

FEBRUARY 23, 2020

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# Bill Coleman: A Long Term Photo Project



*Bill Coleman is a Nikon Legend Behind the Lens*

He says it's not art. It's craft.

"Art is the face of a child," Bill Coleman will tell you. "Anything man does is peanuts."

Bill is not comfortable with the term "art" being applied to his photography. Ask him about his striking compositions and his ability to capture the subtle nuance of a moment, and he'll ask you a question: "Isn't motor drive wonderful?" And then he'll add, "I have a huge number of discards, believe me."

Bill has been photographing Amish families in a secluded valley in Pennsylvania for close to 30 years, and has compiled a body of work that captures the spirit as

well as the daily life of his subjects. When he first drove into the valley, he thought it might take a few weeks to photograph the Amish families living there. After a month he was still photographing. Then a year had gone by, and now, almost 30 years, and he still shows up a minimum of three days a week, because, he says, "There's always so much going on."

He says his pictures are the result of "luck and location," that all he need do is stand in the right place at the right time. "I've always felt that there are two kinds of photographers—those who recognize that which was already established beauty, and those who can create beauty." And because he doesn't pose anyone, he doesn't consider himself the creator of a beautiful image. His photography of the Amish, he says, is simply a matter of hanging around and being observant and receptive. "I'm open to absorb whatever I might see," he says.

When he first discovered the valley and the Amish families living there, Bill was an established and successful portrait photographer. "I had a pretty profitable business doing glamour portraits of Penn State sorority girls. I was booked three months in advance, and did about four sittings a day." But part of him was looking for a change. "I was slowly getting burned out making people look beautiful," he has said, "but I didn't go looking for the Amish as a subject. I didn't know anything at all about them. I came across the valley by sheer accident." Soon he realized that what he was seeing and photographing in the Amish community was much more fascinating than the portraiture he was doing.

There are about 90 families in the area, but only ten or so give Bill permission to photograph. "They know me intimately, and they know I come there often and roam around, just to get casual shots. I never decide in advance what I'm going to photograph—often the weather and the look of the sky is going to determine what I'm going to photograph that day on a particular farm."

He has a few things he likes to do. "I found that it's much more meaningful and universal when you see a child from the back. When you see him from the front, you're looking at someone's child; from the back you're looking at everyone's child." And there are two things he never does: pose people or stage events. Fortunately, he doesn't have to. The daily life around him provides all the opportunity he needs. He also has the added benefit of familiarity. The people are so used to seeing him that they practically don't see him. "And if they see me," he says, "it's nothing special to them. They'll say, 'Oh, that's just Bill, hanging around, taking pictures.'"

After photographing the families for about two or three years, he says he began to feel a need to continue to document the community, to preserve it in his pictures. "I think it is one of the last communities of Amish in this country that tourists have had very little effect on," Bill has said, "so there is a basic integrity here. There is so much that goes back a hundred years that has not been diluted. I felt that if I

didn't capture this on film, no one else would. I know it was a presumptuous thing, but that's how I felt."

He has shared his feelings with members of the community. "A few do understand. Over the years I've seen people become much more lenient towards me, even the ones who were at first adamantly against me. I think they're beginning to understand what my mind set is all about."

The Amish aren't Bill's only subjects. He also photographs in Maine, and he travels at least once a year to Italy, where the last two images you see here were taken. He has said that he photographs in villages in Maine and Italy for the same reason he photographs the Amish. "I've watched values and society slide into a predictable package, and my photography of the Amish was an escape, a return to a basic reality. The Italian small town is the same...there is something exquisite about the lifestyle and the people.

"I go into villages—usually farming or fishing villages, but really any village off the beaten track—and what I'm looking for there is the same thing I'm looking for among the Amish—a lifestyle more befitting the way we were born and built to be."

To see more of Bill's photography visit his website at <http://billcolemanphoto.com/gallerymaine.htm>.