
Entertainment

How Provincetown saved Billy Hamlin

By **John Greiner-Ferris / Banner Correspondent**

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It's a familiar story, but it never gets old. For more than 100 years, this little Portuguese fishing village has been a mecca for artists. They come for the light and the natural beauty, but they also make their way here for the support of the oldest continuous artists' community in the U.S.

You have to ask yourself: how many artists like photographer William Hamlin would have just melted away from life's daily grind if his friends hadn't encouraged him to put his life in New York City on hold and move to Provincetown to make art? Well, Hamlin did move here, and he's made a life of it. He's been affiliated with the Schoolhouse Gallery since its inception, and on Friday, you'll be able to view a series of his latest images there in a group show.

Hamlin — who goes by Billy, more youthful-sounding than William — was raised in staunchly Republican Monroe, Conn., a bedroom suburb of New York. "I wasn't outgoing," he says. "I didn't play sports." But even as a youngster, photography attracted him, in the same way that its magic astonishes nearly everyone at first. "I liked that idea of capturing something, then holding it in my hand," Hamlin says. His first camera was one of those miracles of miniaturization, a Kodak 110. But its small size still let him accomplish something big: it allowed him to show his own point of view. "Photography didn't stifle my voice like other things did," he says. "Ya know?" And yes, most artists would know exactly what he means.

Yet neither of his parents was artistic. His father worked as an electronics engineer for 50 odd years, and Hamlin describes his mom as a homemaker and a great cook. As a kid, he received a good, solid Catholic education and lots of orthodontic work, which, he says in all seriousness, gave him good study habits and a nice smile. It seems as if he had a perfectly normal, happy Connecticut childhood, and when he made the decision to pursue an artistic life and study

photography, his folks fully supported his decision.

Art school requires a portfolio, and by this time, Hamlin had upgraded to a Konica 35mm loaded with Tri-X (developed in D-76, for all of you pre-digital photographers). So he set out building his portfolio at high school football games. "I looked for movement, style and strong compositions," he says. When he interviewed at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, Tom Drysdale, the cigar-chomping founding chair of the photography department, actually remembered his portfolio. "Tisch must get thousands of portfolios a year, but he remembered mine," Hamlin says.

His time at Tisch was four years of bliss. "It was all about the image; it was all about your art," Hamlin says. He graduated with degrees in photography and art history, but what they don't teach you in art school, especially expensive ones like Tisch, is getting a job. He scratched out a living in New York as a studio assistant for a couple years, then threw in the towel and started accepting corporate temp assignments.

Life wasn't bad. He'd take the N train from Astoria to a steady job he'd landed with benefits at a big, fancy-schmancy bank; he had a nice apartment with a live-in boyfriend; and when he had time, he still made art... sort of. He'd set up a little drafting table in a corner, where he shot still lifes and began cutting images into the "woven" photographic works that he's now known for, but on a very small scale. "In New York, I felt a little defeated," Hamlin says. "But when you're young, you think you have time."

Fate, however, decided to intervene. Tom Boland, one of the owners of Far Land Provisions, and Hamlin are old friends. Boland encouraged him to visit P'town and to send his art to someone he referred to as "Midge." Midge was Midge Battelle, who was organizing the Driscoll Gallery, the original photography space at the Schoolhouse. It so happened that she liked Hamlin's work. At the same time, two other friends of his, Annie Mahoney and Diana Prideaux-Brune, also encouraged him to move to Provincetown and make art.

"What am I supposed to do?" he asked them. "Just quit my job? Take a leave of absence?" Yes, his friends answered, and so he did. During a six-month leave, Hamlin immersed himself in his art. The P'town artistic juggernaut of love and support swept over him.

In June 1999, he quit his job and made the move to Provincetown, and that September, the Schoolhouse gave him his own show. While he was preparing for it, he met his future husband, sculptor Ramon S. Alcolea, though at the time, Hamlin referred to him as “my future ex-boyfriend.” They were married in 2014, and Hamlin calls Alcolea’s artistic energy inspiring. They drink their morning coffee together, then go to their respective studios. “You have to work every day,” Hamlin says. “Even if you’re just moving stuff around, you’re working.”

Hamlin’s current work is a departure from the woven images on which he’s made his name. Whereas the woven images are of people, his latest works are (solid, not woven) images of slightly foreboding, uninhabited spaces at night. The viewer becomes an inadvertent participant, choosing whether or not to enter. The images are disarmingly disturbing.

Hamlin’s 1999 show at the Schoolhouse was a success. Pieces were sold, and he found a place for himself in Provincetown. “The show was validation,” he says. “I didn’t know I needed it, but I guess I did.”

And it took. “If I don’t sell another piece, it won’t stop me,” Hamlin continues. “It’s always been there, that drive to photograph and create, even when I was in the corporate world. It creates tension inside me. If that tension goes away, that’s when I’ll worry.”