

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

FRANCESCA WOODMAN

By Sara Christoph (March 5, 2015)

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In 1978, when Francesca Woodman was 20 years old and beginning a life as an artist, John Berger wrote “Uses of Photography.” In the essay, Berger distinguishes between two functions of the medium: private and public. A private photograph is one that holds its context within. It is an aid to memory, and the image’s meaning is intrinsically tied to the moment in which it was made. A public photograph is predictably the opposite: severed from any awareness of context, the image is isolated; meaning is additive and usually gathered through a caption. Public photographs can only be, as Berger writes, “arrested moments.”



Francesca Woodman, “Untitled, New York (N.325)” (1979 – 1980).
Vintage gelatin silver print, image: 4 1/4 × 4 3/8”, paper: 8 × 97/8”.
Courtesy of George and Betty Woodman and Marian Goodman Gallery.

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Francesca Woodman made intensely private photographs for public consumption. She defied these two polarities, to the extent that still, three decades later, her images radiate instability. We don't know where to place them. Scholars such as Abigail Solomon-Godeau and Rosalind Krauss have situated her work within the public dialogues of feminism and modernism (respectively), yet her photographs insist on the personal. Woodman regularly appeared naked within the frame, her body contorted, her flesh blurred—at once visible and intangible. Each image feels viscerally revealing of something, or someone, beyond the frame—something public photographs can't do.

Woodman's "fashion photography," a somewhat superficial category established posthumously by curators, further complicates the way her work navigates the public and the personal. *I'm Trying my Hand at Fashion Photography* gathers 29 images from the last three years of her life. Many photographs are shown here for the first time, previously overshadowed by her imagery that seems more urgent and raw. This small show may not contain her most compelling work, but *I'm Trying my Hand* is key to understanding her serious intentionality as an artist.

After graduating from RISD, Woodman worked under *Vogue* photographer Marco Glaviano. She revered the bold, racy aesthetic of iconoclastic fashion photographers like Deborah Turbeville and Guy Bourdin. In the exhibition's catalogue, curator Alison M. Gingeras places Woodman within the long tradition of photographers, such as Man Ray, who fluidly transitioned between fine art and commercial production. "I'm trying my hand at fashion photography," she wrote beneath a photograph on a postcard sent to her parents, both artists themselves. In a delightful pun, she covers her face with her hands.

Even with her professional aspirations, the images here remain unmistakably hers: psychological and exquisite, with intimations of decay. In "Untitled, New York (N. 325)" (1979–80), a black fur pelt hangs flaccidly from a nail on the wall, snout pointing up; an accessory of luxury amidst rubble and mold. To its left, a young woman dressed in black stands on her toes and stretches upwards, mirroring the limp verticality of the pelt. Her wrists are clinked as if her hands are tied. How often, throughout history, has skin hung on the wall as a trophy of conquest?

In a striking series of color photographs, Woodman appears in a pale green sweater and pleated skirt (an outfit her mother bought her for job interviews), contorting herself into shapes that echo the room's architectural structure. In one, her body arcs into the corner of a mirrored door, in another she clings to the doorframe like a cat frightened up a tree. Simultaneously dictated by and within the frame, her contortions are also a nod to the violence of the camera's crop. She plays with this notion in her photographs of others, posing her models flush with the interior space: elbows bent harshly to reflect the 90 degree angle of corner molding, torsos slid betwixt perpendicular walls.

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Spending time with Woodman's foray into fashion helps to dispel a pervasive and shrouding characterization of her work: that each photograph is, first and foremost, a portrait of a self in pain. It is a careless assumption, and one that tends to happen when the artist is a woman. Woodman used her body brilliantly as a tool of her art-making, and here, we also see her using the bodies of others—as if picking up a different brush. This was not a novel direction in her practice, Woodman employed models—often twisted and nude—years before. In her *Charlie the Model* (1976) series, an obese man unflatteringly collapses into a corner; in *Space Squared* (1975–76), a woman paws at the glass from inside a museum vitrine. Far from a specific internal anguish, Woodman's photographs, were meant to resonate beyond herself.



Francesca Woodman, "Untitled, New York (NF.416)" (1979–1980). Vintage gelatin silver print, image: 21 3/16 × 4 1/8", paper: 8 × 9 7/8". Courtesy of George and Betty Woodman and Marian Goodman Gallery.

Yet, her biography haunts the work. We know that soon after these very photographs were taken, she jumped from a Manhattan window at age 22. Our culture so quickly mythologizes such stories, purging an individual of his or her life into the simple, sellable narrative of a tormented artist. And though she did, tragically, make the decision to cut her life short, her actions do not give us license to read private suffering within each instance of peeling wallpaper or exposed skin.

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Berger's categorical polarities may not feel especially apt to discuss Woodman's work—nor do I think he intended them as strictly black and white—but this ill-fitting attempt is precisely why his words can reveal our slippage. Woodman beautifully muddied the categories we erect to understand the creative act, slipping between public and private, between fashion and fine art, between what is visible and what remains unseen.

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