op Art, creating photographic mosaics comprised of repeated and doubled-over rolls of film. Widely varied in size, shape, and subject, some of these objects are only five inches high but five feet long, while others are virtually square. Some, like *Albanian Soccer Players* (1975)

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<sup>14</sup> Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968). *October* magazine would be born in 1976.

<sup>15</sup> *Photography as Art, Art as Photography* (Chalon-sur-Saône: Maison Européenne de la Photographie, 1975).

<sup>16</sup> Crane's focus on structure also put her in line with figures like Philip Glass, John Cage, and Italo Calvino. She also struck up a friendship with Paul Vanderbilt who, in organizing the Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information collection of 108,000 photographs for the Library of Congress, had become deeply interested in the way that cataloguing shapes subsequent research and how image juxtaposition shapes meaning. A photographer himself, Vanderbilt made a practice in the late 1970s and 1980s of clipping innocuous photographs from magazines and assembling them into experimental sequences simply to see how those sequences shaped one's reading of specific images.

reflect chaos (PLATE XX: CCC Exhib #32). Others, like *Petites Choses* and *Repeats*, dwell on dizzying pattern. Still other images, like *Tar Findings* (1975), a grid of seventy individual close-ups of drips of tar that she assembled two entire rolls of film, suggest the calligraphy of some unknown alphabet or language (PLATES X: CCC Exhib #36). When Crane showed Ansel Adams a 5-by-20-inch strip creating a ribbon out of noncontiguous views of a mountain ridgeline and their flipped counterparts, he was delighted that something entirely unexpected and new had been pulled from of what even he called a stale subject and effusively praised her imagination. Thereafter, he made a point of searching Crane out whenever he came to Chicago (PLATE X: CCC Exhib #76).<sup>17</sup>

All of these efforts culminated in 1975 with Crane's acceptance of a commission to produce twenty-four murals for the new corporate headquarters of Baxter-Travenol Laboratories in Deerfield, Illinois, just northwest of Chicago.<sup>18</sup> The company's president, Bill Graham, asked Crane to depict subjects around the plant, but she negotiated the freedom to blend company scenes and objects with other photographs of her own choosing. Recognizing that the murals would be placed in twelve "canteen" areas around the plant where people congregated to eat, meet, and relax, she composed most of the murals around a central large photograph that reflected travel in a blatant effort to pull viewers' thoughts away from their immediate workplace surroundings. But rather than offer grand Ansel Adams-like landscapes, these central images present prosaic snapshots of everyday life—middle-aged tourists strolling across a Yellowstone

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<sup>17</sup> Art Sinsabaugh and Henry Holmes Smith were also strong supporters of her commitment to exploring the structures of photographic sight. Adams lost interest in Crane's work when she took up more personal subjects and color. Barbara Crane, interview by the author, October 13-14, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Crane made a set of 16-by-20-inch prints that a lab blew up to 7-by-9-feet or 8-by-8-feet. The murals no longer exist.

National Park boardwalk, a parked car with “Just Married” scrawled across its back window, and a group of Navy seamen on leave (PLATE X: CCC Exhib #81). Since the murals would be viewed from a distance as well as up close, Crane surrounded or counterpointed each of these scenes with an array of repeated and flipped photographs of common sights and objects around the pharmaceutical company—syringes, tubing, a production line, and the company’s water tower emblazoned with the Baxter name. Driving one’s attention inward, the mosaics frame rather than blend fluidly with the interior images, playing ingeniously on the tendency of photographic realism to draw one into details, thereby creating a tension between image and structure. The results extended to a less sophisticated audience the same challenge she had been providing the art world—to contemplate the nature of how we see and construct meaning.

Playing with photography’s intersection of abstraction and documentation was not enough though. Even as Crane was creating her grids, mosaics, and Baxter murals, she was also exploring the structures of documentary in the form of Chicago’s urban rhythms. Starting in 1970, for two years, generally on Sundays because of the larger crowds, she photographed people walking through a set of polished brass double doors at the north entrance of Chicago’s Museum of Science and Industry. Some days, she walked in and out of the doorway with her 35mm camera photographing people’s faces at close range as they passed each other; on other occasions she set her 4-by-5-inch and 5-by-7-inch cameras next to a pillar located just far enough back from the doorway that its frame roughly matched the outside edges of her negative (PLATE X: CCC Exhib #24).<sup>19</sup> The

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<sup>19</sup> Though the images look random, Crane set specific assignments for herself. Some days she would look for pairs of people; other days she would only photograph groups that filled the doorway or people opening

resulting photographs, which she called *People of the North Portal*, are distinctly of this world. Each carries enough balance and personality to stand comfortably alone. Isolated, each photograph presents a portrait. Yet Crane was not interested, indeed has never been interested, in the singular image. Her ID training taught her to value photography's multiplicity and the expanded message that is delivered by groups of images. Brought together, the images deliver a vivid sense of place and activity—the repetitious dance of life walking out of a public doorway and into the street, given nostalgic twist through hairstyle and clothing.

Philip-Lorca diCorcia would make similar kinds of photographs in the mid-1990s, in this case depicting people walking the world's urban sidewalks (Illustration X). The cross-section of society delivered by both diCorcia's and Crane's projects is wonderfully varied. Both have a stagelike feel, engendered in Crane's photographs by the doorway backdrop with its shiny brass frame and in diCorcia's images by selective use of flash. But where diCorcia's photographs almost always show people steeped in their own preoccupations, the people crossing Crane's frame show a far greater range of emotions. Those sensitive to their surroundings notice her activity and sometimes spontaneously pose for her, transforming the images into "collaborations." Ever the democrat in a time when artists and museums were actively thinking in populist terms, she exhibited this series not at the Art Institute of Chicago but at the museum of their origin.<sup>20</sup>

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the door. To overcome the museum's qualms, she explained that she taught and wanted the photographs to show her students. Barbara Crane, interview by the author, October 13–14, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> The exhibition *People of the North Portal, Photography by Barbara Crane* was on view at the Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago, May 10–July 30, 1972.

As she finished that project, Crane started bringing her 4-by-5-inch hand-held Super Speed Graphic camera to Chicago's parks and beaches, visiting these sites especially during the summer, over weekends, and during city festivals. Here, too, she tried to make herself inconspicuous by using her diminutive size to settle in with her camera until those around her ignored her and continued their activities (PLATE X: CCC Exhib #64). The resulting photographs draw even more direct attention to the fluid boundary between public and private life. As a group, they deliver a grand sociological study of public activity—of dancing, wooing, coping with children, showing off, catching sun, and even making snapshots. The project places Crane securely in the tradition of street photography. By rejecting the notion that subject and frame have to be in perfect balance, the photographs reflect back to the examples set by William Klein and Robert Frank (Illustration X).<sup>21</sup> Yet their often low perspective, partly due to her short height, frequent focus on a single central subject, and ungainly in-camera cropping, are a far more realistic reflection of the simplistic awkwardness that defines snapshot photography than that presented by Klein or Frank.<sup>22</sup>

Crane always made a point of not sharing her ongoing work with her students at the School of the Art Institute, not wanting to unduly influence their artistic development. But she did not try to hide her activity with her bright red golf bag on wheels filled with camera equipment. She was a familiar sight around Chicago's downtown streets and

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<sup>21</sup> William Klein, *Life is good for you in New York: trance witness reveals*, (S.I.; s.n., 1956) Robert Frank, *The Americans* (New York, The Grove Press, 1958).

<sup>22</sup> The snapshot aesthetic and its history is clarified in Sarah Greenough and Diane Waggoner with Sarah Kennel and Matthew S. Witkovsky, *The Art of the American Snapshot, 1888-1978, From the Collection of Robert E. Jackson* (Washington D. C.: National Gallery of Art in association with Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

parks throughout the 1970s as she explored what had now become a multitude of overlapping projects.<sup>23</sup> To gain a little more cash and to improve her view camera technique, in 1972 she accepted an opportunity to make photographs for Chicago's Commission on Historic and Architectural Landmarks. In that work, which would continue through 1979, she scouted out the best vantage points and determined the times of day when buildings were blanketed with the cleanest light that best flattered them (Illustration X). Noticing the frequency that light and form conspired to undermine her goal of straightforward description, she soon decided to make for herself 5-by-7-inch view camera images that transform the interwoven facades of Chicago's downtown buildings into optically challenging patterns (PLATE X: CCC Exhib #87).<sup>24</sup> Consistent with her ongoing production of ever more optically complex mosaics, the images, shot with a telephoto lens that effectively flattened space, play aggressively with pure geometry. Repetitions of windows, masonry, and steel disorient and seem to invert. Other photographers, from Ernst Haas to Harry Callahan (Illustration X), have played with the faceting of building facades. But Crane's images are far more aggressive. They more viscerally reflect the often surprising, at times confusing, play of light and overlays of repeated form that characterize modern cities. Even as they celebrate Chicago's architectural heritage, they unnervingly cause one to lose one's bearings in space.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Crane got sympathetic questions from the women and golf jokes from men. Sarah Anne McNear, *Barbara Crane: Chicago Loop* (Chicago: LaSalle Bank Photography Collection, 2001) 17.

<sup>24</sup> The project actually was born out of a mural commission that Crane completed called the Chicago Epic. The LaSalle Bank, whose headquarters was the last Art Deco skyscraper built in Chicago, would acquire forty of these photographs in 1999 and make 45-by-50-inch prints of them, also assembling a book and accompanying exhibition organized in association with The Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College Chicago.

<sup>25</sup> Crane would take up this subject again in 2001, this time working in color to create a series she calls *Urban Anomalies*.

The extensive time Crane spent walking Chicago's downtown streets for her architectural work led her in 1978 to put a twist on another standard photographic subject—sidewalk crowds (PLATE X: CCC Exhib #92). Here, in a project she calls *Commuter Discourse*, she used a wide-angle lens, split-frame imagery, and an elongated panoramic format to evoke the hectic atmosphere of people racing off to catch their buses and trains.

Photographing during the key 45-minute height of Chicago's late afternoon rush hour when the sun still blazed hot across the city sidewalks, she positioned herself right in the midst of the pandemonium facing the crowds of people rushing by her. Deciding that the character of spectacle lay with bodies rather than individuals, she pointed her camera down, cutting off the heads of the people spread across the foreground of her viewfinder, stripping them of individuality. They become transformed into rococo frames for intervening space. In that space, a careful look usually reveals Crane herself in shadow form, her arms raised as she holds her camera to her face. She is the outsider, the person who has slowed down enough to reflect on the rush, separated from everyone around her, yet still self-consciously part of the scene. Rather than obscure the act of picture making, in true ID fashion she draws attention to her role, but not in the way that Lee Friedlander did in the middle and late sixties in his self-portraits (Illustration X). By not centering each image on herself, she blends democratically into each scene. The work eloquently reflects the crowded, anonymous, self-focused scurry that defines urban street life.

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In late 1979 Crane broke her intense back-and-forth preoccupation with optically driven mosaics and semi-formal encapsulations of Chicago's life when she moved to Tucson,



Arizona, to work with James Enyeart at the Center for Creative Photography on assembling a midcareer traveling exhibition and accompanying book. There she faced an entirely new kind of terrain, climate, and culture. Having just begun a relationship with Polaroid Corporation Artist Support Program in which she received film in exchange for photographs, she started working in color.<sup>26</sup> Financial assistance also came in the form of a Guggenheim Fellowship. The changes disrupted her rhythm. Being away from family and friends made her lonely. Yet the experience would translate into an artistically fertile year.

Lacking a darkroom, Crane started tying objects to the chain link fence in the backyard of her Tucson apartment and photographing them with Polaroid's 8-by-10-inch color film (PLATE X: CCC Exhib #123). The constructions became her diary. Besides documenting objects found around the neighborhood, she photographed a mop head made of rope, arrays of intimate clothing with a tee shirt announcing "Grandma to Be" (she was becoming a grandmother for the first time), and a slide tray filled with notes relating to her ongoing work with Enyeart. She also took up Polaroid's 3 ¼-by-4 ¼-inch color pack film to photograph the colorful plastic flowers decorating the crosses in the Papago Cemetery at the San Xavier de Bal Mission and the crowds at regional swap meets and fairs. She even started creating landscapes. At the swap meets and fairs, both to reflect and to assuage her loneliness, she pressed close to people, often couples, photographing them from behind at a distance of one or two feet (PLATE X: CCC Exhib #133). The saturated beauty of Polaroid hues lures one into these tiny images to note

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<sup>26</sup> Polaroid supplied Crane with a wide range of their black and white and color materials for more than ten years in exchange for prints. Over 100 of her works are now in the Polaroid Collections.

clothing patterns and take in the brilliant blue sky. Yet a potent sense of danger marks each image. Crane is clearly the interloper. The viewer cannot help but consider the nasty confrontation that would likely have ensued if any of these people had turned around and recognized that she was surreptitiously photographing them.

The Papago Cemetery images, which Crane created at sunrise and sunset, project a strong formalism. Centered on the middle of individual crosses, the images transform the grave markers into barriers that split each image into four tiny windows (PLATE X: CCC Exhib #98) and the flowers at the center of each cross into targets. The overt grid character of the images is palpable. The whole and each section are seen together and independently at the same time. Yet however much each quadrant of space calls out for investigation, the viewer is held back by each image's diminutive 2 7/8-by-3 3/4-inch size, forced to return again and again to the cross with its central flowers and to the notion of grids.

Finally, Tucson transformed Crane into a nature photographer. Frederick Sommer had decades earlier set the standard of how to define the region's desert terrain with photographs of intricate and disorienting flattened pattern. Crane now evoked that same sense of disorientation in her own desert views. But instead of compacting vast expanses of space she deepened it. Where Sommer created tapestries, Crane enveloped the viewer by placing her camera close in to the base of prickly pear cacti and mesquite trees so that foreground plants to tumble forward out of focus (Illustration X; PLATE X: CCC Exhib

#110).<sup>27</sup> She also gave a twist to the oft-photographed subject of saguaros. While others, including, most recently, Mark Klett, had long celebrated the peculiar shapes of the Sonoran Desert's saguaro cacti from comfortable distances, she photographed these majestic plants from immediately below, transforming them into huge beasts leering down with angry waving arms (Illustration X; PLATE X: CCC Exhib #119).<sup>28</sup> The images exude power and confrontational energy even in their small size, becoming little explosions of nightmarish anger.

Crane was at the height of her fame during these years. Her mid-career retrospective exhibition traveled to several venues including the Chicago Center for Contemporary Photography (now the Museum of Contemporary Photography) at Columbia College, Chicago. It was only one of a series of museum and gallery shows devoted to her work that would be presented across the country over ensuing years. The Center for Creative Photography in Tucson had arranged to take her professional archive. Polaroid was committed to supplying her with all the film she needed. She was mixing an array of public lectures and visiting professorships with her work at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where in spring 1983 she became chair of the photography program. Her work was even being celebrated, if tentatively, by postmodernist critics.<sup>29</sup> In the face of these successes, though, her photography was quickly going out of fashion. The Art Institute of Chicago had never been enthusiastic about giving shows to the staff of its art

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<sup>27</sup> Playing with focus has become popular today, reflected in the work of artists as diverse as Esteban Pastorino and Uta Barth. But where these artists challenge viewers to reconfigure their constructions into three dimensions, Crane's works use our three-dimensional world as a foil for drawing attention to space, light, and color on the edges of or beyond that easily understandable world.

<sup>28</sup> *Mark Klett, Saguaros* (Santa Fe, N.M.: Radius Books, 2007).

<sup>29</sup> Deborah Bright, "Double-Edged Constructions," *Afterimage*, 9, no. 3 (October 1981): 8–9.

school, and major museums and commercial markets were fast making classical documentary hegemonic. Leading that trend was John Szarkowski who had transformed The Museum of Modern Art into the country's leading arbiter of photographic tastes. Back in 1965, Szarkowski had sympathized with formal approaches, assembling a major exhibition and book called *The Photographer's Eye* that dissected photography into constructs of object, detail, frame, time, and viewpoint. He had decided by the late 1970s however, that photography's core was really comprised of a denotatively grounded dichotomy of mirror and window.<sup>30</sup> Adding support to his outlook was the widespread acceptance by photographers and critics of the "New Topographics" outlook that accepted commonplace subjects like breakfast tables, backyards, and street corners as compelling artistic themes (Illustration X).<sup>31</sup> In a summer 1983 essay in *Aperture*, Carol Squiers even directly castigated the ID aesthetic as undercutting photography's chances for broad acceptance as a significant art form.<sup>32</sup>

On her return from Arizona to Chicago Crane at first went back to her old quasi-documentary approach, surreptitiously photographing people engrossed in eating at outdoor festivals. But she soon opted to extend her Tucson visions, making small, flash-dominated color close-ups of people dancing, applauding, and communing at public events (PLATES X: CCC Exhib #143 and X: CCC Exhib #048 ). The images reflect their subjects awkwardly, isolating people or bits of their bodies with blasts of flash lighting

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<sup>30</sup> John Szarkowski, *The Photographers Eye* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966) and John Szarkowski, *Mirrors and Windows* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1978).

<sup>31</sup> William Jenkins, *New Topographics, Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* (Rochester, NY: International Museum of Photography, 1976). Those critics underplayed the conceptual core of some of the work in the show, most overtly seen in Bernd and Hilla Becher's patterned presentations of coal breakers.

<sup>32</sup> Carol Squiers, "Photography: Tradition and Desire," *Aperture* 91: 72–76.

against dark backgrounds. They present Crane as a self-conscious outsider, tolerated like a photojournalist, but brusquely ignored.

Museums had started to accept color photography by this date, but such gruff use of color and flash was not part of their collecting agenda. As the art photography world began to herald work dealing with appropriation and personal identity, Crane was moving in a different direction.<sup>33</sup> She started frequenting Chicago's industrial neighborhoods and marine yards where she created light-blasted close-ups of odd machines and structural details of boats in dry dock. The results mirror the strange high-contrast surrealism of early video art. They transform the details into body parts of oversized monsters (PLATE X: CCC Exhib #173). She also started collecting small, oddly shaped objects that she found around Chicago's streets, and photographing them like specimens against clean white backdrops (PLATE X: CC Exhib #169). She then printed the results as delicately rendered platinum-palladium photographs. The resulting prints carry all of the elegance of the tool photographs that Walker Evans made for *Fortune* magazine in 1955, mixed with a splash of Marcel Duchamp, and a dose of Richard Tuttle.

Crane's unsettling photographs of these years might be read as her caustic response to the election of Ronald Reagan, and that Administration's bellicose mix of supply-side economics and Cold War rhetoric, but they are not. Crane calls herself apolitical. She gained moral support from her fellow women photographers and other female artists and critics from Imogen Cunningham to Estelle Jussim, but she did not draw her artistic cues

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<sup>33</sup> The early 1980s brought the celebration of the self-portrait impersonations of Cindy Sherman, the appropriations of Richard Prince, and in 1986, Nan Goldin's photographic diary of her bohemian life.

from that group. Her goal, she asserts has always been more open-ended——simply to challenge herself and others to look harder, with more care, and with more open imagination.<sup>34</sup> “Photography is my adventure,” she says. “New work that is uncomfortable brings me a charge of excitement.”<sup>35</sup> She argues that art spurs discrimination. It makes people think in new ways. In upsetting expectation, it breaks habit. In the 1960s and 1970s, Crane had used form, pattern, and repetition to make people question the role of photographs in shaping their understanding of and relationship to the world. Now she was exploring how flash, close-up, and color could build strange new worlds. It was this vein that she tapped when she started assembling a series called *Visions of Enarc* (Crane spelled backwards) where she moved in close to flowers, berries, and leaves and blasted them with her flash, transforming them into strange alien creatures grossly out of context with their surroundings (Plate X: CCC Exhib #194), and a related series called *Wipe Outs*, where she transformed people into unnervingly washed out, oversized, balloon-like bulbs (Plate X: CCC Exhib #220).

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In 1987, just as her work was spinning ever more intensely into bizarre washed-out patternings, Crane bought seven and a half acres of land containing a modest cabin in the woods on the southeastern shore of Lake Michigan. The purchase became her relief valve and the foundation for gentler photographic investigations that continue today. Many of these recent projects take the title *From Coloma to Covert* in recognition of the two small towns between which her property lies. But gentleness does not mean straightforward

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<sup>34</sup> Barbara Crane, interview by the author, October 13–14, 2007.

<sup>35</sup> Barbara Crane, discussion with the author, August 5, 2008.

description. In her first project at that woodland site, Crane used shallow depth of field to mirror the sensation of bushwhacking through second and third growth forest near and around her property (PLATE X: CCC Exhib #256). The images work deliberately against the grain of landscape photographic trends.<sup>36</sup> Even those photographers preoccupied with extra-photographic concepts, like Mark Klett, who had recently published with his associates a project comparing nineteenth-century federal survey photographs of the American West to contemporary views of these same locales, and Peter Goin, who was overlaying place names and words into his images of nuclear sites, held full focus and the straightforward view sacrosanct.<sup>37</sup> By playing with shallow focus, close-up, and acute juxtaposition, Crane was replicating the feel of walking, of looking through tree branches and around trunks, and of taking notice of downed logs and other details of the forest floor.<sup>38</sup> At times she added a sense of fleeting time to the mix by using a small hand-held flash to draw attention to specific trees or branch details. On other occasions she pushed foreground detail out of focus and leaving the background in focus, transforming the woodlands into a surreal world where foreground recedes and the background comes forward (PLATE X: CCC Exhib #251). Remembering from her New York City years her love of Chinese scrolls, she started creating scrolls of her own by juxtaposing two or more at times noncontiguous 8-by-10-inch negatives (PLATE X: CCC Exhib #231). The

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<sup>36</sup> Richard Misrach was gaining acclaim for his “Desert Cantos.” After building an audience with a successful series of books of Robert Adams photographs, Michael Hoffman was preparing what would become a well received retrospective of that photographer’s work. Richard Misrach, *Desert Cantos* (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1987). Robert Adams, *To Make It Home: Photographs of the American West* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1989).

<sup>37</sup> Mark Klett, *Second View, the Rephotographic Survey* (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1984); Peter Goin, *Nuclear Landscapes* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

<sup>38</sup> In some ways, Crane was reinvestigating the outlook promulgated in the late nineteenth century by Peter Henry Emerson, who, recognizing that humans cannot focus on everything at the same time, encouraged photographers to make images with only one plane in focus. Peter Henry Emerson, “Naturalistic Photography, 1889, an Excerpt” in Vicki Goldberg, ed. *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981) 190–196.

results subvert logical space, yet project a poetic beauty that is further enhanced by Crane's choice to print some in the soft dark hues of platinum-palladium and others as color transfers onto rag paper. The images recall the pared-down vocabulary of haiku poetry. Crane's world may be alien, but it is remarkably inviting.

As Crane has grown comfortable in the woods between the towns of Coloma and Covert, she has started collecting bits of bark, sticks, stones, and even a paper wasp nest to bring back to her studio to photograph alone and in groups. Generally set against black backgrounds, the objects glow with dimension and texture. Isolated and given the status of art—just like the paper wasp nest that Alfred Stieglitz set in the middle of his New York City gallery 291 one hundred years ago—they invite close examination for their formal beauty and individuality. Assembled into sequences and grids, they evoke scientific cataloguing (PLATE X: CCC Exhib #265-272). The act of combining them undermines any impulse to celebrate them as individual forms. Over time, grids of individual photographs of flowers, stones, dead mice, mushrooms, and sticks have given way to groupings of dead animals and even cat hairballs. Recently, they have come to incorporate glass balls and keyholes (PLATE X: CCC Exhib #48).

At the same time that grids have regained Crane's attention, she has insistently continued to challenge reliance on clean focus. At the Lake Michigan beach near her cabin, she has evoked the feel of looking through a slit in a color series called *Sand Findings*. One's eye is drawn to narrow points of focus (often on bits of sticks or stones) as grossly out-of-focus forms loom up out of both foreground and background (PLATE X: CCC Exhib



#289). Not having enough information to judge scale, one's imagination enlarges the out-of-focus forms far beyond their actual size. These investigations have led to other disorienting experiments like forest views that are totally out of focus, where dappled woodland light is transformed into strange celestial visions; side-by-side exposures of disparate details; and overlapped exposures of images so out of focus that although one can see their woodland sources, one reads them as abstractions (PLATE X: CCC Exhibit #337). Printed as inkjet prints, where dyes sit on the surface of the paper, the illusion of physical depth is obscured.

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When Lee Friedlander, one of John Szarkowski's favorite photographers, opened an exhibition of his photographs of Frederick Olmsted's parks at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in early 2008, he explained his approach to photography: "The subject itself is perfect, and no matter how well you manage as a photographer, you will only ever give a hint as to how good the real thing is (Illustration X). We photographers don't really make anything: we peck at the world and try to find something curious or wild or beautiful that might fit into what the medium of photography can hold."<sup>39</sup> The exhibition's curator Jeff Rosenheim put it more directly, suggesting that Friedlander is merely "interested in the pleasure of seeing."<sup>40</sup> Barbara Crane, on the other hand, considers the world a tool, a launching point for explorations into the structures and limitations of photographic sight. To her, photography has always been and always will be more a means for challenging the ways we see than for describing this world ever

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<sup>39</sup> Lee Friedlander quoted in Randy Kennedy, "Compositions of Landscapes That Come Naturally," *The New York Times*, January 3, 2008.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

more cogently. She is a linguist at heart, in love with photographs as signs rather than signifiers. She is an artist who has spent her career exploring how we might escape the narrative constructs that so dominate photography, not to extol form for its own sake, but to suggest new ways of communicating the sensation of being in the world. Her photographs break down the walls of straight description to stretch the boundaries of photography's facility for comparison, categorization, and indexing. Rather than mirror the world, they create a parallel world that is only tangentially connected, where one is asked simply to let go and enjoy the ride.