



STAFF PHOTO BY KEITH E. JACOBSON

Photographer Peter Bates outside his Westbourne Street, Roslindale, home.

Focused on photography

Roslindale artist suffers lifelong passion for pictures

By Nick Katz
STAFF WRITER

Peter Bates got the bug early. His father gave him a Brownie camera when he was just a child, and for the next five decades, he spent countless hours trying to become (pardon the pun) picture perfect.

The Roslindale photographer cheerfully admits, sitting in the antique-laden living room of his Westbourne Street home, he's never taken the perfect picture. But to a visitor, it looks like he's come close.

People will get a chance to judge for themselves all this month, when a collection of his photographs hangs at the West Roxbury Branch Library. His work over the last 25 years has been mostly street scenes, an interesting face he glimpses on the Brussels subway, or a woman staring into the Florentine sun with a half-quizzical, half-angry look on her face (next to a poster of Chairman Mao, no less).

His first professional gig was a series of black-and-white portraits for the Lynn Historical Society in 1976, so it's no surprise that wherever Bates goes, he tries to capture

the essence of it on film. He's captivated by the faces and places most tourists don't go to. There are no shots of the Eiffel Tower in his photographs of Paris.

"What's the point?" he says with a smile. "It's been shot from every conceivable angle — including upside and directly underneath."

His work has taken a new turn in the last four years, when he was inspired to start shooting neon signs. By shooting with a time-lapsed camera and a zoom lens, he's able to record several images of a neon sign on a single negative, giving the work the feeling of an abstract painting, even though it's real.

"I read a book of neon photographs, but it had some very substandard examples," Bates says. "I thought I could do it better."

His friends now know his obsession and gleefully help him out. There's a new neon sign with a moose near the Arsenal Mall, one reports. You have to check out this diner in West Newton, another says. He travels everywhere with a tape recorder in his car, so he can make a note of any undiscovered neon treasures.

Father knows best

Freud says we should look to someone's parents to understand what really makes him tick. He might not have got a lot else right, but in this case, he seems on the mark. Bates says growing up on the North Shore, Jerome "Romey" Bates, his businessman father had one obsession: taking photos.

"He was the only one on the block with a 35-mm camera and he took thousands of slides, which I inherited when he died," Bates says. "He documented everything: our vacations, the building of a Laundromat, the installation of our pool. Everything. ... "He kept a record of everything in his life with that camera.

"He didn't take snapshots. There a quite a few candid. He got a shot of my mother hugging my brother, and it was totally spontaneous, you could tell by the look on her face. He was really a very good photographer."

Little wonder Bates remembers telling his parents, when he was just a kid, that he wanted a 35-mm camera just like dad. He got a Brownie, which he at first wasn't crazy about because you had to

hold it down by your waist to aim it. Bates quickly got over the technical challenge and started a lifelong love of taking photographs.

He never thought he would make a living out of it. Instead, out of college, he worked as a social worker. But once bitten by the bug, Bates had to scratch. He worked evenings and weekends as a freelance photographer, until he finally was able to give up his day job in the early 1980s.

He was also able to use his art in his private life. He met his future wife, Cheryl Levin, at a vegetarian dinner in Boston. She was madly pounding on African drums and he started snapping her photograph. Afterward, he sent her a picture and note that asked if she wanted to get together. She did, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Bates took a two-decade hiatus from full-time photography to do all sorts of writing, too: essays, poems, short stories and what artist's desk would be complete without an unpublished novel in a drawer?

In 1999, his wife convinced him to include his workspace in a tour of open studios arranged by

Brookline. His friends had kept complimenting him on his photographs, so he agreed. The visitors loved it. He sold a couple of photos on the spot, and admits the praise helped get his career back on track.

"I liked the fact that some people liked my stuff," he says.

Bates moved to Roslindale 18 months ago and since then, his wife has really adopted the role of his agent. So far, Levin has gotten Bates' work hung at a half-dozen different shops including Fresh Hair in Jamaica Plain. Then he had an exhibit at the Brookline Library. And now his work will hang at the West Roxbury Library through the end of the month.

His father would be proud.

(Peter Bates' exhibit, "Signs of Light, Signs of Life," featuring photographs of street scenes from Paris, New York, Boston, Brussels and Florence, will be shown at the West Roxbury Branch Library, 1961 Centre St., West Roxbury through Dec. 31. People can also see examples of his work on-line, at www.batescommunications.net/stylus.)

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