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A Day of Introspection for Renowned Chicago Photographer, Barbara Crane

By Charles D. Hershow

First: a series of snapshots that represent just a few of the topics upon which 90-year-old Chicago photographer, Barbara Crane, expounded one sunny winter afternoon in late 2018. In talking with Barbara, I soon discovered that it was a futile and dishonest task to reduce her to any one quotation.

“What matters is that I’m building bodies of work, and I am obsessive.”

“This [print] isn’t bad actually and I take my picture back from the waste basket. Then I try to do things like that on purpose.”

“My passion for photography came from my father when I was twelve years old. We would use the furnace room turned makeshift darkroom....”

“I liked and still like the silence of the dark room with very little light. It is mysterious.... I can’t get stressed out about anything because I am doing my thing. I still have a dark room.”

“With my work, I break conventions all the time.”

“It’s on my mind all the time, making new art.... I’m always thinking, always seeing, aware of the quality of light outside.”

“There’s an art to both of them [life and art].”

“There’s a thing where I’m never satisfied with what I make” was another memorable line. Barbara Crane was never satisfied with her work because she strived for “perfection.” And, in the course of our conversation, I learned that she, too, was never satisfied with how to portray herself: her intentions, her hopes, her doubts, her questions.

Like her work, she encompassed countless points of view and shades of light. She was defined -- if it is, in fact, possible and useful to define her -- by many equally powerful and distinctive identities: artist, teacher, woman, wife, mother, grandmother, and great grandmother. Yet, the way she lived, evidenced in our four hour conversation, defied classification. Her mind perpetually sought new perspectives on familiar subjects.

What I learned from talking to Barbara: there were no limits to her dynamism. The complexity of her character was illustrated by a tour de force interrogation of the English language for the sake of crafting an honest picture of herself.

What will surely be immortalized about Barbara beyond her personality and products of creative energy was her process -- apparent in the way she talked. In our conversation, Barbara was a compulsive editor of diction and syntax. This practice of rigorous revision of words extended to her work as well, exemplified by this collection of prints. Barbara commented on her current book: "I no longer look at my notebooks [documenting times and places to which to return] because I'm involved with editing my work, to cull out incomplete ideas. I don't need any more pictures to store."

She was collaborative in developing her thoughts during our interview and, one can well imagine, how that quality has served her in working with assistants on different photography projects. She even used to include her family in her artistic process: "I would lay my prints out on the living room floor and my kids would choose the ones they liked. I figured they had uncluttered minds about art."

She commented on the challenges she faced: "It was very difficult to be taken seriously in what was once a predominantly all-male field." She described the challenge of balancing life with work: "I don't want family to feel neglected." She refocused and synthesized with a new declaration: "I've been fortunate to have both: family and my work." She nodded in self approval.

Barbara continued speaking on the theme of challenges: "Things happen in one's life that interfere with thinking about and producing the work." One wouldn't know it, though, based on her prolific output of prints and tenacious, infectious personality. "It's been a juggling act," clarified Crane. "[However,] it's been a wonderful lifetime with my camera," she reflected in the overpowering sunlight of her living room.

She explained her interest in the kind of prints exclusively featured in this book: "grids," or "a whole roll of film printed on one sheet of 8x10` paper, a 'proof sheet.':" "I've always done 'grids' from the very beginning.... I liked the look of contact sheets -- proof sheets -- and that inspired me to make 'grids.'" She related her experience of finding "grids" for this book: "I had a

wealth of materials of my own. I also hunted and hunted through work I did early in my career that were 'grids' like 'the Neon Cowboy' -- the once iconic neon sign in Las Vegas. Earlier than that were pictures in a bar on Belmont avenue called 'the Quiet Knight' -- a Chicago nightclub."

She went on to describe more "grids" that appear in the pages of her book. Barbara no longer snapped new photographs but modified and arranged prints gathered from over half a century of producing images. This was the challenge she chose for herself at this point in her life: recovering, repurposing, and revising images from the past. What was constant was her use of "grids."

"One thing we haven't addressed yet is how great grandchildren are delightful." She paused. Her face lit up: "Or a wonderful thing might be better." We proceeded to discuss the merits and drawbacks of using this phrasing and settled on "delightful." There's nothing settling about Barbara who is volcanic, penetrating her environment and upsetting the proverbial applecart.

Her mind churned on: "I would question that I earned high acclaim.... There is a gallery in New York... one in Paris... one in Prague... one in Chicago." And she resolutely concluded: "But I've exhibited work in shows all over the world!" She looked at me. I wasn't quite sure what she wanted. I realized she wasn't looking at *me*. I was the backdrop of an emerging thought that she would discover and reform in the time ahead.

Crane's eyes searched the room. "You see, I'm always looking and evaluating the quality of light on the subject matter. Form and content." Her eyes fixed on me. "That could be the ending." Barbara suggested many possible endings to this piece in the course of our conversation, though ending her story seemed contrived and forced for this tireless warrior poet.

"I'm interested in my images and ideas living on beyond my time." She spoke with typical Barbara matter of factness though possessing irresistibly endearing charm. There was nothing typical about Barbara Crane, however, save perhaps her love of eating avocados.

Her legacy lies, in part, with her desire for immortality: "I wish my work in my studio and my studio could live on forever, with me and my doggie in it. If it were up to me, I'd live 200 years or more," stated Barbara Crane.

The elation of capturing a new kind of beauty was part of her motivation for making art as well and, like her quest for enduring influence, will be part of her legacy: "[Making art] is not just for self esteem" -- amending a previous statement -- "it offers me solace when things are rough. It is my profession, yes, but I also want to discover new visual experiences." She elaborated on her ambition to experience the visual: "I create art to make visual discoveries that lead to more discoveries."

A former student recently contacted Crane. "You were very special as a guide, mentor, teacher, and example to me of what a great artist and teacher could be," he wrote. Barbara was an artist and a teacher. She assumed many influential and, at times, competing roles throughout her life. She loved and will continue to love photography with a ferocity few can match: "I have no intention of giving it up, ever," she said.