

Review of The Brown Sisters

by Peter Brown

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The Brown Sisters

Photographs by Nicholas Nixon

Afterword by Peter Galassi

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This is a mesmerizing book. I have left it around various vacation homes over the past few weeks, and family and friends - particularly women, (and even more particularly, those in their forties or fifties), pick it up, sit down, drift into it as into a dream, and do not re-emerge until they are awakened by something in the present.

Generally, most people do not react to photographic books in this way. More often than photographers like to admit, there is a swift riffling of pages from back to front (a sweep that often dings up the reproductions), a few glances, three or four long stares, and then that pole-axed look, upwards, blank, maybe thinking, maybe a little confused. But down goes the book. Finished.

Not so this time. The Brown sisters get questioning brows, wry smiles, knowing nods, shaking heads - a reaction that is almost the body equivalent of listening to salsa music - and this bobbing and weaving goes on, oblivious to all surroundings.

Like many, I have been aware of Nicholas Nixon's long term portrait project with the Brown sisters. The photographs have been shown singly and in small groups in many places over time, but have not, to my knowledge, been exhibited or published in such quantity before. (Twenty-five years and the cusp of a new millennium are good places to pause and reflect.)

These sisters - Heather, Mimi, Bebe (Nixon's wife) and Laurie have been photographed - grouped together, standing in the same order, annually (one chosen photograph a year), for the past quarter century. An eight by ten inch view camera (a beautiful, bulky machine mounted on a tripod) and black and white film have been used, as they have in Nixon's past work.

The portraits, which are varied in place and season, have, in their early stages, a cool if not combative distance about them; yet as the series progresses, a mix of intensity, indifference, care and warmth, shift from year to year, and from face to face, until a closeness that the sisters share with each other, and ultimately with the viewer, becomes paramount. The photographs are of interest individually but come into new power when viewed as a sequence. And in some ways, they are as compelling for what they refuse to show, as for what they reveal.

What they do show, and what seldom fails to rivet those who pick up the book, is the sight of a small group of our contemporaries aging before our eyes.

These are beautiful, and as Nixon says in his short acknowledgment, "strong" women. They seem (and "seem" is the mystery word which swirls with glee throughout this book) to be members of a family from which most of us would be happy to be counted. A poet friend of mine, an only child (like Nixon), after finishing the book, looked at me with the eyes of a woman more than a little cheated by life, and said in the voice of a small girl, "I want to be one of them! I want them for my sisters!"

What do we know about them? Not much, really. At bedrock, we understand what they have looked like for fractions of twenty-five specific seconds, over the course of twenty-five years. We also know that there are four of them - a fact remarkable in its own right. (I have known only one other "four-sistered" family in my life.) There is an age difference of ten years between the oldest and youngest, with the series beginning in 1974 when Mimi was fifteen and Bebe twenty-five. The sisters are carefully and "tastefully" dressed, though in casual ways, with Mimi, the youngest, being the most maverick in terms of style. She alone is pregnant (in the 1992 photograph), the only obvious pregnancy. The sisters have aged, in conventional ways, at slightly different rates. They are photographed with little identifiable background - though beach, ocean rocks, shrubbery, lawns, and, a couple of times, a wall make their presence known. The photographs are taken most often during the summer. We seem to be on the East Coast and the sisters seem to be middle class easterners - but perhaps not. In some photographs they hold each other, in others they are more separate, and in some there is a mix of embrace. Their facial expressions vary, but earlier photographs seem to more strongly confront the viewer than the more receptive images that end the book. And there are many facts of dress, hairstyle and posture that would be of interest to a cultural anthropologist (facts that will increase in power over time), but facts that the rest of us interpret in spontaneous ways.

Peter Galassi's afterword fills in a bit more, but not much: a college graduation after which the photographs began in earnest; the Brown parents' habit of photographing the sisters for Christmas cards when they were kids; the fact that Nixon is not only an only child, but the son of two other only children; a few dates from which we can guess at ages - but purposely, the essay gives away little. We are meant to react to these photographs only as images, without much backup or explanation. And this is both interesting and irritating. And interesting in its irritation.

We know nothing, for example (apart from intuition), of the obviously complex relations between the sisters, of their mixed responses to the photographer, of their marriages or the lack of them, of children, jobs, educations, pasts, senses of humor, passions, hates, homes, health, et cetera, et cetera...

Yet I drifted happily and easily into speculation. As Galassi notes, the portraits are like the family photographs that all of us have in albums and boxes at home (though these are considerably more disciplined). And he points out what we're not a part of: the subtext, of course, the intimacy that these people have shared over many years.

What are we to make of the photographs then? For that matter, why should we care about them at all? A variety of responses popped up for me, all intertwined. I'd like to separate them a bit, to pull them apart, because the book can be approached from a variety of points of view. (Though that first confused rush of connection, curiosity and voyeuristic fascination is perhaps the most encompassing response we will have, and such a reaction, without a lot of structured thought may be the best way to think of the book in the long run.)

But as preface, the idea itself, a very simple one, is overwhelming as we watch it move through a quarter of a century. This clearly is a collaboration. Nixon is the photographer, but for twenty-five years, the sisters have choreographed these images with him. And they seem much less subjects of a photographer's scrutiny than active participants in a long term process (though again, we don't know the full story). We do understand quickly what these people are up to however, and I wished (somewhat grumpily) that I had had the forethought to do the same with my own family. Anyone could create something roughly equivalent with a point and shoot (though again not as far reaching or beautiful), but still... a few hours at most, once a year, and a resonant record would exist. What else is there?

In an expanding order of my own interests: first, let me dispense, at least momentarily, with the questions of background, and look at the images simply as visual material, non-metaphoric and unladen by content: the facts, simply those photographic facts. I found that, particularly as a photographer, (though with some difficulty), I could examine the photos as I might a hyperrealist painting of a shop front, say. Just ferreting out information. I watched, from image to image, as Nixon's camera moved in front of the sisters, changing its line of view, ratcheting up and down, moving back and forth, occasionally throwing a shadow over the four - but each time culminating in a photograph that by virtue of the camera's positioning, created a specific mix, a structure that might be construed as intimate, dominant, careful, mysterious, neutral etc... a construct that among other things might begin to define a mood or a set of feelings. I found myself looking within this structure as well: the way the sisters are sometimes centered, sometimes not, sometimes cropped on one side or another (a leg, an arm, half a face missing). I looked at occasional lens distortion (which can give a creepy migraine-like quality), at the varied light that Nixon is interested in (which is normally a sensual part of his work) - and on occasion, its drab lack; at the intermittent use of flash; at the various ways the women fit into the background of leaves, rocks, sky, etc.; at the mix of tonal values (their beauty, derived from the eight by ten contact prints from which these reproductions are made); at the lack of grain; the intimate size of the book; the sisters' eye contact with the lens, or not, etc. etc. And while all of this is an interesting exercise, it ultimately pales because of the human content of the photographs. These are multi-layered pictures of people and we want to make more of them than a formalist reading allows. (Though on formalist grounds, it should be noted that Nixon has worked with large format cameras in the street, at home and in a variety of hospitals and schools for

many years, and with remarkable dexterity. While these portraits are more studied and compositionally doctrinaire than most of his other work, lyrical flourishes of line and background are still a motive force - although in a kind of miniaturist fashion.)

Secondly, one might put on another set of blinders and look at the book just as pictures of these particular women, again without metaphoric thought - just considering the "news" of their metamorphoses - watching them grow, change and age. One might leaf through the book a number of times, keeping an eye out for specific things: each woman as an individual; the group as a whole (the sisters' dress, the changes in group facial expression and body language, the shifting sibling alliances noted through linkage of arms and the like) - and as a finale, one might just zip through the book quickly, almost as if viewing a film, to see what holds.

Third, one can't fully consider the images outside the historical context of the last twenty-five years. The Brown sisters, at some point in our thought, will stand in for white middle-class American women who have grown up in the latter part of the twentieth century; some distillation of all that we have come to believe about this generation will make itself known.

In the progression of these images, there seems to me to be a parallel to the lives of many women I have known of the Brown sisters' age, women both in my family, as well as friends. First, we should bear in mind that these are photographs of four sisters. Just that. Four sisters who react to each other and to another family member who happens to be photographing them in the same sorts of ways that we all have reacted in our own lives. There is a mute intimacy to this that we appreciate - as well as a tenderness and vulnerability from which other issues spring.

Grossly oversimplified: the expressive stances of the sisters move (in varied ways) from somewhat symbolic postures taken in the seventies, which can be read, either as an immediate reaction to Nixon and the act of being photographed - or, more interestingly perhaps, as having been generated by those particular times; stances set in response to a configuration of cultural expectations. Generational politics, patriarchal and feminist issues seem at the forefront, but a wide variety of other social and family concerns must be involved as well. Each woman seems, in general, more alone than a part of the group, yet still projects a great sense of self-sufficiency. The look and feel of some of the gentler aspects of Judy Dater's early work come to mind as a parallel. In the eighties - greater closeness (photographically speaking) develops between the sisters, yet still, a somewhat confrontational stance is taken in regard to the outside - not a lot of smiling, but arms linked, ample strength apparent, yet less as individuals and more as a group. And in the nineties, little of all this is lost. What is won, however is a visible warmth, and a difficult but resonant peace - just look at these faces. We have watched the sisters age for a quarter of a century in a matter of minutes. These women, though changed, are quite beautiful, and in deeper ways now, than when they were young. They greet us openly, if mysteriously, and the bond between

them is profound. (As is the courage that they show, in allowing us to watch them age, in this era of perpetual youth.)

As clichéd and absurdly rushed as this synopsis may sound, the cumulative effect of what we see, is moving. To witness, as confrontation, strength, love, and wisdom combine - in the sisters, in their group and in this group's relation to the outside, is remarkable in its own right. Yet it's also an experience that can help one look to one's own past, and to the lives of one's own loved ones.

A great degree of all of this, of course, is conjecture. And there is still unresolved tension, as the sisters' postures and miens continue to shift, even in these later years. But in viewing the book again and again, this multifaceted change, though difficult to pin down, is beautiful to watch.

One can try to decipher the series in greater depth by reading the work in more literal ways - but this is an imposing job. As I've said, the sisters' postures, expressions, clothing, and various on-camera roles - as sisters, individuals, symbolic forces, et cetera, seem to have been formed by an enormous mix of personal and cultural forces. The worlds of sibling politics, the wider family, the lives of women in a strongly feminist time, the inner workings of the art world, the inconsistencies of the moment are all at play. And there is so much more...

Hundreds of variant thoughts and questions, times four, inform the creation of each image. And this does not include the input from Nixon, which is considerable. Once his decisions are factored in, we might (with a sense of the truly ridiculous) multiply each set of annual influences by the twenty-five years to arrive at the web of cross currents that create the book's infrastructure. All of which is to say: that, unless provided with voluminous information, to try to divine in credible ways, why one sister looks pleased, for example in 1976 and is vaguely troubled in 1977, is beyond useful thought.

(And again, we have Nixon, the wild card, who in making his ten or twelve negatives a year, affords himself an interesting choice as editor of this work. How do his interpretations affect the soul of the series?)

Finally, I give up trying to create biography and move on to fiction, or at least some sort of novelistic non-fiction. And I find myself projecting first into the future (thoughts of aging and death, by their nature go hand in hand); and I wonder where these women will be in another twenty-five years. How long will the series continue?

Which leads to the fourth, and to me the most enjoyable way to experience this book: just let your imagination run rampant. Flip the pages back and forth (carefully), and try to figure out what has happened: wonder about the frowns and smiles, watch Laurie age, watch Mimi change her hair style, consider the remarkable intensity of Bebe... wonder if that's Lake Michigan or the Chesapeake Bay, or Maine... think of the cousins playing tag in the background. Think of the poor husbands, talking among themselves as they wander about on the lawn checking in with their law firms or sociology departments by cell phone. Think about the bad pictures, the out-takes, the spaghetti spilled on the blouse that was just right for the photo, watch the

elderly Browns doing the dishes, listen to the dinner table conversation, consider the sibling rivalry, the news of the new job, the warmth, the backsliding into bickering, the phone calls, the email, the ball games, the rides to the airport, the rent cars: the whole ragtag novel of lives shared and denied; a hodgepodge of thoughts that are linked uncontrollably and comparatively to one's own life, one's own friends and family, and one's own recollections of time past.

And finally, we should take Galassi's reticent and wise approach seriously, in which he maintains that little need be said about these images at all. No commentary is necessary of course, when we can each provide our own. And to say too much as interpretation, is, (as often is the case with photographs) to clumsily cobble a reproduction of something that has already been communicated with grace and circumspection.

Yet a wide variety of thought does come rumbling into consciousness as we wander wistfully or march purposefully through this book. And it's this slippery, serious, happy, and very multi-faceted potential (from photographs that are actually very quiet), that gives the book its power and its mystery.

More questions are posed than answered. But the questions point down roads that seem familiar. And while some know the territory, and some may not, (I wonder how a poor nineteen year old woman from south Boston, for example, might react to these images), to many, this middle-class world is one that has been shared. In the last analysis, and in the most humane way, the Brown sisters do become our sisters. We are curious about their lives, because if given the opportunity, we are curious people. An invitation has been made. It's been made quietly, lovingly and with an artful attempt to define a limited but powerful set of truths. We recognize the validity and seriousness of the attempt and say, sure we'll take a look, and we do so, with interest.

In the end, this is a book, which like these women, ages well. Their lives, to a surprising degree, have become an open book. One opens The Brown Sisters, this haunting, intimate, literal book often, each time hopeful, each time searching out new, truthful, bittersweet things.