Portraits that Speak

Margo Kren: A Gathering in the Arts: Midwesterners Photographed by George M. Kren, newprairiepress.org/ebooks/16

The cover photo pulls me right into the book as my eyes follow a man walking up a wintry slope somewhere in the Flint Hills - white limestones shimmer between patches of prairie grasses - on toward the ridge beyond which discoveries beckon. These are revealed as portraits that speak, or, better said in German (George Kren’s and my mother tongue) “sprechende Bilder.”

I see the genius of George M. Kren’s photographs from the last three decades of the 20th century, of women and men passionately committed to the arts, all contributing to the quality of life in Kansas, as local artists, visiting artists, art historians, art educators, gallerists, museum directors, arts organizers, patrons. Of the 120 or so creative personalities we meet in these pages I count 56 women, many of them in leadership roles. A historian by profession and self-taught photographer George Kren (1926-2000) captured his colleagues and friends-in-the-arts with his Hasselblad 503cw camera, not in pre-planned portrait sessions, but in the midst of spirited personal encounters. Kren’s images reveal something of each person’s character, of their essence, their energy. Authenticity and liveliness radiate from their faces, be it a contemplative inward look or infectious laughter, or a mouth poised in mid-speech. To me the most extraordinary looking face – and perhaps because of his extra-ordinary story - is that of the Russian Aleksandr Glickman, a former curator at the Hermitage Museums in St. Petersburg during the Soviet era. But then no one’s story is ordinary.

Margo Kren’s biographical notes and accounts of the context in which each of the Krens’ friends-in-the-arts was photographed lend significant historical value to this book. By studying George Kren’s tools, his camera equipment, photographer John Blumb adds valuable insight into Kren’s mastery of his craft. This book is a critical document of the rich history of the visual arts in Kansas, as well as a beautiful tribute to and memorial of her husband’s legacy. How I wish it had been available when I taught for the first time a course on the history of Kansas art and architecture at Washburn University.

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