

Nicholas Nixon

The Brown Sisters



“These pictures grew out of the curiosity about and admiration for this band of beautiful, strong women, who first let me into their lives then allowed me to try making one picture, then joined me in a tradition, an annual rite of passage. I love my sisters-in-law Mimi, Laurie and Heather, and I thank them wholeheartedly for their love and patience. Bebe, my true love, my best friend, is the centre of my life. How lucky, how grateful I am.”

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The Brown Sisters

Nicholas Nixon occupies a singular place in the recent history of photography. Focused on portraiture above all, and with a strong interest in the descriptive possibilities of the camera, his work reveals a tension between the visible—the subject, depicted skillfully and with extraordinary clarity—and the invisible—the emotional content, thoughts and curiosities that emerge in his photographs.

His serial work explores unique worlds with a notable social concern that allows us to access unseen aspects of the artist’s private reality. But the everyday qualities of the series make them relatable and awaken in us echoes of associated memories and emotions. The communication of the passage of time and the absence of dramatic elements define a body of work that unfolds over nearly five decades of continuous dedication. Nixon employs a simple technique, almost obsolete, yet impeccable, the use of a large-format camera that encourages intimacy and cooperation with his subjects allowing him to reveal the worlds of the elderly and the sick, as well as the inner life of families and couples.

The series *The Brown Sisters* has become one of the most powerful studies of portraiture and temporality to be found in contemporary photography.

Undoubtedly, it embodies the inherent nostalgia of photography, the medium's ability to stop time. Each year Nixon photographs his wife Bebe and her three sisters with a large-format camera outdoors, with natural light. The order of the subjects is always the same, having been established by accident at the first shoot: from left to right, Heather, Mimi, Bebe and Laurie. The women, with some exceptions, always face the camera.

In 1974 Nixon made a portrait of the Brown sisters, but didn't consider it good enough to keep. The following year, however, he took the first photograph of the series; at the time Bebe was 25 and her sisters Heather, Laurie and Mimi were 23, 21 and 15, respectively. Nixon was pleased with the photograph and kept it: "The photographs of the Brown sisters were totally casual. All of us liked the photo and that's where the idea came from. Most parents have the same idea". The following year Nixon took the second photograph at a family reunion and, recognizing the quality of the exposure, decided to propose making these portraits an annual tradition. Only one photograph from the various takes would become part of the series, and the chosen photo would be selected by consensus between Nixon and the sisters.

Each one of these images is a section of their lives, but when we view them year-by-year, we recognize that the sisters do not remain unchanged, like photographic subjects often do in our memory; the passage of time visible in their faces is a confirmation of vulnerability that causes us to feel a painful sensation of loss. Temporality is not only reflected externally in aging faces or in changing fashion trends; a close inspection of the photographs reveals shifting psychologies, as well as altering and enduring attitudes with respect to family ties. The series shows smiles, thoughtful gazes, complicity, and shared joy over pregnancy, but also blank stares of grief that convey pain and turmoil.

These photographs remind us of the family album, which brings us back to past moments and emotions. But what ultimately confuses and fascinates in this series, rich in both documental objectivity and emotional intimacy, is the fluctuating internal rhythm of repetition. Each photograph takes shape and meaning within the context of the others, and it is within the series that they acquire their strength. The series also functions as a self-portrait of the photographer, a site through which he expresses his own emotions.

Carlos Gollonet

Curator

1947

Nicholas Nixon is born in Detroit, Michigan. An only child, just as his mother and father, he is fascinated by sibling relationships.

1965-1968

Nixon studies American literature at the University of Michigan. During this time he works in a bookstore where by chance he comes across a volume on Henri Cartier-Bresson that makes a great impression on him. Although photography is not his field of study, he decides to enroll in a course in the summer of 1968. After his second class he spends nearly all of his savings on a 35-mm Leica camera.

1969

Nixon graduates with a degree in American Literature. He continues to recognize the influence of writers that he studied, such as William Faulkner, Willa Cather, Henry Green, Marcel Proust, T. S. Eliot, Charles Dickens, and Ernest Hemingway.

1970

He meets Beverly Brown (Bebe), whom he marries the following year. Nixon begins postgraduate studies in Fine Arts at the University of New Mexico, where he specializes in photography. After the Leica, he briefly uses a 4x5" camera (10x13cm), which he uses to make his first urban photographs from hilltops outside the city, demonstrating an interest in the borderlands between town and desert. He soon begins to use an 8x10" camera (20.3x25.4 cm).

1974

After finishing his graduate degree he moves with Bebe to Brookline, near Boston, a city that fascinates Nixon for its contrast to the Midwest, where he grew up. He takes photographs of cityscapes from rooftops. Nixon begins teaching photography at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, where he remains through 2017, maintaining his own artistic practice at the same time.

During a family reunion, on impulse, he takes his first photograph of the Brown sisters. Unsatisfied with the outcome, he discards the photo.

1975

Nixon's photographs at the time demonstrate a particular interest in urban space and landscape, which earns him a place in the landmark, generation-defining exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape*, organized by the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York and curated by William Jenkins. Other photographers in the exhibit include Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, John Scott, Stephen Shore, Joe Deal, Frank Gohle, Henry Wessel, and Bernd and Hilla Becher. In July he takes what will become the first photograph of *The Brown Sisters series*.

1976

Figure studies begin to take prominence in his work as Nixon moves away from the urban views that dominated his early practice. He wins a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Between July and October the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) mounts the artist's first important monographic exhibition, *Longer Views: 40 Photographs by Nick Nixon*, which marks the close of his explorations of landscape. From this point forward Nixon continually participates in solo and group exhibitions in American and European institutions, and publishes prolifically.

1977

Wins a grant from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. His work takes a definitive turn when he begins to photograph marginalized people who congregate and live near the banks of Boston's Charles River. He continues to work on this project through 1982. At the same time he refines his skill using a large-format camera, which he treats almost as a manual camera. Moving unnoticed, Nixon works with the intention of emphasizing the familial, social and psychological connotations surrounding these individuals.

1983

Birth of his son Sam. The artist begins to take photographs that reflect family intimacy and develops an interest in the nude figure and close-up, tightly cropped compositions. He continues to photograph his wife, and his children until their adolescence. These works become a diary of their shared experiences, and offer viewers a glimpse of their private life.

1984

Interested in vulnerability and the passage of time, Nixon begins to take photographs in nursing homes where he has spent time as a volunteer. To a large extent these works reveal the artist's emotional engagement and commitment to people at risk of social exclusion. There is a notable change in how he approaches his subjects. In proximity to them, Nixon takes close-up shots and sometimes details of hands and weary faces, testaments of fully lived lives.

1985

Birth of his daughter Clementine.

1987

Nixon addresses the AIDS crisis. The disease is demonized at the time, both feared and little known. Together with his wife Bebe, the photographer embarks on a project chronicling the lives of 15 people infected with HIV, who he photographs in weekly or monthly intervals from the time of first contact to the time of their deaths. The project, titled *People with AIDS*, is exhibited at MoMA the following year.

1988

MoMA presents Nixon's monographic exhibition titled *Pictures of People* and publishes an accompanying catalogue with an essay by Peter Galassi. The selection of works includes photographs made in the street and in nursing homes, as well as nudes of his family members, and photographs from *The Brown Sisters* and *People with AIDS* series.

1991

He publishes the monograph *People with AIDS*, with text by Bebe. By revealing private moments, the book offers an honest chronicle of the lives affected by this disease, and allows viewers to understand the suffering of patients and their families.

1992

The exhibition *Pictures from Perkins School for the Blind* takes place at both the Fraenkel Gallery and the Zabriskie Gallery. The new series demonstrates Nixon's concern for disability and fragility.

1997

A new series, *Bebe & Me*, is exhibited at Fraenkel Gallery, where Nixon has exclusive representation. Although the series continues within the vein of his family pictures, it also includes new kinds of images, including vertically oriented photographs and, above all, self-portraits.

1998

Bulfinch Press publishes his monograph *School*, which compiles a series of photographs made in various Boston schools, and features a text by Robert Coles.

1999

MoMA publishes the first 25 photographs of *The Brown Sisters* in a monographic edition.

2002

For his latest series, *Couples*, Nixon does not direct the scenes, but participates in their creation. He only makes exposures once a climate of trust has been established. Torsos, arms and mouths are almost abstracted, which speaks to the intensity, as physical as it is emotional, of the relationships depicted. These photographs transmit intimacy, passion and pleasure, and show how we share our lives.

2003

Close and Far, exhibited at Zabriskie Gallery, presents Nixon's newest work: a combination of intimate photographs and, a result of the artist's return to the urban landscape, new views of Boston made with long-range zoom lenses and a large-format 11x14" Deardorff camera (25.4x30.5 cm). Tf. Editores publishes the bilingual monograph *Nicholas Nixon* with an essay by Carlos Gollonet. The book accompanies Nixon's first traveling retrospective exhibition in Spain.

2005

On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of *The Brown Sisters* series, the photographs are exhibited in three major US institutions: the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, the George Eastman House, and MoMA.

2008

MoMA publishes *The Brown Sisters: Thirty-three Years* with an essay by Peter Galassi. Fundación MAPFRE acquires *The Brown Sisters* series and publishes the Spanish-language monograph *Las hermanas Brown (1975–2007)*.

2009

Live Love Look Last is co-published by Steidl, Fraenkel Gallery and Pace/MacGill.

2011

Fundación MAPFRE publishes *Las hermanas Brown 1975–2010* with texts by Carlos Gollonet and Antonio Muñoz Molina.

2014

MoMA holds the exhibition *Nicholas Nixon: 40 Years of the Brown Sisters* and publishes the catalogue *The Brown Sisters: Forty Years* with an essay by curator Sarah Hermanson Meister.

2015

Fraenkel Gallery publishes *Nicholas Nixon: About Forty Years*.

2017

Fundación MAPFRE presents a large-scale retrospective of Nixon's work at their dedicated photography galleries in Madrid. The show travels to Almeria, Berlin and Brussels. The accompanying catalogue includes essays by Carlos Gollonet and Sebastian Smees. Fundación MAPFRE acquires 137 more photographs by Nixon, making it the largest existing collection of the photographer's work