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The Long Exposure of Francesca Woodman

By Elizabeth Gumport (January 24, 2011)



Francesca Woodman: *House #3*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976

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Given that her complete catalogue is composed almost entirely of work she produced as a student, the posthumous critical esteem for American photographer Francesca Woodman is astonishing. 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. That she has achieved such status is all the more remarkable considering only a quarter of the approximately 800 images she produced—many of them self-portraits—have ever been seen by the public.

Now, on the thirtieth anniversary of her death, Woodman is having something of a moment. In coming months, her work will be shown by several British galleries, and later this year San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art will mount a major retrospective of her work, the first of its kind in the United States. In 2012, the show will travel to the Guggenheim. *The Woodmans*—C. Scott Willis's thoughtful new documentary about the photographer and her family—opened last week at Film Forum in New York.

Taken between 1972 and 1981, Woodman's photographs are almost all black-and-white and have a general softness of focus not often seen these days. They depict a world almost identical to the one captured by earlier generations of photographers, as if Woodman's camera were a filter through which the neon clutter of contemporary life could not pass. Some of these images have the polished smoothness of Surrealist photographs, like those of Man Ray and Hans Bellmer, in which precisely-rendered objects are arranged so deliberately it seems the slightest movement would alter the meaning entirely. (Fluent in Italian, Woodman spent her junior year in Rome, where she paid frequent visits to the Libreria Maldoror, a bookshop-gallery that specialized in work about and by Surrealists, and which ultimately hosted her first small show.) She makes use of many Surrealist motifs, among them mirrors, gloves, birds, and bowls. Like Magritte, she often shrouds her subjects in white sheets.

Her concealed figures, however, call to mind corpses, or ghosts, as if the wall between our world and the spirit realm had begun to fall. In her images, dust abounds, and there are no new buildings, only ruins, whose disintegrating forms evoke the wrecks admired by the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic revivalists often cited as major influences. The out-of-focus figures are faint and friable-seeming, and Woodman's gray tones as powdery as crumbling stone. "To Die," reads the inscription on a Victorian tombstone that appears in one of Woodman's early images, "is Gain."

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Francesca Woodman: Untitled, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976

The phrase is more than apt. What little is known of Woodman's archive has proven itself capable of supporting a monumental reputation, the nude portraits of herself and other young models bearing much of the weight. Since her rediscovery in the mid-1980s, Woodman has continued to attract the attention of audiences and critics. Her work is in the permanent collections of many museums—among them the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art—and her style has so informed other professional and amateur photographers that effects she pioneered now appear in catalogues and ad campaigns and fashion spreads. She can even be credited with the coining of visual clichés: shots of women's legs, a Woodman favorite, are now considered the adolescent's stock in trade.

Born in 1958 to artist-parents—mother Betty Woodman is a ceramicist and sculptor, father George a painter and photographer—Woodman was largely unknown during her lifetime. Her work was first introduced to the public at a Wellesley College exhibition that opened in 1986, five years after her suicide. At the time, much significance was attached to its apparently autobiographical qualities, which continue to intrigue audiences today. Her death does not simply cast a shadow on the images, but suffuses them with a strange, spectral light, in which everyone looks like Woodman—photographs of models are frequently mistaken for self-portraits—and facts resemble foresight. The artist seems always to be anticipating her own disappearance.

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In one of her first genuine self-portraits, which she produced as a boarding school student in the early 1970s, Woodman creeps naked from the forest, eyes closed. In another, taken a few years later, it appears that the roots of a tree on a riverbank are seizing her naked body from the water—or that she is transforming into a tree herself, her pale, flowing hair and slender leg as soft and tentacular as roots. The tree, whose trunk seems to emit a white, alien light, is in a graveyard.



Francesca Woodman: Untitled, Boulder, Colorado 1976

The same graveyard can be seen in an earlier untitled piece, in which Woodman crawls naked through an opening in a tombstone, her moving body captured on camera as a misty blur, as if she were as insubstantial and inhuman as the air around her. It is the earliest example of the technique that became one of her trademarks: by using slow shutter speeds, she gave her subjects time to move, and on film motion tends to obliterate the thing moving. In later images—produced as a student at the Rhode Island School of Design, and afterwards in Italy and Manhattan—flesh appears as fog, vapor evaporating or being absorbed by its surroundings. In one 1976 photograph, a girl seems to float, like smoke, inside a fireplace. In another, taken a year later, she melts into—or perhaps emerges from—the wallpaper. Like the early Colorado picture, both are long exposures. Woodman referred to the series as “ghost pictures.”

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Francesca Woodman, Untitled, Boulder,
Colorado, 1972–1975

Her first suicide attempt came three years later, in the autumn of 1980. She survived, received psychiatric treatment, and moved in with her parents, who were also living in Manhattan. Early that winter, she published a small book called *Some Disordered Interior Geometries*. Then a grant application was denied, her bicycle stolen. A romance continued to turn sour. Her parents suspect she stopped taking her medication. On January 19, 1981, she jumped from the roof of a building on the East Side. Nobody at the scene knew Woodman's name, nor did it appear on any of her belongings, and so her body remained unclaimed at the morgue until someone identified her clothes. The fall had rendered her face unrecognizable.

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A distinguished television news producer, C. Scott Willis had never heard of Woodman when he met her parents several years ago, at a brunch hosted by his cousin. Nor had he directed a film: *The Woodmans*, which was inspired by that chance encounter, is his first, and he keeps its structure simple. Interwoven with Woodman's experimental videos, journal entries, and photographs, some of which have never before been made available to the public, are interviews from which Willis omits himself entirely. We hear and see only Woodman's friends and family, her parents in particular—and, in the brief clips Willis culls from her video projects, Woodman herself. Everyone agrees that Woodman's work is too often evaluated in light of her suicide, her ghostly portraits miscast as experiments in self-effacement. "Francesca Woodman," a friend says firmly, "was not trying to disappear." Willis shows Woodman's footage of a project inspired by an overturned flour truck, the result of which is a black trace of a body, a void surrounded by white dust. We hear Woodman's delighted appraisal: "Oh, I'm really pleased!"

Willis traces Woodman's aesthetic motivations to her childhood in Colorado and in Italy, where the Woodmans had a second home. Wherever the Woodmans were, George says, art "was considered serious business." In the mid-1960s, they often hosted visiting artists, among them David Hockney and Richard Serra. Whenever the family visited a museum Woodman and her brother, now a video artist, were provided with sketchbooks, and it was George who gave the teenage Woodman her first camera, the same Yashica 2¼ x 2¼ she would use for most of her career. Contemporary footage of Colorado serves briefly as scenic backdrop to the film's account of Woodman's youth, and it's easy to imagine how the winter landscape worked its silent, icy influence. The frozen world is white and black and gray, and looks like nothing so much as one of Woodman's prints.

In order to avoid making her suicide the climax of the film, which would mean once again presenting it as central to her life and work, Willis frames Woodman's story with that of her parents. *The Woodmans* begins and ends with Betty and George discussing their own work, in particular a sculpture Betty was commissioned to produce for the American Embassy in Beijing, and whose progress Willis tracks throughout the film. Its installation is at once triumphant and bittersweet. The elder Woodmans often feel their reputations depend on their daughter's—as if, as Betty puts it, "she's the famous artist and we're the famous artist's family." George recalls that Woodman killed herself a few days before the opening of his own Guggenheim show.

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Francesca Woodman: Untitled, Providence, Rhode Island,
1975–1976

The Woodmans dispenses with the image some may have of the young photographer as a tortured naif, whose suffering was uncorrupted by ambition or the desire to do anything besides disappear. Francesca cultivated her reputation and knew, as her friend Betsy Berne wrote, “how to play the game.” Having artists for parents, one friend informs Willis, made success seem imperative, and obscurity particularly painful. It was necessary, she told her father, to make at least one career-related phone call every day. The process of creating a coherent public image is explored in her journal, where she often referred to herself in the third person. In one 1975 entry, she mentions having shown the journal to a friend. “Does it,” she writes, “read as a book one wonders.”

Woodman’s interest in self-presentation—and self-preservation—emerges even in a note written around the time of her first suicide attempt. “I finally managed,” she explains, “to try to do away with myself, as neatly and concisely as possible.... 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.” Woodman reverses the traditional terms of the arrangement: death, like photography, is simply a series of chemical reactions. Living is “erasing”; dying a way of ensuring that what was will continue to be, of fixing certain things in place. When Woodman died, she left behind an unpublished artist’s book, a set of five images, called *Portrait of a Reputation*.

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But what accounts for the current wave of interest in Woodman? Why do young artists in particular consider her a “rock star,” as one photography professor puts it in *The Woodmans*? A note Woodman wrote on the edge of an early print perhaps provides a clue: “There is the paper and then there is the person.” Self-portraits, once a challenge, are now the easiest kind of image to produce. We just face our laptop and it snaps a picture or records a video. In this position, taking photographs feels exactly like not taking photographs, and being recorded is just like being: we sit back, or type, or wander away. We are increasingly unable to register the creation of an image as a particular, contingent event, and many of the pictures we see are as unmemorable as the circumstances in which they were created.



Francesca Woodman: From Angel series, Rome, 1977

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Perhaps this is why Woodman, who produced in her entire life fewer pictures than are uploaded to Facebook every second, has lately been attracting our attention. Her images offer our atrophied organs of perception occasion to exert themselves, forcing us to focus on the moment of their creation. Woodman often planned her pieces far in advance, sketching them as a painter might, and in her journal characterized one of her long exposures as a portrait of “legs—and time.” Her wording recalls a statement issued by early photographer William H. Fox Talbot in the 1830s, when he praised the infant medium’s ability to document “the injuries of time.” He had in mind the comparison of two photographs—one old, one new, both of the same subject.

Woodman reveals the injuries that occur in the time it takes to produce a single picture: hair turns wispy, flesh fades and stretches into smoke. The longer her shutter stays open, the blurrier and more transparent bodies will appear, until at last they disappear. Shortly before her death, she began experimenting with a particularly long development process that required her to spend several hours producing a single photograph. In the end, her camera captures not the girl but the long moment it looked at her.

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