A GAZE THROUGH TIME

Carlos Gollonet

“But above all, Nixon photographs transmit affection and peace. Without this testimony, we are lost.”

Robert Adams

Two years ago, during the opening of the Judith Joy Ross exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in June 2023, Nicholas Nixon told me that the photograph he had taken the previous summer would be the last in The Brown Sisters series. I was stunned. At Fundación MAPFRE, we eagerly awaited each new portrait, immediately adding it to the series we had acquired in 2007. Year after year, it never failed to surprise us with its strength, despite being, in essence, almost the same photograph as the year before. This fascinating story had reached its end.

Indeed, Nixon and his subjects, defying our expectations, chose this unexpected conclusion to their journey. Now we are left to imagine what lies ahead for those lives that, over the years, have become so familiar to us. What might have unfolded had the series continued for another year, or two, or five? We all anticipated a cruel ending, one written by fate and beyond their control. But in the end, they were the ones to write the final chapter. And now, as in the best novels, all that is left for us to do is return to each episode of these shared lives, again and again, and let ourselves be carried away by everything they offer: the subtle changes from year to year, the narrative twists we sense beneath each image, the

evolution of each sister… The series provides us with an inexhaustible wealth of insight into the human condition. It is so captivating that how it has ended might seem beside the point. But it does matter. And as we now contemplate the final photograph, we cannot help but feel—as if we had reached the closing page of an unforgettable novel whose author had managed to temporarily draw us into its world—a strange disorientation, a bewildered sense of orphanhood.

In a recent interview, Nixon spoke of how he had been profoundly impacted by the work of one of the first photographers he discovered, Henri Cartier-Bresson. Upon seeing those images, he realized it was possible: "I could be a player rather than a spectator. I could discover things for myself. I could create objects to be proud of." (Nixon, in Gollonet 2017a, p. 21). Five decades later, there is no doubt that Nixon can be proud of having created—and shared with us—one of the most compelling and moving works on portraiture and the passage of time in the history of art.

Before that first encounter with photography, the young Nixon had been drawn to English literature, which he studied at the University of Michigan. That bedrock—shaped by William Faulkner, Charles Dickens, Ernest Hemingway, and W. B. Yeats, among others—laid a foundation that would slowly surface in his work. Even more so than the influence of the photographers he came to admire later, less evident in a body of work as original as his, one that has always stood apart from fashions or trends.

Nixon's way of working in series, some of which span years, brings a literary sense of narrative to his work. The most emblematic of these is The Brown Sisters, which, due to its scale and power, is not only his best-known series, but also the one that most invites the viewer to enter the hermetic world he constructs, to recognize themselves in it, and even to imagine how it might end. The series began in 1975 and concluded in 2022, unfolding alongside a prolific and intense body of work in which

portraiture has always been the main focus. Analyzing Nixon's other series—or, conversely, considering The Brown Sisters as a lens through which to view the rest—helps us to better understand both his formal evolution and his personal interests.

From the outset, when in the 1970s he began photographing New York and Boston—cities he would return to decades later—Nixon opted for the large-format 8 x 10-inch view camera, with which he took nearly all of his photographs, as its negative size renders enlargement unnecessary. This type of camera allowed him to achieve the remarkable sharpness that has become a hallmark of his work, as well as a tonal continuity so subtle, so uncannily precise, that it borders on the unreal. This gradation of tones gives shapes an extraordinary sense of volume, a depth that expands the space around them, inviting the viewer's gaze to linger on each detail—so exact, in fact, that it paradoxically opens the door to the intangible. It creates intervals through which time seeps in and, as Laura Terré puts it, transforms "objective" reality into poetic material. As she notes, "We are faced, therefore, with a body of work grounded in the pure, subtle, and complex observation of life—of phenomena embedded in time—and whose main concern is to transfer that observation clearly to the image" (translated from Terré 2020, p. 9).

At the end of that same decade, Nixon began his second major series: portraits of families living along the Charles River, near Boston. From this point on, portraiture—or more precisely, people—would become his main focus. In another body of work, families are often photographed on the porches of their homes, in impoverished neighborhoods of the American South. What stands out in these series is Nixon's surprising mastery of the heavy view camera, which he handles with astonishing ease, as if it were a lightweight instant camera, a facility reflected in the naturalness of his portraits. Two key elements now come to the fore in his work: the central role of natural light in the construction of his images, and his deep interest in people—their gestures, their physical closeness, their bodies, their gazes.

Around 1983, Nixon began photographing elderly residents of the nursing homes where he worked as a volunteer. This introduced a new kind of relationship between photographer and subject: one based on personal acquaintance. From that point on, direct human experience and an interest in the final stages of life would become recurring themes in his work. A notable shift also occurred in how he approached his subjects: he increasingly favored close-ups that revealed the marks of an entire life nearing its end.

That concern with the haunting presence of life approaching its conclusion became even more pronounced in his next project, People with AIDS, created in the late 1980s. His social commitment led him to photograph people living with AIDS from when he first met them until the moment of their death. Over time, he got to know them personally, interviewed them together with his wife, and continued to photograph them to the very end. By this point, it was evident that Nixon's human and ethical convictions took precedence over everything else: over trends, over the market. Few intellectuals placed their intelligence in the service of those suffering not only from a devastating, deadly illness but also from society's prejudice and incomprehension. As Sebastian Smee wrote of the photographer's attitude: "But he is a different kind of artist. A different kind of man. His artistic antennae are in tune with his human ones. And when that compassionate, human side is activated—when that happens—the artistic impulse kicks in too, the urgent need to take a good photograph" (Smee 2017, p. 263).

In the early 2000s, Nixon began photographing couples in extreme close-up: details of torsos, arms, and faces—forms that verge on the abstract yet speak to the physical and emotional intensity of intimate relationships. He also photographed his own family, that real and familiar universe in which he lives every day, and which would occupy a significant place in his work for several years. From this point on a renewed sense of attraction draw him back to familiar themes, which resurfaced in new variations:

cityscapes, in which he now experimented with even larger-format cameras (11 x 14 inches); portraits of Bebe, his wife; self-portraits; images of children; and more recently, of elderly hospital patients. “Nixon brings a warmth and a depth to his work that puts the tradition of concerned photography in a new light. This is not the sort of undertaking that gets your name on everyone’s lips, but there are other rewards for a man in search of the wonderful” (Aletti 1999).

In all these other series that unfold in parallel with The Brown sisters, Nixon consistently speaks to the viewer about the human experience and the cycle of life, showing not only the fragility but also the mysterious capacity for resilience of the human being. Yet it is undoubtedly in The Brown Sisters that the central concern of his entire body of work becomes most apparent: the passage of time. Reflecting on this series, Antonio Muñoz Molina wrote that “the millions of words in À la recherche du temps perdu tell us less about the passage of time than the sequence of group portraits Nicholas Nixon continues to take of the Brown sisters” (translated from Muñoz Molina 2015, p. 9). It is always revealing to observe visitors at an exhibition featuring this series: how they see themselves, visibly moved, in that mirror toward which we are all advancing—in which glimpses of lived stories emerge, stories they project themselves into, along with the inevitable, painful sense of loss they awaken. “Taking its vital pulse, Nixon tells us, in real time, of the inexorable passage of time that shapes and blurs us” (translated from Terré 2020, p. 8).

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In 1974, during a family gathering, Nixon took the first photograph of his wife with her three sisters. But it wasn’t until the following year, pleased with the new picture of the group he had just taken, that he decided to propose to the sisters the idea of taking a new picture every year. This idea, in fact, wasn’t entirely new: it echoed a family tradition established by his father-in-law, who had made a habit of photographing his daughters every year and using the resulting image as a Christmas

card. Nixon later reflected on that first image of his: “I think the real emotion and directness of the first photograph is what made us all like it immediately, and that’s probably also why her parents didn’t” (Nixon, in Gollonet 2017a, p. 33). But turning a family ritual into a work of art is something else entirely: it requires intention, cooperation, enthusiasm, and, it must be said, being an artist.

Since 1976, the year of the group’s second photograph, the shots have always been taken outdoors, in natural light, with the sisters positioned in the same order. Nixon’s wife, Bebe, second from the right, was twenty-five years old at the time, and her sisters—Heather, Laurie, and Mimi, from left to right—were twenty-three, fifteen, and twenty-one, respectively. Nixon took several shots, yet only one, selected with the sisters’ participation, would become part of the series.

Sarah Hermanson Meister points to the mastery of the medium these images reveal. Among other aspects, she highlights “the variety of pictorial solutions Nixon finds without abandoning strict technical and formal parameters” (Hermanson Meister 2014, n.p.). These solutions, united by a wise use of light, often go unnoticed by most, but sooner or later, they draw the viewer in. How can we not delight, when looking again at the earliest photographs, in the plasticity that the light lends to the images of those young sisters, beautiful, defiant, with a whole future ahead of them? The future… In this series, the measure of time is exact, rhythmic, inexorable—but this is only a partial truth: while calendars give days and years the same duration, we know that time seems to speed up with age. Geoff Dyer said, “From a certain age, usually around fifty or after the death of one’s parents, one of the main experiences is that time is running out, or that it slips away with you” (Dyer 2015, p. 315).

I have known the Nixons since the late twentieth century, but today I no longer view the series with the same eyes I did twenty-odd years ago. Back then, I did not think about the future, did not identify with their age, did not feel I was growing older as they were, even though my age

falls between Mimi's and Laurie's. Today, we are all older. We do not want to think about the future, but we do, and we look at life and the series from a different perspective: its emotional weight grows with each new image and with every year that passes. This is where its full strength lies: in rhythm, in repetition, in making us participants in this story of theirs that we once approached with curiosity and now with anguish, because we see in it the reflection of our own lives as they, too, slip away.

The success of this project is due to the photographer, but also to the collaboration of these women, who have continued to pose year after year despite the worldwide attention that these private scenes have garnered in successive exhibitions and publications dedicated to the series. Nixon expressed his gratitude for their collaboration in the dedication included in one such publication: "These portraits 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 center of my life. How lucky, how grateful I am" (Galassi 2008).

Here we conclude with Nixon and the Brown sisters, forty-eight years later, from defiant youth to inexorable old age—lives full and intense, condensed into just a few minutes as we turn these pages. We thank all five of them for this precious gift and for still being here among us, allowing us to look at these pages together and remember their lives. Life goes on. Let us enjoy the present before it becomes the past.

Most experiences are unsayable, they happen in a space that no word has ever entered, and more unsayable than all other things are works of art, those mysterious existences whose life endures beside our own small, transitory life."

Rainer Maria Rilke