

Collection Close-Up

Bruce Davidson's Photographs



Collection Close-Up: Bruce Davidson's Photographs comprises a selection of the American photographer's work made between 1956 and 1995. Davidson, a leading figure in the field of documentary photography, is known for establishing personal relationships with his subjects and working over extended periods of time in diverse places and communities to create in-depth series that capture what he has described as "worlds in transition."

The presentation begins with images from one of Davidson's earliest series, Brooklyn Gang, 1959. Davidson sought out a group of teenagers called the Jokers, who had instigated a skirmish in Prospect Park, after reading an article about them. He earned their trust by standing with them on street corners late at night and joining them on excursions to Coney Island. *Esquire* magazine published Davidson's resulting photographic essay portraying their struggles through adolescence. 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 for voting rights. 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."



Bruce Davidson, *Selma March*, 1965. Gelatin silver print, 12 $\frac{5}{8}$ \times 18 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (32 \times 47.6 cm).
The Menil Collection, Houston, Anonymous gift. © Bruce Davidson/Magnum Photos

Davidson's pictures offer an intimate perspective of his subjects and their communities, from circus performers to Welsh miners to the neighborhoods of East Harlem and the Lower East Side in New York City. Primarily drawn from an anonymous gift to the Menil Collection of approximately 350 of Davidson's photographs, the exhibition highlights the artist's sustained engagement with social and political concerns and also photography's powerful role in documenting struggles for justice and equality.

Born in 1933, Davidson grew up near Chicago in Oak Park and became interested in photography at a young age. He studied the medium at the Rochester Institute of Technology and Yale University. When drafted into the U.S. Army, Davidson was stationed in the photography lab of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe outside of Paris. There he met Henri Cartier-Bresson, who became his friend and mentor. Two years later, in 1958, Davidson joined the renowned agency Magnum Photos (cofounded by Cartier-Bresson), becoming, at 24 years old, the youngest member. Davidson's work has been the subject of numerous solo museum exhibitions, including at the Art Institute of Chicago; the International Center of Photography, New York; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, among others. He lives and works in New York City.

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

This exhibition is generously supported by Anne Levy Charitable Trust; Franci Neely; Erla and Harry Zuber; and the City of Houston through Houston Arts Alliance.

Public Programs

Outdoor Film Screening

A selection of short films curated by Mary Magsamen of Aurora Picture Show held in conjunction with the exhibition
Friday, March 11, 7 p.m.
Menil Lawn

All public programs are free and open to everyone.
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Exhibition Dates

December 10, 2021–May 29, 2022