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Photographer Nicholas Nixon's next big challenge: nudes

Nicholas Nixon's photographs shed light on the human experience -- including the complicated relationships we have with our own bodies

By [Linda Matchan](#) | GLOBE STAFF JANUARY 31, 2012



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Nicholas Nixon photographs a woman (who wished to remain unidentified) in her apartment at an assisted living facility.

It is an odd first encounter.

A 76-year-old woman waits in her living room in an assisted living facility, wearing nothing but a sarong. A photographer - she's known him all of an hour - carefully studies her form.

The woman drops the sarong. The man peers through his lens.

“Oh my God, aren't you beautiful,” he tells the woman, as she eases herself into a flowered wing chair. “You are, you're wonderful.”

Pornographic? In another context, maybe. But the man is Nicholas Nixon, the distinguished large-format photographer from Brookline, and what he sees through his lens is not simply nudity.

“I saw her pride in herself,” he said, a few days later. “I saw her lack of sexual modesty. I saw the baby marks on her stomach, and found that kind of touching. I saw a face that was dignified.”

For more than three decades, Nixon has ranked among the most respected photographers in the country. His photos are in the collections of major art museums including the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York, and the National Gallery of Art, in Washington.

His most famous work is “The Brown Sisters,” an ongoing series of portraits of his wife and her three sisters beginning in 1975, exhibited last year at the Museum of Fine Arts. “It's one of the most significant photographic projects of the modern era,” said Gus Kayafas, who founded the photography department of Massachusetts College of Art and Design, where Nixon has taught since 1975.

Nixon's subject, broadly speaking, is the human experience and cycle of life. He has photographed his family, children, the sick, the dying, the poor, souls both old and new. He just completed a series of people over the age of 100, and is finishing up another of first-born babies and their mothers.

And now he is working on a new project: nude portraits of adults at home. It's part of what he refers to as his "ongoing human catalog of spirit and bodies." Years ago, he said, he learned "how beautiful and expressive the skin was."

He's not interested in what's sexy, he said. "I'm interested in who's home."

Unfortunately, for Nixon, not enough people are opening the door.

Never has he had so much trouble finding subjects. When he was looking to shoot couples, he advertised in local newspapers and "people called up by the flocks." For his project on people over 100, he asked for referrals from doctors at Boston Medical Center and was swamped with volunteers. To find mothers of babies, he joined a Jamaica Plain mothers' chat group and got 200 subjects in a month.

Not this time, although it's not for want of trying. He asks everyone he meets if they will pose for him. He's put word out to fellow faculty members at MassArt. He posted a request with his neighborhood association chat group, phrasing it carefully so it won't sound like a Craigslist come-on, promising to "make the pictures as beautiful and faithful as I can" and offering complete control over what might be published. He's gone back to the mothers' chat group, but instead of 200 replies, this time he only got three or four.

He's even swallowed hard and created a website that issues a call for volunteers, tinyurl.com/nicholasnixon, despite his galleries' preference for him not to have his own site; he is represented by Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco and Pace/MacGill in New York. "I've never had a website," Nixon said. "They think it's tacky."

Mostly, he's received polite refusals. "Nobody has gotten horrified," said Nixon, 64. "Most people's reaction is: 'That's not for me.'"

So who is it for? Rejection has taught Nixon a lesson about people's complicated relationships to their own bodies.

"I've learned everybody's body is a bigger part of life than I thought," Nixon said. "It's a secret just to them or whoever their sweetheart is. The mortician sees it at the end. Doctors and nurses see it along the way. But you guard it for yourself, and there is something very artificial about taking [your clothes] off for a viewer. . . . I guess I've learned there is something a little sacred about one's body, and I've learned how to be more humble, more appreciative of the gift of their suspending that for me."

Nixon is a slight man with piercing eyes, who speaks in direct, declarative sentences. A tour of his home starts with the walls, lined with mostly black and white pictures by other photographers - Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, Abelardo Morell, William Christenberry - whose work he admires and has traded for his own. It ends at the top of the stairs in his darkroom, a space not often seen in homes, or elsewhere, these days. The same spot on one wall is reserved for the most recent Brown Sisters photo. There have been 37 Brown Sisters photos so far, one taken each year.

Nixon shoots in black and white with a clunky Deardorff 8×10 view camera, the old-fashioned kind with a mahogany body, bellows, and black focusing cloth, which he reloads for each exposure. The darkroom is where he does the “satisfying” work of converting the negatives into contact prints. Digital photography holds little appeal for Nixon, known for the intimacy of his work and meticulous detail.

What he produces in the darkroom, he said, “is the sharpest and clearest thing in the world. Nothing comes close. You don’t believe it as much.”

Perhaps too much for people he’d like to photograph nude. He made a rule for himself when he started the project, which is that every picture had to have a face. (He broke it last week, though, photographing a man with tattoos up his neck. “His body was skinny and long and beautiful and his face would have wrecked it,” Nixon said. (“His face wasn’t as interesting as his body.”))

Eroticism, he said, is not the point of this project. “It’s about earthiness, it’s about sensuality. It’s about ease of self in the skin,” he said.

He would like to photograph 200 people, to distill it down to the 50 or 60 “really good ones” he would like when he is done, whenever that might be. “It’s the kind of project that could go on for a long time as I age, the subjects age, new subjects come up.” There will be a show at both galleries first, hopefully a book later. The prints will be for sale in the galleries, “but I have little hope of their selling,” Nixon said.

“It’s skewed toward upper class well-educated white people,” he said, “with some sympathy toward the arts.”

Most of his subjects have never posed nude before, including Dan Watt, 71, who lives in Cambridge and posed for Nixon with his wife of 42 years, Molly Lynn Watt. “I don’t normally take my clothes off for people,” she said. “I’m not a nudist or whatever that term is that people use for that these days.” Dan knew about Nixon from his show at the MFA; Molly persuaded him to be photographed.

“I thought it would be fun,” said Molly, a retired educator and a poet who just turned 74. “I thought having our photograph taken nude could be kind of interesting, a celebration of where I am at this time in my life. I am not much of an exhibitionist and I don’t have this fabulous body, but it has been a wonderful body and it’s still serving me.”

At the moment, Nixon is photographing everyone who volunteers. There’s just one person he will not shoot: himself. He’s sitting this one out. “I don’t want a nude version of myself in public,” he said.