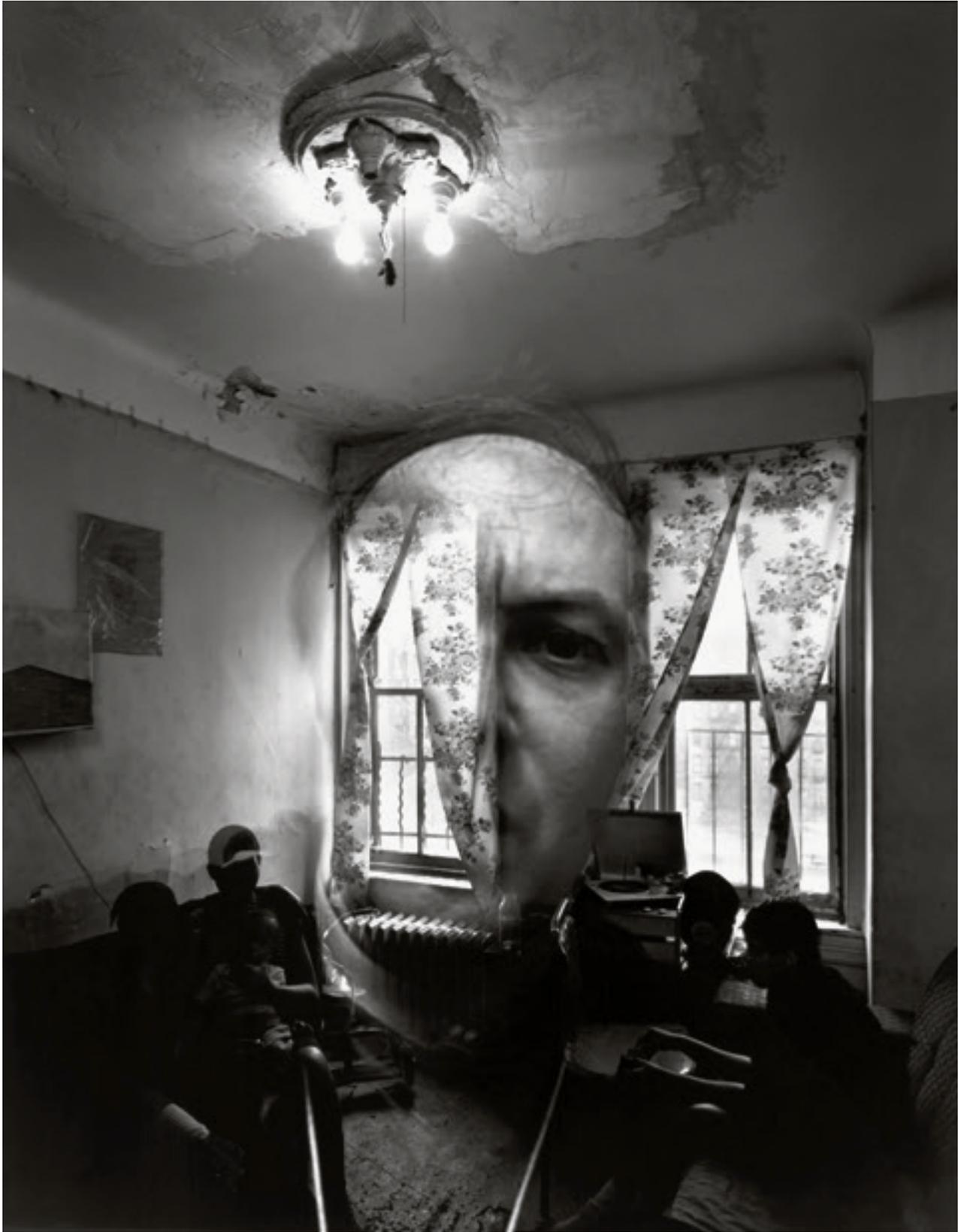


MAGNUM LEGACY

BRUCE DAVIDSON



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AN ILLUSTRATED BIOGRAPHY / VICKI GOLDBERG

Magnum Foundation

Prestel Munich • London • New York

The Magnum Foundation's Legacy Program preserves and makes accessible materials related to Magnum Photos and the larger history of photography to which it has uniquely contributed. This series explores the creative process of Magnum photographers, from the agency's founders to its contemporary members, through a mix of biographical text, archival materials, and iconic imagery.

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“I burn intensely but with a slow flame, like an acetylene torch.
What keeps you going is the passion you have.”

—Bruce Davidson

FOREWORD

It is fitting that Bruce Davidson should be the subject of the second volume in the Magnum Legacy series, because as he has said, “Magnum provided a climate of creativity.” A self-proclaimed “loner,” Bruce preferred to work by himself, but the Magnum Photos collective served as an important framework and anchor to his career, acting as a sounding board, a source for story ideas, and a place to develop important friendships and contacts. Bruce has been a member of Magnum Photos for more than fifty-seven years, almost his entire professional life.

When *Life* offered Bruce a staff position at the age of twenty-five, he turned it down. Though he found it easy enough to produce a typical *Life* essay, he had realized that no matter how well he executed the assignments, they did not suit him. He had tried to use his camera as a shield against banality but found that this did not work. For him the camera had to be a means of connection. He felt the need to belong when he took pictures—to discover something inside himself while creating an emotional bond with his subjects. At Magnum he found the meaningful work that was essential to him. The cooperative provided him with the freedom to explore the worlds of the circus, of coal miners in Wales, of the gangs of New York, and sent him to the South to cover the Freedom Riders.

There is no signature Bruce Davidson style or “look.” He adjusts his camera and approach to the subject matter, producing a remarkably varied body of work. Less motivated by ideas than by trying something new, he trusts that the subject and his intuition will connect and land him in the right place. Bruce is nothing if not versatile. He can move from an intimate portrait of a widow in Montmartre to ironworkers on the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, and is

2. Contact sheet, girl with birdcage, East 100th Street, New York, 1966

equally at ease in color and black and white. He loves to work with different formats and films and has embraced digital photography in his eighties, even though he still loves working in the darkroom by himself. Bruce's experiments with photographic technology—from Tri-X film to Kodak 64, from 35mm to view cameras, from fish-eye to digital—trace the history of the medium itself.

Although Bruce claims to be nonpolitical, his photographs of the civil rights struggle have become iconic. These defining documents of the movement have been hailed by Congressman John Lewis, then a leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and others as a major factor in effecting political change, and are widely used in schools as a means of conveying the struggle to a younger generation. Yet Bruce defies easy classification as a news photographer. He takes ideas from the news and then covers them in a way the news does not. When he worked on *Subway*, for instance, he chose not to focus on subway crime but on the people living through it and their relationship to the troubled environment that surrounded them.

Bruce's work has played a central role in documenting his times. Throughout, he focuses on individuals, portraying people who have found a way to create good lives despite the crushing forces of poverty and discrimination.

Bruce has always gone out of his way to connect with his subjects, at times living alongside them, and he maintains the connection long after the work is done. Not only did he photograph gang members, sharecroppers, residents of Harlem, or subway riders, he also gave them copies of the pictures he took. He continued to search for members of the Jokers, and they continued to seek him out, more than twenty-five years after *Brooklyn Gang* was published. It is often the case that for many of his subjects, Bruce's photographs are the only evidence of their history. It is poignant to think that he provided the equivalent of family albums for many who could not otherwise afford a record of their lives.

The intent of this series is to explore the lives behind and around the photographs,

some known and others unpublished. It is clear that Bruce's complex childhood gave him a strong sense of empathy and helped him bond in unusual ways with the elderly, the very young, and the people living on the fringes of society. It is also clear that his family had a special impact on his work. His wife, Emily, became his closest collaborator, and his daughters grew up with his photography and became artists themselves. "Family" is a term that Bruce defines broadly, including not only Emily and his daughters, but also his studio manager, and Magnum, which was part of his extended "dysfunctional family that functioned." For Bruce, photography can never be separate from the way he has lived his life.

With stories such as *Brooklyn Gang* and *East 100th Street*, and his commitment to long-term projects, showcasing his work in magazines, books, or museums, Bruce has become a major influence on a younger generation of documentary photographers. Although he has never sought to be identified as an artist, his strong composition and beautiful printing are as important to him as his subject matter, and he has brought his documentary sensibility into the realm of art photography.

Susan Meiselas
President, Magnum Foundation

Andrew E. Lewin
Managing Editor, Magnum Legacy series



Chapter One

MAGIC

It was the magic that hooked him, and it hooked him for life.

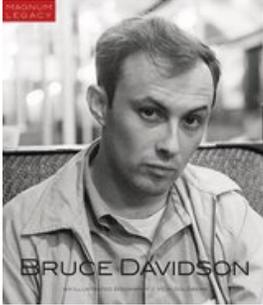
The year was 1943. Ten-year-old Bruce Davidson was waiting his turn in the basketball game in the alley when his friend Sammy came by and asked if he wanted to watch him “developing.” Whatever *that* was, Bruce figured it was probably better than waiting around. He found himself inside a darkroom for the first time. He watched Sammy take what looked like a piece of blank paper and sink it into a tray of what looked like water. Out of the blankness, an image began to swim up on the paper. Magic! Entranced, Bruce went home and asked his mother if he could have a darkroom. Not long after, she emptied his grandmother’s jelly closet in the basement. A sign soon appeared painted on the door: “Bruce’s Photo Shop.”

At the time, Bruce and his younger brother, Burton, were living with their mother, her parents, and his mother’s younger brother in Oak Park, a quiet, middle-class suburb of Chicago. They had moved there when Bruce was five, right after his mother, Eleanor, and his father,

Arnold, had divorced (fig. 4). Arnold, a handsome and debonair lawyer, had turned out to be a gambler who bet on the horses, neglected his family, and squandered both their money and his own career. The collapse of their marriage was harrowing. Bruce remembers huddling under the dining room table, playing with his toys, frightened by the harsh sounds of his parents quarreling. Today he thinks his father must have been mentally ill, “probably brilliant but a gambler.”¹

Before the divorce, the family had lived in a two-story Chicago apartment with a back porch; afterward, three adults, one adolescent, and two children were squeezed into a small house with three bedrooms and a single bathroom. “How did we do it?” Bruce wonders. “You’re smaller yourself, so everything seems bigger than it really is.” At the same time everything familiar and safe—all they had come to depend upon—had fallen apart. Their father was gone, the neighborhood was new, the house cramped and overseen by grandparents who were not just elderly but notably silent while their mother was away all day at work.

3. Bruce Davidson, New York, early 1950s



Vicki Goldberg

Bruce Davidson: Magnum Legacy

Gebundenes Buch, Pappband, 192 Seiten, 23,5 x 27,3 cm
52 farbige Abbildungen, 123 s/w Abbildungen
ISBN: 978-3-7913-8135-0

Prestel

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Davidsons Liebe zur Fotografie begann, als er zehn Jahre alt war. Der Sohn einer hart arbeitenden geschiedenen Mutter war ein Einzelgänger, der in der Schule schlecht zurecht kam und nur schwer Kontakt fand. Befreiung aus den Fesseln seiner Jugend brachte ihm die Kamera, die ihn ein Leben lang begleiten sollte. Vicki Goldbergs fundierte Monographie über Bruce Davidson geht seinen fotografischen Ausdrucksformen und Techniken in ihrer ganzen Bandbreite nach und zeigt, welchen Einfluss Davidson auf die Fotografie des 20. Jahrhunderts hatte. Der reich illustrierte Band enthält Bilder aus den bekanntesten Werkgruppen und bisher unveröffentlichtes Material aus dem Privatarchiv des Fotografen in erstklassigen Reproduktionen. In allem zeigt sich die einfühlsame Neugier, mit der Davidson den Menschen vor der Kamera begegnet, sowie die erzählerische Kraft seiner Bilder.

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