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## COMPELLING PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAITS IN “NICHOLAS NIXON: THE BROWN SISTERS” OPENS NOVEMBER 13 AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART



**Nicholas Nixon**

***The Brown Sisters, 1978***

gelatin silver print

sheet: 20.2 x 25.2 cm (7 15/16 x 9 15/16)

National Gallery of Art, Washington, Patrons' Permanent Fund, 2001.67.168

Washington, DC—One of the most compelling investigations of both portraiture and time in contemporary photography is on view in **Nicholas Nixon: The Brown Sisters**,

at the National Gallery of Art in the West Building ground floor photography galleries from November 13, 2005, through February 20, 2006. The exhibition presents photographer Nicholas Nixon's best-known work, a series of black-and-white portraits of his wife Bebe and her three sisters taken each year since 1975. While the photographs have their roots in family snapshots, the rigor of the artist and the commitment of the women to the project transcend their heritage to create a moving testament of human relationships.

The series as a whole has become a remarkable record that grows in strength with each new addition. It has also attracted much attention: in 1999 the Museum of Modern Art in New York displayed the first 25 years; a version also has been shown at Harvard University's Fogg Museum. Earlier in 2005, 30 years of the annual pictures were included in an exhibition of Nixon's work at the Cincinnati Art Museum. The exhibition of 31 photographs in Washington, DC is organized by the National Gallery of Art.

"Nixon's eloquent photographs command our attention and provoke our curiosity," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "We are delighted to present this landmark series to visitors to the National Mall from around the world."

### **Exhibition Support**

The exhibition is made possible through the generous support of the Trellis Fund and The Ryna and Melvin Cohen Family Foundation.

### **The Exhibition**

Since 1975, Nicholas Nixon has photographed his wife Bebe and her three sisters each year, working within a number of deliberate constraints. The format of the pictures was set with the first one and has not varied substantially in the intervening 31 years. The sisters are lined up in the same order from left to right: Heather, Mimi, Bebe, Laurie. With few exceptions, the setting is outdoors on a lawn or a beach, and in natural light. Nixon, who stands before the group with an 8x10 view camera, appears at times as a shadow cast across the women. No matter how many exposures he makes, Nixon selects only one to represent the women each year.

Working within these limited parameters, Nixon has created a powerful essay on the passage of time, capturing attendant changes and shifting moods while testifying to the enduring nature of family ties. When all 31 photographs made between 1975 and 2005 are examined, viewers can study not only incidental changes in background, lighting, and dress, but also the gradual, incremental aging of the women, and such momentous life-events as pregnancy. Close scrutiny also suggests changes in both the demeanor and psychology of the women and their relationships with each other.

Nixon's admiration for photographer Walker Evans first led him to work with large-format cameras, first one that uses 4 x 5 inch negatives and then one that uses 8 x 10 inch negatives. For *The Brown Sisters*, he employs a large 8 x 10 view camera mounted on a tripod and must load each sheet of film separately for each exposure. He then uses his 8 x 10 negatives to make contact prints, which gives the resulting photographs maximum clarity and impact.

### **Artist's Biography**

Nicholas Nixon was born in 1947 in Detroit, Michigan. He studied American literature at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and received an MFA in photography at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque. Nixon has worked as an independent photographer since 1974. He is the recipient of two John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowships, three National Endowment for the Arts Photographer's Fellowships, and a Massachusetts Council for the Arts "New Works" Grant. He currently is a professor of photography at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston.

Nixon has been exploring portraiture and social photography since the 1970s. Although best known for *The Brown Sisters*, he has created several other series noted for their humanity and restrained emotion. Nixon often spends a year or two exploring his chosen theme: among his subjects have been nursing home residents (*Old People*), AIDS patients in their final months (*People with Aids*), and Boston schoolchildren (*School*).

His photographs have been exhibited at numerous museums and galleries, including the Art Institute of Chicago; Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio; and Museum of Modern

Art, New York. He has published many books of photographs, including: **Nicholas Nixon** (2003); **A City Seen** (2001); **The Brown Sisters** (1999); **School: Photographs from Three Schools** (1998); **People with AIDS** (1991); **Family Pictures** (1991); **Nicholas Nixon: Pictures of People** (1988); and **Photographs from One Year** (1983). Nixon's photographs are in the collections of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, among many others.

### **Curator and Related Activities**

Sarah Greenough, curator and head of the department of photographs, National Gallery of Art, is the exhibition curator.

Staff lecturer Sally Shelburne will present a Gallery Talk about the exhibition on November 16 and 29 and December 4 at 1:00 p.m.; and December 3 and 13 at noon.

Presented in conjunction with the exhibition, the documentary film *Other People's Pictures* (Cabot Philbrick and Lorca Shepperd, 2004, 53 minutes) captures nine passionate collectors who talk about their motives for collecting vintage snapshots. The filmmakers will be on hand to discuss the film when it is shown on Saturday, November 12 at 12:30 p.m. in the East Building Auditorium.

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## General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets along Constitution Avenue NW and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. With the exception of the atrium and library, the galleries in the East Building will be closing gradually beginning in July 2013 and will remain closed for approximately three years for Master Facilities Plan and renovations. For specific updates on gallery closings, visit [www.nga.gov/renovation](http://www.nga.gov/renovation) (<http://www.nga.gov/renovation>) .

For information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the Gallery's website at [www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov). Follow the Gallery on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt](http://www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt) and on Twitter at [twitter.com/ngadc](http://twitter.com/ngadc).

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

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