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“New Hampshire Now”

A diversity of images documents a time like never before

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Anders Morley

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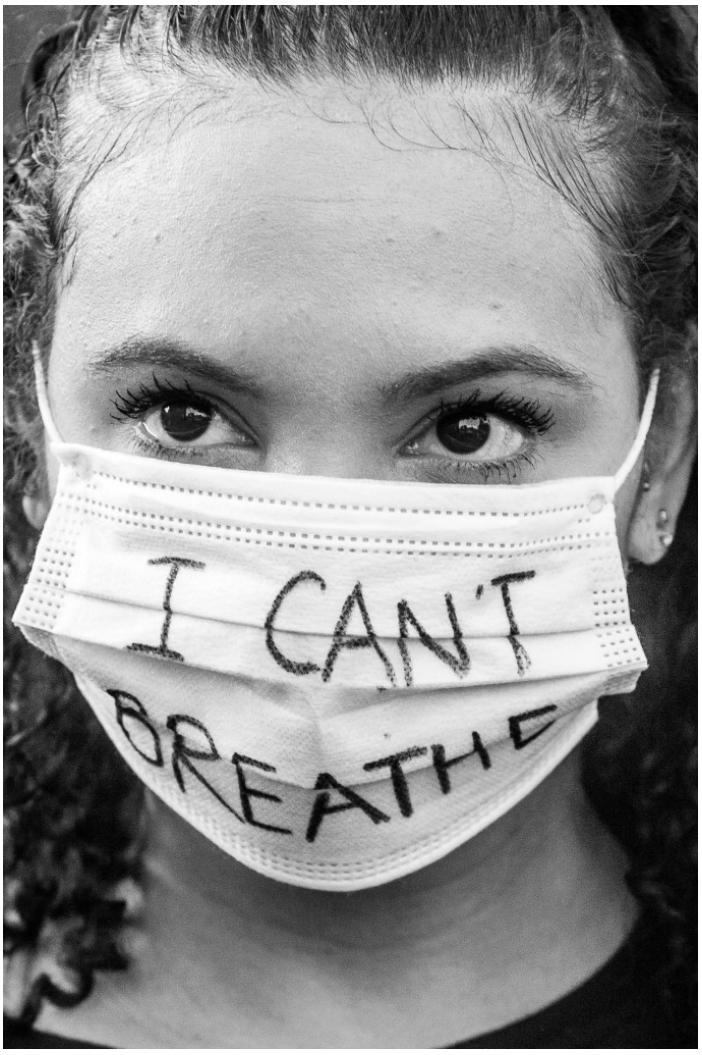

A participant attends the Black Lives Matter March in Portsmouth on June 4, 2020. *Photo by Mark Bolton*

Henry Thoreau once rhapsodized in his journal about a “New Hampshire everlasting and unfallen.” He praised a land where it was forever morning — a wild place, or at least a pastoral one. We all know this supposedly timeless New Hampshire from calendars and postcards — rolling hills dusted with snow or radiating autumn color, a steeple, a barn, a waterfall perhaps. To some of us in the 21st century, such images still represent a real place. To others they are more like a window on a past so remote it seems imaginary.

Photography, at least the art of candid documentary photography, has never been about the everlasting. The idea is to snatch an instant from the flux of space and eternity and then hold it up to be looked at. If it is a good photograph, viewers will say, “Yes, that’s the way it was.” The matter of persistent value is for posterity to decide. There is therefore something admirably plainspoken, almost daring, about an exhibition of photographs called “New Hampshire Now,” which can only become New Hampshire Then the moment it goes up.

This kind of clear-eyed, unpretentious gaze is precisely what former New Hampshire Artist Laureate Gary Samson was aiming for when he launched the project, which was initially styled “New Hampshire 2020,” even though the images in it were to be captured over a 30-month period between spring of 2018 and fall of 2020. Was the name changed because the titular year, which felt everlasting, turned out to be such a weighty one, like 1789 or 1917, and threatened to steal the show? In his eloquent introduction to the exhibition’s companion volume, Howard Mansfield goes so far as to liken 2020 to the pivotal year zero, neither BC (before Covid) nor AC (after Covid), but instead an inflection point. Looking back on a year of Zoom meetings, stay-at-home orders, and social distancing, Mansfield writes that “New Hampshire Now has returned us to each other’s presence.” It reminds us that we are here, now.

This is the gamble of the New Hampshire Historical Society, the project’s major supporter, in giving free rein to a loose collection of artists, all members of the New Hampshire Society of Photographic Artists, whose work will appear in the exhibition: that their honest attempt to take visual note of the presence of others, to give a complex and multifaceted impression of what New Hampshire actually looked like during a very recent 30-month period, will somehow transcend this fairly basic mission and perhaps become the stuff of history.

The project was directly inspired by the Depression-era photography campaign promoted by the Farm Security Administration, whose images Samson first saw as an adolescent. Already emblematic by then, they afforded him a window on life a generation earlier. “My mother, who grew up during the Depression, often talked about people suffering,” Samson explains, “but until I saw the photographs, I didn’t fully realize just how much people suffered and struggled through those years. Those photographs gave me that visual information, that reference, that made me understand the potential for photography to shape and record our lives.” Yet according to Walker Evans, one of the best known of the FSA photographers, he and his colleagues had no intention of creating documents for the historical record when they spread out across the country with their cameras in the 1930s. They just did their job, and because they did it well, people said, “Yes, that’s the way it was.”

The alliance with the Historical Society, not to mention Samson’s own long-standing interest in photography as an instrument for communicating across time, makes “New Hampshire Now” a little more self-consciously historiographical than the FSA photography program. Some 3,000-4,000 of the images captured are already destined for the Historical Society’s archives in Concord. Of these, 500 will be on display in various combinations at seven regional exhibitions around the state, which open on October 1. A flagship exhibition in Concord will represent the state as a whole.

Notable contributions come from acclaimed ski cinematographer Fletcher Manley, who ranged all over the North Country and White Mountains in search of images; Ian Raymond and Mark Bolton, who were wildly prolific and varied in their quests to capture the many faces of New Hampshire; Becky Field, who focused on the immigrant experience in the state; and street photographer Anthony Attardo, who during the 2020 lockdowns shot exclusively at night.

A companion book containing the finest photographs from the exhibition will be released simultaneously and made available for purchase at the exhibition venues as well as in independent bookstores throughout the state. Bill Dunlap, president of the New Hampshire Historical Society (and

the man Samson credits with making all this possible), was adamant about the book being a 100% New Hampshire-made affair. And so “New Hampshire Now” — a hefty volume containing some 250 photographs shot by 46 Granite State photographers, selected and edited by Samson and fellow NHSPA members Michael Sterling, Dan Gingras, Bev Conway and Effie Malley — has been designed and published by Peter E. Randall Publisher of Portsmouth and printed by Puritan Press of Hollis on paper manufactured by Monadnock Paper Mills in Bennington.

Volunteers help out at a homeless food line. *Photo by Gary Samson*

But what does it actually mean to set out to create a collection of photographs that might someday become a historical statement by documenting New Hampshire now, as opposed to a New Hampshire of yore or some imagined “New Hampshire everlasting”? It’s impossible to say for sure, and only time will tell if the photographers succeed, but Gary Samson has a few ideas. “In the future, New Hampshire may not have the importance that it has now during the presidential primary races,” he says. “Also, the northern part of the state has a very different lifestyle than the cities in southern part of the state, and capturing some of those differences in photographs will be important to share with future generations.” Samson is also wary of dealing in stereotypes, of seeking the lazy way out with little more than pretty landscapes, a concern shared by Bill Dunlap. To this end, they have encouraged the NHSPA photographers to make visible the reality of diversity in our state by taking pictures of urban New Hampshire, of non-white New Hampshire, of gay and lesbian New Hampshire, and of New Hampshire people who are suffering. All of this is us.

Of course, we still see the last of twilight twinkling on Portsmouth and its harbor on a summer evening, as a tour boat rides over the swirling tidewater and the Coast Guard’s stately Barque Eagle stands sentinel on the Maine side. We see, also, a group of summer-camp boys playing tail tag, dashing along a dirt road through oak and white-pine woods, a cool lake peeking through the branches. We see cold gray portraits of homeless people, pleading with carboard signs and weary looks for compassion. We see familiar images from the campaign trail — political grins fit for a dentist’s brochure blazing out over crowds of red, white and blue. We see lobster boats and barbershops, contra dances and fireworks. We see gatherings and empty spaces, symmetry and asymmetry, sunshine and snowfall. We see a 3-year-old girl holding a battery-powered candle aloft at a Black Lives Matter vigil — an aspiring Lady Liberty with bright, questioning eyes.

What stands out most of all, though — what makes it clearer than anything else that we are looking at New Hampshire precisely now — are the masks. It's the masks, more than the fashions, the car models, or the signs in the background, that will make these images instantly recognizable to future generations. Gore Vidal once remarked that we spend our lives putting on and taking off masks. How satisfied he would have been to see his metaphor become literal last year! Oscar Wilde, in an equally enigmatic vein, quipped that we learn more from masks than faces. But it's Voltaire the philosopher who makes us understand the truth at the bottom of this: "Mortals are equal; their masks differ." And it's Whitman the poet who makes us feel that truth: "I see behind each mask that wonder a kindred soul."

The photographers of New Hampshire now — with their images of a single human race behind a thousand kinds of masks — are trying to make us see.

About The Book

The New Hampshire Society of Photographic Artists and the New Hampshire Historical Society joined forces to undertake a three-year project to photographically record daily life in the state. The resulting book, featuring more than 250 photographs from 46 photographers covering the seven regions of the Granite State, is available from the project website (below) and from independent booksellers statewide. The body of work created not only illustrates the book, but will also be featured in exhibitions around the state this month and archived at the New Hampshire Historical Society in Concord. Gary Samson, an award-winning photographer and seventh New Hampshire artist laureate, served as project director for "New Hampshire Now." For more information, visit newhampshirenow.org