

The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release
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NICHOLAS NIXON: PICTURES OF PEOPLE

September 15 - November 13, 1988

The contemporary American photographer Nicholas Nixon is the subject of a major exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art from September 15 to November 13, 1988. Organized by Peter Galassi, curator, Department of Photography, NICHOLAS NIXON: PICTURES OF PEOPLE presents approximately 120 black-and-white photographs surveying Nixon's work of the past decade. In this work Nixon has brought fresh conviction to the idea that sympathetic pictures of ordinary people can address the deepest human values.

This exhibition and the accompanying book have been made possible by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts. John C. Waddell and Polaroid Corporation have provided additional support for the book.

PICTURES OF PEOPLE is divided into five sections representing the five major series Nixon has produced since 1977: photographs of groups of people outdoors (1977-82); portraits of the elderly (1983-85); nude studies of Nixon's family (1980-88); annual portraits of the photographer's wife and her three sisters (1975-88); and excerpts from work-in-progress on portraits of people with AIDS (since 1987).

In his essay, Peter Galassi observes that Nixon's work is free of irony and sentimental cliché. "His pictures persuade us that we see individuals, not symptoms of a problem, or, worse, heroes of the solution. This achievement arises from Nixon's talent for pictorial invention, his sureness of craft, and above all his frankness of purpose, without which the other two would matter little."

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Nixon works with a large, old-fashioned view camera that stands on a tripod. The camera is cumbersome, but its 8x10-inch negatives, printed in contact with the positive paper, yield photographs of great precision and subtlety. In the seventies Nixon was a leader among young photographers who revived use of the view camera, which had been out of fashion under the quick-shot aesthetic of the sixties. He first came to prominence with a series of richly detailed city views, exhibited at The Museum of Modern Art in 1976.

In the late seventies Nixon began using his view camera to photograph people outdoors or on their front porches. As the photographer became a virtuoso of his craft, the pictures became increasingly complex and supple. By 1982, when he completed the series, he had achieved a surprising and unprecedented degree of spontaneity in large-camera work. This stylistic innovation goes hand in hand with the psychological directness, the disarming candor of the pictures.

In the subsequent series of portraits of old people, made in 1984-85, Nixon's pictures became simpler and more penetrating. Galassi writes, "Their terrible beauty and iconic grandeur address death with impersonal gravity, uncorrupted by pity." Nixon turned next to the very young. His nude studies of his wife and two small children celebrate the vitality of flesh, its beauty and promise. The theme of age, central to Nixon's work, also is the subject of his series of annual portraits of his wife and three sisters.

The exhibition concludes with excerpts from Nixon's current work, begun in the summer of 1987, on sequences of portraits of people with AIDS. Marking intervals ranging from a week to a month, the sequences record the harrowing progress and cruel finality of the disease. They also draw us to the person as an individual, not as an anonymous victim.

Nicholas Nixon was born in Detroit in 1947. He began to photograph in 1969, the year he earned a B.A. from the University of Michigan. In 1974 he received a Masters of Fine Arts in photography from the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque. That year he moved to Cambridge and started teaching at the Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, where he has been a professor since 1985. Nixon's work has been widely exhibited in the United States. He has received two Guggenheim Fellowships, in 1977 and in 1986, and, since 1976, three grants from the National Endowment for the Arts.

After its New York showing, NICHOLAS NIXON: PICTURES OF PEOPLE will travel to The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (February 4 - April 15, 1989), The Detroit Institute of Arts (May 16 - July 2, 1989), and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (September 1 - November 5, 1989). After traveling to Europe in 1990, the exhibition will resume its domestic tour.

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LECTURE: Tuesday, October 11, 6:30 p.m.
Nicholas Nixon will show and discuss his work.

Tickets are \$8, members \$7, students \$5, and are available in advance at the Museum's lobby information desk or by sending payment with a stamped, self-addressed envelope to the Department of Education, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, NY 10019.

PUBLICATION: Nicholas Nixon: Pictures of People by Peter Galassi. 128 pages. 91 tritone illustrations, with 85 plates reproducing Nixon's subtle contact prints in the size of the original and with an unusually high degree of fidelity. Published by The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Clothbound, \$40.00; paperbound, \$18.95; available in the Museum Store. Clothbound, distributed by New York Graphic Society Books/Little, Brown and Company, Boston.

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For further information, contact the Department of Public Information, 212/708-9750.