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Geoffrey Hiller: Lifting the veil on Myanmar

By **Kate Hubbard**
The Asian Reporter

Myanmar, also known as Burma, is one of those rare places left on the planet: mysterious, secretive, and rarely talked about. It was isolated under military dictatorship for about a half century, and it is still making the bumpy transition to democracy. Luckily for us, Portland resident and professional photographer Geoffrey Hiller has travelled there and taken photos since 1987. During the upcoming holiday season, there are two opportunities in northwest Portland to take a peek inside the hidden recesses of the country.

Upon first seeing Hiller's photos, it's striking how somber the subjects seem. There are not a lot of smiling faces, and it's clear these are people who work very hard to survive.

The history of Myanmar in the last century has been rough. The country has been marked by political repression and human-rights violations, and largely ignored by much of the world. Unlike other places that receive more press coverage and money as well as high-profile visitors and tourists, it is a country that's been tucked away unnoticed for quite a long time.

Myanmar is on the brink of profound transformation following political changes, and it is now taking on technological advancements and utilizing social media. A SIM card used to cost a



thousand dollars in the country, Hiller said, and now one costs only a few dollars. That means more people on the street have access to technology and a chance to become connected to the rest of the world. Old Burma is rapidly disappearing; Hiller's photos capture a way of life that is going away as well — for better or worse.

I had a chance to talk with Mr. Hiller recently by phone, and his love for Myanmar can be felt in his enthusiasm. He described his very first visit and explained how he fell in love with the isolated country even though he was only allowed to stay for one week. He travelled the entire time, taking photos all along the

way. In the years since, Hiller has gone back to visit several times, always with camera in hand. He recently published a book, *Daybreak in Myanmar*, which features 170 of his photos as well as interviews with prominent Burmese people. It's a fascinating and insightful look at the country.

Hiller's photos have a feeling of being frozen in time. Although many were taken more recently, not much seems to have changed over the decades. There are bicycles that appear to be from World War II, old telephones, and sobering evidence of poverty and decay. There are a lot of

HIGHLIGHTING THE HIDDEN. Images taken by documentary photographer Geoffrey Hiller and included in *Daybreak in Myanmar*, a book featuring 170 color photographs of Myanmar, also known as Burma, are on view during the month of December at two venues in Portland. Pictured at left is "Rally for Aung San Suu Kyi, Patheon, 2012." (Photo/Geoffrey Hiller)

serious people who look intently at the camera, as well as brilliant bursts of color and moments of contentment. There are also gorgeous images of the countryside.

One of the interviewees featured in the book described the Burmese people as "constantly joking and full of humor," even though that might not be evident in the photos. Hiller also describes the Burmese in glowing terms, explaining how wonderful and graceful they are. He said a lot of the discrepancy is due to their desire to seem pleasant and not lose face. In spite of their struggles, there is a wish to maintain dignity, much like the title of Hiller's 2000 web documentary called *Burma: Grace Under Pressure*.

Hiller's photos of Myanmar will stick with you and make you think. They are deceptively simple, yet incredibly powerful. Look for the image of a child riding shotgun in a bicycle sidecar, face adorned with *thanaka*, a makeup and beautifying powder. Or view the side profile of a man perched in the cross tresses under a bridge, umbrella hanging near, not even looking at the muddy water flowing beneath him. He stares off into the

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Tagalog: ควบคุมโรคเบาหวานเพื่อชีวิตของท่าน. Tagalog: Pamahalaan ang Inyung diyabetis, upang manatiling malusog at masigla.

Chinese: 珍惜生命控制血糖. Chinese: 珍惜生命控制血糖.

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