

Photo exhibit documents Providence's '60s transformation



A Harry Callahan look at Providence from 1966. It is one of 24 photos in the exhibit, "The Providence Album, Vol. 1," at the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage.

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The exhibit, which will be on display at the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage on Benefit St., beginning Saturday at 5 p.m. through July 18, contains 24 photographs by Harry Callahan and Carmel Vitullo.

PROVIDENCE — Visitors to “The Providence Album, Vol. 1,” a photography exhibit of photos from the 1960s, will be transported to a moment in Providence’s history that represents a time of transformation.

“This was the period where population was falling drastically in Providence,” said Marisa Brown, the assistant director of programs for the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage at Brown University, as she stood among the black-and-white photographs hanging on the walls.

The exhibit, on display at the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage, 357 Benefit St., beginning Saturday at 5 p.m. through July 18, contains 24 photographs by Harry Callahan, who established the photography program at the Rhode Island School of Design in 1961, and Carmel Vitullo, a Providence-born photographer. It also includes a video of interviews with older Providence residents who reflected on living through this era of the city’s history.

“It’s sort of an anxious period for the city in its history because there’s an awareness by everyone, including these artists, but also the city plan commission, people who are living in Providence, that they’re not really sure what the future of the city is going to be with all of this population loss,” Brown said.

The photographs, all black-and-white, portray different aspects of city life and varied artistic approaches.

“Callahan and Vitullo have very different photography styles and working processes,” said Yilin Huang, a first-year master’s student in public humanities at Brown University who is assisting with the exhibit.

Vitullo got up close and personal with her subjects, while Callahan was more shy and didn’t ask his subjects for permission before photographing them.

“He just placed the camera at the height of his waist and just walked through the street,” Huang said.

The Vitullo photographs were loaned to the exhibit by the Bert Gallery in Providence and the Callahan photos came from the David Winton Bell Gallery at Brown.

The exhibit is free and part of a year-long initiative called Year of the City: The Providence Project, which is meant to explore the history, life and culture of Providence through year-round events hosted by more than 50 curators.

Before “The Providence Album, Vol. 1” opens Saturday night, Brown will be helping lead a citywide walk that will take participants through various neighborhoods of Providence, she said. The leaders of the walk will ask people on the street for directions and take participants past locations of historical, cultural or artistic significance to create a kind of “crowd-sourced” map of the city, she said.

The walk will leave from the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage at 9 a.m. on Saturday and return in time for the opening reception of the photography exhibit at 5 p.m. Similar walks will take place throughout the weekend. See [this link](#) for a full schedule.

A similar series of walks entitled Este Es Mi Barrio will take place as part of the Year of the City throughout the summer and guide participants through areas significant to Rhode Island’s Latino communities.

While the walking tours give people a view of their city as it is now, the photos in “The Providence Album, Vol. 1” will give visitors to the exhibit a new perspective on how their city is ever-changing, said Dashiell Wasserman, an English doctorate student at Brown who is helping with the exhibit.

“They’re of a place that we live in, and I think the value of these photos is that it allows you to do a double-take and think, ‘Oh, that’s what Federal Hill looked like back in the day,’” he said. “I think it can spark conversation about, not just where Providence has been in the past, but the city it wants to be.”

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