MOWA to dedicate record space for Milwaukee photographer

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Tom Bamberger, 68, promises he’s still alive and is not sick.

Starting today, the Museum of Wisconsin Art in West Bend will open the Milwaukee native’s first major retrospective, featuring more than 300 photographs of Bamberger’s three-decades career. The museum is dedicating three of four changing exhibition spaces for it, the most it has ever done.

When asked about it, Bamberger had a sense of humor about the exhibition.

“They usually give you retrospectives before you die,” he said. “I’m not sick or anything.”

“I’m excited for myself, but also as a citizen of the art community,” he said when asked about what the exhibition means to him in his career.

Laurie Winters, executive director and CEO of MOWA, is excited to bring the work to West Bend.

“It’s an amazing gift to have. An artist giving you close to 400 works is really unprecedented,” she said.

Bamberger echoed a similar appreciation.

“They’re doing an unbelievable job,” he said of the museum.

Some of Bamberger’s work will be in excess of 30 feet in scale. The exhibition will be called “Hyperphotographic.”

“I think Tom really believes in this institution,” Winters said.

The opening party and tour is 2-5 p.m. today at the Museum of Wisconsin Art, 815 Main St.

About a year after getting the camera, he had already taken a summer course at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee about photography and read several books on the topic.

“I was kind of a nut,” Bamberger said. “It was the thing that I could do.”

He eventually wound up teaching some photography classes.

“I kept taking small steps,” he said. “I never used conventional film. I took pictures of pavement, then parts of bodies, then a head on the body.”

Just like his time in jail, the moment he got the camera changed everything.

“I still remember having it in my hand,” Bamberger said. “It was a magnetic thing. It was fascinating for me. A camera is a wonderful creation.” What’s been fun for Winters and her staff sort of goes along with the mantra that retrospectives, such as the one Bamberger is getting, is usually done for those who passed away.

Bamberger has been a part of the process, which has helped Winters and others at MOWA appreciate his talent, enhancing the experience of the staff, Bamberger and the soon-to-be visitors of the exhibition.

“It’s kind of a remarkable thing that he’s done,” Winters said. “And that he would choose MOWA.”

Bamberger is glad to have survived his bad decisions.

“All my best work almost seemed like an accident,” he said. “You have to be somewhat lucky to be really great. I’m trying to surprise myself as an artist. You have to get outside of yourself to get the kind of art I liked.”

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museum. Then, from 2-4 p.m. April 8 and April 22, Bamberger will be at the museum to answer questions from gallery-goers.

“He’s a great photographer,” Winters said.

How he found photography came after a brush with the law.

Living in Boston and attending Boston University in the 1960s, Bamberger got into drug use and drug dealing, which ultimately got him arrested.

“It’s very vivid in my memory,” he said.

One thing he remembered was all he could think about was “what do I have to do to get out?” He didn’t think of all the other things that were going on in his life. That narrow focus of how to get out of jail changed his perspective, even though he was in jail for about 90 minutes.

“It’s a very strange thing,” he said.

Soon after, he returned to Milwaukee and was given a second chance.

“I got my stuff together and became a more serious and focused person,” Bamberger said.

Then his three younger brothers stepped in. They gave him a camera as a wedding present. Today, he still has that camera.

“I thought it was a nice thing and I started learning about it,” Bamberger said.

He was also slightly baffled by the gesture because he knew how much of a pain in the butt he was when they were growing up. Well, not those exact words.

But he was intrigued by the idea of taking pictures. He also took up philosophy after his brush with the law. Those two together opened up a different world for him.

“I think in retrospect, what I loved about photography, it was a language that made sense to me,” Bamberger said. “A photograph is always a question about what really exists or what do we...
really know. I was interested in the problems of knowledge and the problems of cognition. How do we make sense out of the world?”

He added, “Art is so hard. You have to be desperate to do it. I immersed myself. Art saved me from myself.”

Bamberger picked up on it quickly.