GETTING TO KNOW GEORGE KREN, PHOTOGRAPHER
Getting to Know George Kren, Photographer

When I was invited to work on the retrospective photography exhibition *Makers Framed*, it was impossible for me to consult with the photographer. I had met him once, but just briefly. Between then and the time this project came along, unfortunately, he had passed away. I knew that he had been active in photography and had made portraits of artists in Kansas and the Kansas City area. As I became familiar with his working methods, I got to know him well.

The photographer was George Kren. At the beginning of the project, I had the chance to see his camera equipment. He had one case to hold a camera and lenses, and a separate case to carry accessories and film backs. The camera was a Hasselblad 503cw, which sent a clear signal to me that he was dedicated and wanted the best results possible. Hasselblads have been the chosen camera of many professionals, and they were used during the famous Apollo 11 moonwalk of 1969. It is a versatile system of interchangeable film backs and excellent Zeiss lenses, which mount on a body containing the shutter and reflex viewing mirror. George had an assortment of lenses, which allowed him to visualize and compose portraits from tight headshots to wide full-length environmental portraits.
The Hasselblad camera uses medium-format film, producing a negative or transparency about four times the size of a 35mm frame, with a distinctive square format. Editors could easily crop a Hasselblad photo to create a page or cover, yet run other photos in their uncropped square format. For this exhibition, because George couldn't direct me to select cropping as he would, I was very careful to standardize my procedure so that I could print the entire image. Without input from the photographer, I would not presume to make such editing decisions.

A photographer’s darkroom becomes a personalized place over time, as the owner selects equipment and adds accessories. Souvenirs, notes, and clutter build up over time, like any office or workshop. Like a painter's studio, darkrooms provide a lot of information about their owners. When I got to see George's darkroom, I learned a lot more about him.

I was impressed to see these familiar darkroom furnishings: a Bessler enlarger with built-in color filtration, a color-negative analyzer, an adjustable-blade easel, a rotary processor, color-corrected light table, magnifiers, and a spacious sink. I couldn’t help thinking, “Wow, I have used all of these tools of similar ones in the past. When I worked at a camera store, I even sold a lot of this equipment!” I noticed that George had a list of color-correction notes printed out and posted near his enlarger, just like most people who need to navigate the confusing system of light filtration!
The original prints produced by George Kren were in the contemporary color processes of the time. This series spanned the time when he printed his color negatives on Kodak C paper and color transparencies on Cibachrome paper. He also worked in B&W, printing his negatives on silver gelatin paper. There are just a few B&W images in this series. I think color was the best choice for this documentary project, because it recorded the current styles and tastes. Not only do the styles of clothing change over time, but the popular colors of clothes, hair, and homes change. Looking back over three decades, the clothing and colors are important to the character of the portrait subjects, and color film was the best way to document it.

6036
Ektachrome 200 Professional —color transparency

For exhibition prints, I scanned the original film images and printed them on a paper that would be consistent between the various films, while maintaining the integrity of the photographer's vision. Scanning with a Nikon Super Coolscan 2000 transparency scanner guaranteed high detail and sharply focused scans. Then the photos were cropped so that no detail was lost on the edges of the images. Brightness, color and contrast were adjusted, and they were sharpened last, before saving as TIFF files. These were used to produce inkjet prints on Hahnemuhle Smooth Fine Art paper. The image size is 16 x 16 inches. For this web book, the same files have been resized and converted to the JPG format.

6049
Try-X Pan Professional —black and white negative
That reminds me of one more aspect of the project that I enjoyed, -- the films. Manufacturers identify their films by exposing type along the edge, outside the image area. This information took the form of a numerical code, which helps to identify the type of film after processing. As I worked with the selection of color negatives, transparencies, and B&W negatives, I enjoyed seeing these emulsion numbers. There is a steady progression of various emulsions, as manufacturers competed by tweaking and improving their films. They reminded me of all the changes that Kodak, Fuji, and Agfa have made over time, and the many choices of films that a photographer had. It was like seeing a bunch of old friends. Again, I had either used many of those films, or sold them in the camera store! I even looked up a reference chart online so I could remind myself what the name, ISO speed, and style of the films were. There was even an Agfa B&W film that I had never heard of. I could see that George had made the most of the materials available and had chosen to optimize his results by selecting the best films for the subject and lighting at hand.

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It was a pleasure to get to know George Kren through the legacy of his photographs, and I’m certain that we would have gotten along very well. I hope that the viewers of this web book will feel the same appreciation for the photographs and the man who created them.
Jon Blumb,
May 12, 2017