Nancy Crampton photo exhibit features writers

Nancy Crampton has spent years photographing writers and artists. She is probably the preeminent portrait photographer of writers in the United States. A new exhibit of her work, "Writers: Photographs by Nancy Crampton," will open April 1 at Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art.

For anyone who reads, and especially if you are as obsessed with reading as I am, the exhibit is heaven. It is an instance where art seems to disappear into its subject. This is because the subject is so riveting: to see and have a chance to study the faces of writers who have contributed immeasurably to our lives and culture is a joyful experience.

This is where Crampton's gift comes in: All of her photographs are taken in black and white with a Leica M3 camera ("last manufactured in 1964" per Crampton). Her technique gives each of her photographs a transparent directness. The images are not about the photographer or loaded down with carefully arranged semiotic clues about the subject: Crampton presents a direct connection to legendary figures, aided by the gift of simplicity in her compositions.

There is a certain formality in many of her photographs, but whether formal or informal (see Maurice Sendak), she gives us character studies of each author.

Look at the photo of Truman Capote from 1984. He seems so present and clear-headed. She had been warned it was too late to catch Capote on film — "He's a wreck," she was told. Crampton tells us: They're proved wrong: he comes through smashingly in a photo taken only three months to the day before he gives out.

A photo of Eudora Welty reveals her informal Southern charm almost disguising her razor mind, and her total awareness of the culture and times in which she lived. In Philip Roth's picture, you can see his conflicted feelings about being photographed: You see his pleasure in being famous enough to be a subject, but also his impatience with the amount of time Crampton has taken with him.

"After the third or fourth road," Crampton remembers, "Philip says, 'Nancy, the road didn't write the book.'"

There are so many striking shots: a beautifully caught, pensive Ralph Ellison; a striking, but rather scary, picture of the poet Anne Sexton, taken the day before she committed herself to an institution; and a memorable image of James Baldwin, in the south of France, with him in a white djellaba, posed against a wall. Baldwin's face is so painfully expressive it is almost difficult to look at. But Crampton managed to create a masterful study of the writer, and she was so happy with Baldwin's picture, she asked herself, "Have I died and gone to heaven?"

The photographs included in the upcoming exhibit "Writers: Photographs by Nancy Crampton" are from a book of the same name. The book is available in the museum's gift shop and Crampton will sign copies during the artist's reception 5:30 p.m. April 14. At this time, Crampton also will present a slide lecture of her work in the museum's Mary Eddy and Fred Jones Auditorium.

For more information about the exhibit and Crampton's lecture, call 325-3272.

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