

ARTSATL

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## Photographer Lucinda Bannen's generosity makes her "patron saint" of High Museum collection



Curator Brett Abbott and Lucinda Bannen in the galleries.

(Photo courtesy of High Museum)

Lucinda Bannen arrives at the High Museum of Art carrying a framed photograph by William Christenberry just plucked off a wall in her art-filled home. "Can't you squeeze him in?" she asks photography curator Brett Abbott. "He was so disappointed when I told him he wouldn't be in the show."

Abbott, who curated "The Bannen Collection," on view at the museum through February 2, smiles indulgently. You get an inkling that this is not the first such request. But then, how does one refuse the 83-year-old woman whom Abbott himself has dubbed "the patron saint of

photography”? Especially when “The Bunnan Collection” celebrates her commitment to the High: over the course of 30 years, she has given or promised some 650 photographs for the museum’s collection. “We are a major collection because of her,” Abbott says.

For example, Edward Weston’s “Palma Cuernavaca II, 1925,” a singular view of a portion of a tree trunk, would be a key work in any photography collection. “It’s a very rare work by a master,” Abbott explains. “It’s a transitional piece. He was experimenting with modernism, abstraction, simplification of form. And it’s platinum palladium — really vintage.”

But her immersion was swift and her dedication total. In the late ’70s, with \$40,000 to spend, she offered to build a collection for the High. She and a committee — High then-curator Peter Morrin, gallery owner Jay Crause and photographer Virginia Warren Smith — assembled 80 works for a show titled “Subjective Visions,” built on the idea of the photographer as artist.

The first acquisition for the collection, which debuted in 1982 as one of the inaugural exhibitions in the new Richard Meier-designed museum building (now the Stent Wing), was a suite of 26 photos by the visionary Clarence John Laughlin. Bunnan had heard that Laughlin, whom she had met through Krause, was selling his master prints.

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“Ginny and I would go to New Orleans and stay with him,” she remembers. “He would hold the photos to his chest — you could see the impression of his shirt buttons on the print — saying, ‘I just can’t do it.’ Then it would be lying on top of my breakfast plate the next morning.”

“That was a good precedent, because I want to collect in depth,” Abbott says. “With 26 pictures, you can get a sense of what drives a person.”

After “Subjective Visions,” Bunnan became the go-to person when the High’s photography curators wanted to acquire something. “They would ask and I would buy it,” she says matter-of-factly.

Abbott has done a masterful job of conveying the magnitude of her philanthropy through the 120 pieces on view. A number of Atlanta-based artists, both mature and emerging, are mixed in among photographs by acknowledged masters and marquee contemporary artists. “This was important because Lucinda has been so supportive of regional artists,” Abbott says.



William Eggleston's "Untitled (Freezer)"

One gallery is devoted to black-and-white work, one to color photographs. (In case you're wondering, the Christenberry photo, of a gourd tree, is part of a terrific trio, hanging next to one of William Eggleston's seminal color works, "Untitled (Freezer)," and Harry Callahan's triptych "Atlanta.")

The largest gallery, and it's a knockout, is devoted to portraits. The centerpiece, a promised gift, is Nicholas Nixon's "The Brown Sisters," a series of black-and-white portraits of his wife and her sisters that he began in 1975 and continues to this day. (Bunnen received the newest one just weeks ago; hers is one of 37 extant full sets.) Every year the women pose in the same positions, which magnifies, especially hung together on one wall, the passage of time writ on their faces in wrinkles and softening jawlines, changing hairdos and bodies spreading into middle age.



Nan Goldin's "Cookie Laughing, 1985"

Nan Goldin's ode to her dear friend Cookie, who died of AIDS, makes for an interesting juxtaposition. The opposite of Nixon's methodical approach and spare concentration on faces and bodies, the Goldin series is more a scrapbook of Cookie's life, a compilation of time spent together, including sometimes lurid behavior chronicled in equally lurid color.

An impassive Chuck Close looms over the gallery in a giant three-part Polaroid self-portrait. Like Close's paintings, it sticks to the facts: a map of the lower part of a face. One of the original purchases for "Subjective Visions," it is rather unnerving. The viewer standing close to the piece will be staring into the thick of the photographer's beard, described hair by hair. Abbott offers a contrasting vision in Atlanta Elizabeth Turk's series of four self-portraits, also limited to the lower part of her face but dramatically bathed in chiaroscuro.



An untitled photo from Cindy Sherman's "Untitled Film Series" (1979, printed 1989)

He also slips in witty counterpoints: Joel Meyerowitz's "Man on the Champs Elysées," the back of a bald head, in one corner and, at the other, one of Cindy Sherman's "Film Stills." It's a portrait of herself playing an actress who plays a character, an echt postmodern commentary in which identity is like those nested Russian dolls. Just around the corner, Bunnell poses à la Sherman in Virginia Warren Smith's "Truck Driver's Wife (Portrait of Lucinda Bunnell)."

All along, Bunnell bought photos for herself, an enterprise totally separate, and different, from her gifts to the High. Museums have plans, targets, gaps to fill, value to consider. Bunnell did not purchase as an investment, though she does revel in the rising values of her photos. The Weston,

which she bought for a then-shocking \$500, is now worth millions. “If you have the guts to buy something before everyone else, you can get more for a lot less,” she crows.

She is seemingly immune to received wisdom; her first Ansel Adams photo was “Pipes and Gauges,” a factory interior. “I didn’t like his landscapes,” she explains.

She finds even the notion of “building” a collection a bit foreign. “I never had a point [to what I bought],” she says. “I never thought, ‘I have to have this or that.’ I acquired photographs to help other photographers and galleries get going.”

If there’s a subtext to the pictures she has accumulated, it would be the same curiosity and openness that characterizes her own work. Bunnell went for photographs that delighted, surprised, moved or otherwise spoke to her.

“It just happened,” she says, with a bit of wonder. “All of a sudden I had a collection.”