

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

*The Late Photographer Francesca Woodman  
Used Ghosts To Tell Her Story*

By Priscilla Frank (October 28, 2015)



Halloween is around the corner, so let's talk about ghosts.

If you Google "ghost," you'll likely wind up with a surge of cartoonish images of white figures with hollow eyes. Imagine a ghost, and the vision that comes to mind may not be so clear cut. Perhaps a creaking floorboard at an inopportune moment. A dream that leaves unwanted residue the following day. A voice in your head that comes from somewhere else.

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Capturing ghosts in art is no easy feat. They're hazy, slippery, invisible, mischievous -- they may not even be real. You may think the proper approach to document one in the (incorporeal) flesh would be to act quickly. But no. In fact, it's quite the opposite. One must linger before the camera, allowing shapes to stretch out and lose their edges, turning from a discrete unit into a blurred, three-dimensional stain. It's this liminal state, where mouths become chasms and skin is an untrustworthy container, where you spot them.

As far as those who were able to aptly depict ghosts in their natural habitat, few were as successful as artist Francesca Woodman. The photographer was born in 1958. Her mother was a ceramicist and sculptor, her father a painter and photographer. Woodman too, would take up the camera. As Elizabeth Gumpert wrote in *The New York Review of Books*: "Unlike music or math, where precocious displays of talent are not uncommon, photography tends not to have prodigies. Woodman, who committed suicide in 1981 at age 22, is considered a rare exception."

Woodman's gift made her a talent. Her insight and drive made her a visionary. Her youth and beauty made her an idol. Her untimely death made her a legend.



Francesca Woodman, "Self-portrait talking to Vince," Providence, Rhode Island, 1977  
© George and Betty Woodman

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Francesca Woodman is known for her self-portraits, most of which obscured far more than they elucidated. Her uncanny images don't capture a single moment in time, but a messy stretch of it, spread out in parts and bunched up in others like a sheet draped over old furniture.

Her portraits, at once skillfully precise and masked in an otherworldly haze, feel somewhat similar to looking at your reflection in the mirror. Narcissistic to a point, the experience then becomes something other, something as disturbing as it is seductive. Stare at your face long enough and it ceases to be familiar, like a word repeated inside your mouth until it no longer hangs together with meaning. In one photo, Woodman stretches her mouth into a dark cavity without clear edges. In another, she pinches her nude body so the flesh bulges out like excess meat. This is not an exercise in self-love but in self-transfiguration, exaggerating the way we encounter our reflection in the mirror each morning, slightly altered.

Born in Boulder, Colorado, Woodman often spent her summers in Italy, where her family had a second home. A perk of growing up with artist parents, Woodman and her brother were encouraged to visit museums, sketchbooks in hand, and often received house guests such as Richard Serra and David Hockney. She attended boarding school in Massachusetts and RISD for undergrad, spending her junior year abroad in Florence. In Italy, Woodman frequented a bookshop and gallery, the Libreria Maldoror, that specialized in surrealist work. There, she held her first-ever exhibition.

Surrealist influence runs thick through Woodman's work, from the uncanny subversion of the domestic sphere to the way the images seem to hover outside a particular time or place, most certainly not reminiscent of late '70s Rhode Island. There are pre-Raphaelite moments in the gauzy weightlessness of the photographs, and Gothic traces in the decomposing architecture, even if housed inside her own place of residence.

Many viewers, notably critic Rosalind Krauss, identify feminist elements of Woodman's practice, in the way she shields herself from the male gaze, presenting her nude body as a sort of animal carcass. Or the way she possibly alludes to the confines of the home, crouching behind a fireplace, hiding behind crumbling wallpaper, eating curtains. Photographer Cindy Sherman disagrees. "I think Francesca would scoff at being called a feminist artist," she told *The Telegraph*. "She used herself organically, not to make a statement."



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Francesca Woodman, Untitled, 1977-1978 © Betty and George Woodman

From a young age, Woodman felt an intense urge to succeed artistically, and fast. "In your 20s, everything feels so urgent," her friend Betsey Berge explained to *The Guardian*. "You think you've got to be famous in 20 seconds, all the more because she had been making this very good work from the age of 14. The pressure was intense."

Woodman also struggled with depression. She first attempted to kill herself in 1980, leaving a note behind. "I finally managed to try to do away with myself, as neatly and concisely as possible," she said. "My life at this point is like very old coffee-cup sediment and I would rather die young leaving various accomplishments, some work, my friendship with you, and some other artifacts intact, instead of pell-mell erasing all of these delicate things."

One year later, Woodman jumped from the roof of a Manhattan building, ending her life. It's difficult, if not impossible, to untangle her fate from the work she left behind, especially given the already eerie and seductive nature of the images. It's wrong, Woodman's family has repeatedly urged, to think that Woodman was trying to erase herself through her artwork.

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"Francesca Woodman," a friend says in "The Woodmans," a documentary on Francesca and her family, "was not trying to disappear."

Woodman eternally froze the seductive, mysterious and haunting vision of herself she had conjured in her work. As Gumpert put it: "Living is 'erasing'; dying a way of ensuring that what was will continue to be, of fixing certain things in place." Never revealing her cards, growing stale or irrelevant, Woodman disappeared, like putting a stop to a 22-year-long exposure photograph.



Francesca Woodman, Untitled, MacDowell Colony, Peterborough, New Hampshire, 1980  
© George and Betty Woodman

Today, over 30 years following Woodman's death, whispers of her work are everywhere. Tumblr and Instagram are bubbling with young women exploring their physicality, eroticism and unfamiliarity. For every young selfie addict, there is someone quite different, interested in how a self-portrait inherently fails, snapping instead seductive glimpses of hair-caked faces and truncated limbs. Young women recognize the way their images can't help but seduce, but can also disturb, unnerve.

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Woodman titled a series of long-exposure photos made in 1976 her "ghost pictures." In these, the contours of the body and all the stuff that fills it are reduced to vapor by the joint weapons of the camera and time, passing.

When thinking of what's really eerie this Halloween, it's not monsters or witches or ghosts or ghouls you'll find in horror flicks. It's the way a young woman's figure can contort into a million shapes and finally disappear, while remaining everywhere. The way we're all so easily seduced, by myths of talent and downfall, by beauty and fearless wit, by the occasional desire to be young and the occasional desire to die.

"Francesca Woodman: On Being an Angel" runs from Dec. 18, 2015, until March 2, 2016, at the Foam Museum in Amsterdam.



Francesca Woodman, "About Being My Model," Providence, Rhode Island, 1976 © George and Betty Woodman

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Francesca Woodman, "On Being an Angel # 1," 1977 © Betty and George Woodman

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Francesca Woodman, "Self-Deceit # 1," 1978 © Betty and George Woodman

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Francesca Woodman, Untitled, 1979 © Betty and George Woodman

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