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Making a ‘Different

For three decades, Brenton Hamilton has modeled creative courage in the classroom

BY **JENNIFER G. WOLCOTT**

Kind of Photograph’



Brenton created this surrealist print, *Tower Rise*, in 2014. It is included in *A Blue Idyll*, a recently published retrospective of the artist's nearly 30-year career.

below Brenton composed this painterly tricolor gum-bichromate print, *Reaching for a Nightingale*, in 2014.



Bird Man displays Brenton's fascination with fragments and fantasy and demonstrates his skill with palladium-and-gum-bichromate methods.



OFTEN, THE BEST TEACHERS ARE THOSE WITH a voracious appetite for learning. Visual artist Brenton Hamilton, who has taught photography for nearly three decades at Maine Media Workshops + College in Rockport, is intensely studious when pursuing his own work. His fascination with 19th-century photographic techniques drives him to dig deeper, to keep researching, acquiring more knowledge, and honing his skills—and he’s a better teacher for it.

“I like to challenge myself by tackling things I haven’t done before,” says Brenton. “It enlivens me and is wonderful for my students. I want to show them that I am taking risks.”

Even in his first year of teaching in 1992, he didn’t play it safe. It was then, Brenton says, that he “gravitated to making a different kind of photograph.” He devoted endless hours in his studio to mastering historical printmaking methods—the embellished cyanotype, gum bichromate forms, collodion on black glass, plati-

num, and more—and he has employed these techniques to create a highly original body of work featuring astronomy, human anatomy, and botanical imagery and influenced by surrealism, ancient Greece and Rome, and 15th- and 16th-century Dutch paintings.

A self-proclaimed storyteller, Brenton likes to weave fragments from art history, engravings, and letters into an entirely new story. This direction was inspired by a trip to Rome in the nineties, when, as he recalls, he bought “a dusty antique book with a fragment inside of an engraving that was marvelous in its patina and stains.” Since then, he says, “the idea of fragments has always appealed to me.”

Along the way, he has shared his explorations and epiphanies, his knowledge and know-how in the classroom, and he has often supported his students’ paths to professional careers.

Skip Klein, a Baltimore-based photographer, says Brenton stands out as one of the best teachers he’s ever

below *The Garden*, a French paper calotype made in 2010, references ancient Greece and Rome and the history of art.



above *The Storyteller* was made with gum washes and cyanotype, a 19th- and 20th-century method for producing copies of drawings or “blueprints.” Brenton says of the process, “I am attached to the symbolism of blue.” *right* *Devoured* is a palladium print Brenton created in 2017.



had. “Great teachers not only share knowledge, but they also light an inner spark, blow on the embers, continue to nurture the flame, and then continue to make sure that the fire burns brightly for years to follow. Brenton did all of this for me.”

Another former student, New York-based photographer Frances F. Denny, is proud to have learned from Brenton, whom she describes as “guru to many alternative-process acolytes.”

Indeed, Brenton has carved out a niche for himself as perhaps the first contemporary artist to revive 19th-century photographic printmaking techniques, a field that like all things vintage is experiencing a resurgence of interest.

For the past several months, he has been teaching remotely, which has opened up his classroom to students all over the globe. But now even more accessible than a virtual course with Professor Hamilton is

his recently published 25-year retrospective, *A Blue Idyll, Cyanotypes and Dreams* (Schilt Publishing, 2020). “Maybe it’s not the best time to release a book,” Brenton says, referring to the pandemic period. But on the other hand, he adds, some fans of *Blue Idyll* say it offers them a welcome escape into a fantastical world.

Brenton’s former student Skip Klein considers *Blue Idyll* not only a retrospective but also a self-portrait. “It combines first-rate production values,” he says, “with his lyrical imagery that speaks directly to the history of photography while taking you inside Brenton’s curious, surreal, dream-like, yet subtle and understated mind.”

And Frances Denny, who was also quick to get a copy, says his “language of symbols—birds and busts, classical silhouette and romantic gesture—mixes science and magic to magnificent effect.” She calls the volume “quiet evidence that Brenton is king of his medium.”

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To have published a retrospective of his nearly three decades as a photographer, printmaker, and storyteller is indeed “a big event,” he admits with characteristic modesty. With such an important feat behind him, Brenton is content to embrace whatever’s next. “This is a time of transition,” he says. “I want to make new work.”

He’ll continue to delight in teaching, which he calls a “dynamic process” and a “long conversation where we are working out something to make their photography deeper, clearer, and more understood.” But he also wants to keep infusing his teaching with the ideas and insights he gleans as a student of his own art.

Lately, he’s been asking himself, “What’s next, Hamilton?” As he muses about his future steps, however, he is also leaping forward. “I’m happy,” he says. “I’m pursuing collage in new ways, investigating stop-motion filmmaking, looking at early Russian and European animations ... it’s all really exciting.”