



Barton, Crawford (1943-1993)

by Barry Harrison

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Two photographs by
Crawford Barton.
Courtesy The GLBT
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Crawford Barton was one of the thousands of gay and lesbian refugees who arrived in the city of San Francisco in the 1960s and 1970s. In his role as photographer and chronicler, he captured the essence of that extraordinary place and time, especially the blossoming of an openly gay culture in one of America's most fascinating cities. His work blurs the lines between fine art and documentary, between the explicitly sexual and the quietly intimate, and between the personal and the political.

Born on June 2, 1943, Barton was raised in a fundamentalist community in rural Georgia. He was a shy, introspective boy. His artistic interests, fear of sports, and "sissy" ways alienated him from his father, a struggling farmer. He escaped family tensions by creating a world of his own imagination, which eventually led him to immerse himself in art. Upon graduating from high school, he received a small art scholarship that enabled him to attend the University of Georgia.

At the university, Barton fell in love with a man for the first time. Unfortunately, his feelings were not reciprocated. After a single semester, the unhappy young man dropped out of school and returned to the farm.

A couple of years later, at age 21, Barton enrolled in art school in Atlanta. He made new friends and found outlets for his pent-up sexual energy in that city's gay bars and clubs. During this time in Atlanta, Barton received a used 35mm camera as a gift and learned basic darkroom techniques. He had found his true calling in life--photography.

Barton moved to California in the late 1960s to pursue his art and life as an openly gay man. By the early 1970s he was established as a leading photographer of what has been called the "golden age of gay awakening" in San Francisco. He was as much a participant as a chronicler of this extraordinary time and place.

Many of his images documenting long-haired freaks dancing in the street, love-ins in the park, dykes on bikes, cross-dressers in the Castro, and leather-clad men prowling at night have become classics. He photographed some of the first Gay Pride Parades and protests. He chronicled the campaigns of Harvey Milk. He photographed celebrities such as poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti and actors Sal Mineo and Paul Winfield.

His circle of friends and acquaintances inspired his most intimate erotic photography. Chief among these subjects was his lover, Larry Lara. Barton described Lara as the "perfect specimen, as crazy and wonderful and spontaneous and free as Kerouac, so I'm never bored and never tired of looking at him." Considered as a single body of work, Barton's photographs of Lara--including images of him dancing in the hallway of their flat on Dorland Street, a bearded hippie in the door of a cabin in Marin, a sensual nude in the hills of Land's End--suggest the fullness, richness, and complexity of the man he loved most.

In 1974, the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum featured Barton's prints in a show entitled "New Photography,

San Francisco and the Bay Area." His bold, unapologetic work was praised by the *New York Times* reviewer. Other critics, however, labeled it "shocking" and "vulgar," the epithets suggesting that perhaps Barton's frank homoeroticism and unabashed celebration of the gay community offended the sensibilities of the critics.

In addition to his fine art photography, Barton worked on assignment for the *Advocate* and the *Bay Area Reporter*, as well as the *San Francisco Examiner*, *Newsday*, and the *Los Angeles Times*.

A book of Barton's work, *Beautiful Men*, featuring homoerotic images, was published in 1976. His photographs were also used to illustrate a collection of reminiscences by Malcolm Boyd, *Look Back in Joy* (1990). Following the photographer's death, *Crawford Barton, Days of Hope* was published by Editions Aubrey Walter.

Containing more than 60 black-and-white photographs, *Days of Hope* distills the essence of Barton's contribution as a photographer. In these beautiful images, taken in that magical but all too brief period demarcated on one end of the timeline by Stonewall and the beginnings of gay liberation and, on the other, by the assassination of Harvey Milk and the advent of AIDS, Barton presents San Francisco in the 1970s as a time of hope and possibility, of great fun and hard-won but still imperiled freedom. The poignancy of the photographs come from the knowledge that so many of the people preserved in them would soon be dead, casualties of the political turmoil and the AIDS pandemic that would characterize the late 1970s and the 1980s.

Speaking of his goals as a photographer, Barton commented, "I tried to serve as a chronicler, as a watcher of beautiful people . . . to feed back an image of a positive, likable lifestyle--to offer pleasure as well as pride." Mark Thompson, in his foreword to *Days of Hope*, eloquently summarizes Barton's unique contribution: "Crawford Barton leaves us a portrait of a seminal time, burnished with the fine polish of his sensitivity--an instinct for wonder never relinquished."

By the early 1980s, the innocence and optimism of the 1960s and 1970s were gone forever. Barton's lover of 22 years, Larry Lara, died of complications from AIDS before Barton himself succumbed at the age of 50, on June 12, 1993.

Bibliography

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About the Author

Barry Harrison is the founder of *Queer Arts Resource* (www.queer-arts.org) and producer of more than 40 online exhibitions that suggest the range and depth of queer artistic expression. Recently, he launched *Homobilia* (www.homobilia.com), a site for gay art and memorabilia.