

Nicholas Nixon The Brown Sisters

Forty Years



The Museum of Modern Art, New York

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To Sally Brown and in memory of Fred Brown,
parents of Bebe, Heather, Laurie, and Mimi

1975



1978



1988



1999



2014





Longer Views: 40 Photographs by Nick Nixon. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, July 22–October 5, 1976. Installation views



Nicholas Nixon: *40 Years of The Brown Sisters*

When Nicholas Nixon’s first solo exhibition opened—on July 22, 1976, at The Museum of Modern Art—he had only recently decided to make his portraits of the four Brown sisters into a series. In fact he had taken only two of these photographs—hardly a series—but John Szarkowski, Director of the Museum’s Department of Photography at the time, decided to include them both in a show that otherwise concentrated on explorations of the built and natural landscape. Many of the photographs were sweeping views of Boston, Nixon’s recently adopted hometown, and they were taken from elevated vantage points through the lens of an eight-by-ten-inch view camera, cumbersome equipment requiring a deliberate approach typically reserved for static subjects. (Nixon recalls, “I thought [the Brown Sisters] looked great amidst the rest of the omniscient striving prints.”) There is no stronger early sign of the series’ promise than their inclusion in this context, a promise fulfilled in the ensuing thirty-eight years: Nixon evidently recognized the human presence as a piquant counterpoint to what was then his characteristic subject, and since then, pictures of people—young and old, strangers and

relatives, alone and in groups, ill and well, passionate and innocent—have become central in his achievement. It took just these two images—the first two plates of this book—to evince photography’s power to capture the passage of time, and Nixon’s ability to harness that power. They assume the unpretentious format of a family snapshot and elevate it to the realm of art.

The facts about the series are clear but few in number. In August 1974, Nixon was twenty-six years old, and had been married to Beverly (Bebe) for three years. He made a photograph of Bebe and her three sisters, Laurie, Heather, and Mimi, at a family gathering, but wasn’t pleased with the result and discarded the negative. In July 1975 he made another, and this one seemed promising enough to keep. At the time, the sisters were fifteen (Mimi), twenty-one (Laurie), twenty-three (Heather), and twenty-five (Bebe). The following June, Laurie Brown graduated from college, and Nick made another picture of the four sisters. It was after this second successful picture that the group agreed to gather annually for a portrait and settled on the series’ two constants: the sisters would always appear in the same order—from

left to right, Heather, Mimi, Bebe, and Laurie—and they would jointly select a single image to represent a given year. (If you have sisters, or even if you don’t, you’ll know this course might be difficult; add to it the emotional dynamic of a husband/brother-in-law for whom artistic coherence and psychological presence are paramount, and you can begin to appreciate the challenge these simple constants present.) Also significant, and unchanging, is the fact that each portrait is made with an eight-by-ten-inch view camera on a tripod and is captured on a black-and-white-film negative.

For a quarter of a century, Nixon printed these negatives exclusively as contact prints, so that the results were always the same size and showed exquisite detail and continuity of tone. Nixon has observed of his signature process,

It creates the illusion of being able to see more than the eye could see if you were there. It’s basically the clearest picture one can make in photography. Part of it has to do with faithfulness, but it’s also a matter of making a print whose quality of realism is so heightened that it’s

sometimes surreal. Yet I can’t make it up: it’s absolutely there. I just love that. I’ve loved that for twenty years. I’ve tried everything from a half-frame camera to eleven by fourteen, but I stick to making contact prints. And eight by ten seems to be my size.¹

Nevertheless, there came a time when Nixon convinced himself of the value of making larger prints, and since 2006 The Museum of Modern Art has collected the Brown Sisters photographs in two sizes: both the lusciously tactile eight-by-ten-inch contact prints and striking twenty-by-twenty-four-inch enlargements. With the advent of the digital era, our eyes have become accustomed to seeing ever-larger photographic prints, but even Nixon’s smaller ones can withstand large spaces. He has never pursued the fashionable, and one might argue that the primary difference between the smaller prints and the larger ones is experiential: the larger prints may sacrifice the intimacy of the smaller scale, but one can appreciate them from a distance that stands in for a distance in time, the remove of the viewers suggesting the sisters’ own remove from their younger selves.

Bebe Nixon has observed that the power of her husband’s annual series of portraits is “evolving,” and this has nothing to do with scale. We note the physical manifestations of the passage of time, we speculate on the significance of an expression, a gesture, an article of clothing, we remark on the variety of the pictorial solutions Nixon finds within strict technical and formal parameters, and we marvel at the trust among these participants. In the end, we grow older along with these women, yet we are confronted with four lives we will never know through the eyes of a fifth. And in the space created through that ignorance, we find the potential for understanding the series as a work of art, despite our familiarity with the ritual of standing before a camera with friends or relatives.

In his first published statement about photography, written the year he made the first of the Brown Sisters portraits, Nixon remarked, “The world is infinitely more interesting than any of my opinions about it.”² If he was modest about his opinions, though, his photographs clearly show how the camera can capture that infinitely interesting world; and to the attentive viewer, these

silent records, with their countless shades of visual and emotional gray, can promote a new appreciation of an intangible part of it: the world of time and age, of commitment and love.

Sarah Hermanson Meister
Curator, Department of Photography

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Notes

1. Nicholas Nixon, *Family Pictures: Photographs by Nicholas Nixon* (Washington, D.C., and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, in association with Constance Sullivan Editions, 1991), p. 6. With characteristic disregard for predictability, the year after this book was published Nixon would begin using a camera with a fourteen-by-seventeen-inch negative to photograph his wife and children and for a series made at the Perkins School for the Blind, in Watertown, Massachusetts.
2. William Jenkins, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* (Rochester, N.Y.: International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, 1975), p. 5.

A Note on the Prints

The Museum of Modern Art has collected the Brown Sisters photographs since 1976. For the first thirty years of the series, it acquired only gelatin silver contact prints, each measuring 7¹¹/₁₆ by 9¹¹/₁₆ inches (19.6 by 24.6 centimeters), a size corresponding to the image area of Nixon's 8-by-10-inch film negatives. In 2006 the Museum acquired a complete set of the existing photographs as enlargements printed on sheets measuring 20 by 24 inches (50.8 by 61 centimeters); and from that year on, it acquired prints of each new photograph in both sizes. The Museum gratefully acknowledges the generosity of Peter MacGill in the acquisition of the larger prints from before 2006; support for these works came from the Photography Council Fund (for the prints from 1975 to 1990) and the Committee on Photography Fund (for the prints from 1991 to 2005). The contact prints, and the enlargements from 2006 onward, bear the credit lines in the list following, which also indicates where each photograph was taken.

1975: New Canaan, Connecticut. Gift of the artist
1976: Hartford, Connecticut. Purchase
1977: Cambridge, Massachusetts. John Parkinson III Fund
1978: Harwich Port, Massachusetts. John Parkinson III Fund
1979: Marblehead, Massachusetts. Gift of the artist
1980: East Greenwich, Rhode Island. Acquired through the generosity of Pierre N. Leval
1981: Cincinnati, Ohio. David H. McAlpin Fund
1982: Ipswich, Massachusetts. Gift of the artist
1983: Allston, Massachusetts. David H. McAlpin Fund
1984: Truro, Massachusetts. Gift of the artist
1985: Brighton, Massachusetts. Gift of the artist
1986: Cambridge, Massachusetts. Lois and Bruce Zenkel Fund
1987: Chatham, Massachusetts. John Parkinson III Fund
1988: Wellesley, Massachusetts. The Family of Man Fund
1989: Cambridge, Massachusetts. The Family of Man Fund
1990: Woodstock, Vermont. Gift of the artist
1991: Watertown, Massachusetts. Purchase

1992: Concord, Massachusetts. Geraldine J. Murphy Fund
1993: Boston, Massachusetts. Gift of the artist
1994: Grantham, New Hampshire. Lois and Bruce Zenkel Fund
1995: Marblehead, Massachusetts. The Family of Man Fund
1996: Lexington, Massachusetts. The Family of Man Fund
1997: Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts. Gift of the artist
1998: Falmouth, Massachusetts. Lois and Bruce Zenkel Fund
1999: Brookline, Massachusetts. Gift of the artist
2000: Eastham, Massachusetts. John Parkinson III Fund
2001: Brewster, Massachusetts. Gift of the artist
2002: Marblehead, Massachusetts. The Family of Man Fund
2003: Ipswich, Massachusetts. John Parkinson III Fund
2004: Cataumet, Massachusetts. Gift of the artist
2005: Cataumet, Massachusetts. Gift of the artist
2006: Wellesley College, Massachusetts. Committee on Photography Fund
2007: Cataumet, Massachusetts. Gift of the artist
2008: Dallas, Texas. Purchase

2009: Truro, Massachusetts. Gift of the artist
2010: Truro, Massachusetts. The Family of Man Fund
2011: Truro, Massachusetts. Gift of the artist
2012: Boston, Massachusetts. Acquired through the generosity of Roger Strong in honor of Robert B. Menschel
2013: Truro, Massachusetts. Gift of the artist
2014: Wellfleet, Massachusetts. Cornelius N. Bliss Memorial Fund

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