

**The Menil Collection to present
*Collection Close-up: Bruce Davidson's Photographs***

Exhibition highlights Davidson's sustained engagement with social and political concerns with works from the museum's permanent collection



HOUSTON—November 17, 2021—The Menil Collection is pleased to present *Collection Close-Up: Bruce Davidson's Photographs*. The exhibition comprises a selection of the American photographer's most consequential series made between 1956 and 1995, primarily drawn from an anonymous gift to the museum of approximately 350 of Davidson's photographs, which have never before been on view at the Menil. Seeking a shared humanity, Davidson's photographs offer an intimate perspective of his subjects and their communities, from circus performers to Welsh miners to New York City neighborhoods. *Bruce Davidson's Photographs* will be on view at the Menil **December 10, 2021, through May 29, 2022.**

Rebecca Rabinow, director of the Menil Collection, said: "The Menil is honored to present some 70 photographs by Bruce Davidson in this timely and thought-provoking exhibition. A leading figure in the history of documentary photography, Davidson's work focuses on the many challenges faced by American and European multiracial, multiethnic societies that promise liberty yet struggle to achieve racial and economic equity and justice."

Molly Everett, Curatorial Assistant, Modern and Contemporary Art, said: "With this exhibition, we have the incredible opportunity to consider Davidson's powerful practice thanks to a recent anonymous gift that builds on the Menil's strong holdings of civil rights-era photographs."

Davidson's work is representative of how photography has, and continues to be, a crucial medium for social engagement."

The Menil's presentation begins with work from one of Davidson's earliest series, *Brooklyn Gang*, 1959. After reading an article about a group of teenagers called the Jokers, who had instigated a skirmish in Prospect Park, Davidson sought them out. He earned their trust by standing with them on street corners late at night and joining them on excursions to Coney Island. Davidson's resulting photographic essay portraying their struggles through adolescence was first published in *Esquire* magazine. The work received international acclaim, and the artist subsequently was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to document "Youth in America." For this project, Davidson joined the Freedom Riders, college-age activists who confronted racial segregation in the American South. Davidson was profoundly impacted by the violent resistance the group encountered, as well as by the glaring inequity in the communities they visited. "Riding on that bus with the Freedom Riders," recalled the photographer, "I became sensitized, and the exposure developed my perception."

From 1961 to 1965, Davidson continued to record the civil rights movement and the effects of segregation throughout the United States in his series *Time of Change*. His images show Mother Brown, a former slave living in Harlem, aboard the Circle Line boat tour as it passes the Statue of Liberty; a member of the Ku Klux Klan handing out pamphlets on the streets of Atlanta, Georgia; and demonstrators marching from Selma to Montgomery in late March 1965, during their third



attempt to reach the state capitol. One of his most iconic photographs comes from this march. It depicts a young man with a painted face; the word "VOTE" is inscribed across his forehead, a large American flag is unfurled behind him, and he stares directly into the camera. Davidson has explained that he sought to portray "these dedicated protestors as individuals and not just faces in the crowd," an approach that distinguished his work from other images of the civil rights movement circulated widely in the press. According to John Lewis, one of the leaders of the Freedom Riders who later became a United States Congressman, "Bruce's courageous photographs helped to educate and sensitize individuals beyond our southern borders. They shone a national spotlight on the signs, symbols, and scars of racial segregation."

Collection Close-Up: Bruce Davidson's Photographs is curated by Molly Everett, Curatorial Assistant, Modern and Contemporary Art.

About the Menil Collection

Houston philanthropists and art patrons John and Dominique de Menil established the Menil Foundation in 1954 to foster greater public understanding and appreciation of art, architecture, culture, religion, and philosophy. In 1987, the Menil Collection's main museum building opened to the public. Today, the Menil Collection consists of a group of five art buildings and green spaces located within a residential neighborhood. The Menil remains committed to its founders' belief that art is essential to human experience and fosters direct personal encounters

with works of art. The museum welcomes all visitors free of charge to its buildings and surrounding green spaces. menil.org

Funding

This exhibition is generously supported by the City of Houston through the Houston Arts Alliance.

Image Captions

1. Bruce Davidson, *Brooklyn Gang*, 1959. Gelatin silver print, 5 5/8 × 8 7/8 in. (14.5 × 22.6 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Anonymous gift. © Bruce Davidson/Magnum Photos
2. Bruce Davidson, *Selma March, Alabama*, 1965. Gelatin silver print, 12 5/8 × 18 3/4 in. (32 × 47.6 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Anonymous gift. © Bruce Davidson/Magnum Photos

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