

## *Nan Goldin on art, addiction and her battle with the Sacklers over opioids*

*The artist tells the FT why she ‘can’t stand back  
and watch another generation disappear’*

By Liz Jobey (November 8, 2019)



Alex Sloth/Magnum Photos

“Why aren’t you on the march?” Nan Goldin asks, as she picks up the phone in Brooklyn. “Everyone I know in London is caught up in Extinction Rebellion.” It’s early October, and the artist has been energised by the latest round of climate change protests.

For the past two years, she has led her own campaign to expose the role that Purdue Pharma and its highly addictive painkiller OxyContin have played in the opioid crisis. More specifically, her group Pain (Prescription Addiction Intervention Now) has targeted certain members of the billionaire Sackler family, whose wealth came from OxyContin, and whose name adorned museums, universities and research institutions around the globe.

Goldin, who became addicted to the drug after being prescribed it for an injured hand in 2014, used her own experience to speak for the hundreds of thousands of people who, like her, had no idea how dangerous it was until it was too late.

“We have to speak truth to power, all of us,” she says. “I always want to push back against the horrors of the world around us. But I always do things from a personal position.”

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Goldin had only recently recovered from her addiction in 2017 when she read a New Yorker article that exposed the Sackler family's ownership of Purdue Pharma. Her work has been shown in major museums around the world, so the name "Sackler" rang a very loud bell.

"When I came out of the hospital I had been seriously addicted to OxyContin, like, a serious full-time job," she says. "And I got clean. I didn't know about the crisis. I only knew about my own crisis. And I found out pretty quickly about the crisis, but I still didn't know about the Sacklers."

"I still saw them as philanthropists. They've been so secret. So when I read [about] it, I became furious and I thought, 'OK, here's my mission.' I knew it in my body. I can speak to it."

In January 2018 she published a piece in Artforum magazine, laying out her desire to call the Sacklers to task. "To get their ear we will target their philanthropy," she wrote. "They have washed their blood money through the halls and museums and universities around the world. We demand that the Sacklers and Purdue Pharma use their fortune to fund addiction treatment and education. There is no time to waste."

Opioid addiction claimed the lives of about 400,000 people in the US between 1999 and 2017, and one report suggests another 700,000 could die by 2025 if nothing changes. Goldin based Pain on Act Up, a movement which, 30 years earlier, had fought to prevent another mounting catalogue of deaths.

Throughout the 1980s, Act Up protested against the US government's lack of action to combat Aids and lobbied to introduce medication that would fight the disease. "I knew of no political movements on the ground like Act Up," she wrote. "Most of my community was lost to Aids. I can't stand by and watch another generation disappear."

Earlier this year, Goldin was in London making preparations for a new exhibition. Sitting across from her in the anonymous luxury of a hotel restaurant, it was hard to credit how much this rather fragile-seeming, nervy woman, more fixated on going for a cigarette break than looking at the menu, had achieved in such a short time.

Since Pain began its public protests outside museums and galleries that carried the Sackler name, a growing number of institutions in the UK and the US have announced they will no longer accept donations from the family.

Dressed in black, with her halo of brown curls and the remnants of an old tattoo encircling a forearm, she is direct in her conversation, but not curt; quick to correct mistakes and keen to supply detail about the progress of the movement so far.

Pain is a small organisation — "In the core group there are 12 of us," she says — but its impact has been outsized. "You would never imagine all the noise and popularity they get from such a small group of people," says the Italian curator Guido Costa, an old friend of Goldin's.

Recommended Purdue Pharma LP Photographer Nan Goldin plans UK 'guerrilla action' in Sackler protest Their first target was the Metropolitan Museum in New York, whose Sackler Wing

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houses the ancient Egyptian Temple of Dendur, one of the museum's greatest attractions. On March 10 last year, Goldin and her supporters staged a "die-in", showering the temple's pool with prescription bottles, then marching through the galleries with banners.

In February this year, they protested at the Guggenheim Museum, which had received \$9m in donations from the family between 1995 and 2015, waving banners that read: "SHAME ON SACKLER" and "TAKE DOWN THEIR NAME", and releasing a blizzard of paper from the famous central spiral balconies.

These were "fake prescriptions", bearing quotes from correspondence recently made public as part of a lawsuit brought by the state of Massachusetts against Purdue Pharma and certain members of the Sackler family.

One of the slips quoted part of an exchange between Richard Sackler, former president and co-chair of Purdue Pharma, and an executive, about the German market, which read: "If OxyContin is uncontrolled, it is highly likely that it will eventually be abused . . . How substantially would it improve our sales?"

From the Guggenheim the protesters moved to the Met, where they handed out leaflets - modelled on the museum's floor guide, with the word "PLAN" changed to "PAIN". A week later, the protest moved to London, where Goldin was in discussions with the National Portrait Gallery about a retrospective.

She informed them that if the gallery went ahead with a possible £1m donation from the Sackler Trust, she would pull out of the show. (The South London Gallery in Camberwell had already decided to return a gift of £125,000 to the Sacklers in 2018.)

On March 19, the National Portrait Gallery issued a statement with the Sackler Trust saying they had "jointly agreed not to proceed at this time with the £1m gift". It was Pain's first big success with a major gallery.

Two days later, the Tate group announced it wouldn't be accepting any more money from the Sacklers. A day later, the Guggenheim did the same. In April, speaking at the opening of her show in the Serpentine Sackler Gallery, the German artist Hito Steyerl addressed "the elephant in the room" and condemned the family.

The Serpentine's response was immediate: "We have heard what Hito Steyerl has had to say today and the important issues that she has highlighted. Donations to the Serpentine from the Sackler Trust are historic and we have no future plans to accept funding from the Sacklers."

By this time the media had gone into overdrive with debates about how far institutions were supposed to go to investigate where donors' money came from. Goldin nods when I mention this. "That's one [argument]," she says. "The other one is: 'How do you expect museums to keep going?' But, you know, a museum should be an ethical place . . . A museum is supposed to be a repository of the best things about humanity, right?"

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The dominoes continued to fall. In May, the Metropolitan announced that “we feel it’s necessary to step away from gifts that are not in the public interest”, and in July, following a Pain demo, the Louvre announced it was removing the Sackler name.

The one standout was the V&A, where the handsome paved new courtyard, built with a £2m donation from the family, opened in 2017. Theresa Sackler, the widow of Mortimer Sackler, is on the V&A’s board of trustees until the end of the month.

Speaking 10 days after the Louvre’s decision, the V&A’s director Tristram Hunt said the museum was proud of the support they’d received from the Sackler family over the years, and would not be “taking down names or denying the past”.

By this time, it was becoming hard to remember Goldin was an artist at all. So, in late August, I went to Paris to see a new work she had made at the Palace of Versailles. She had taken her inspiration from a 1791 treatise, “The Declaration of the Rights of Women and the Female Citizen”, written by the French playwright Olympe de Gouges.

Her portraits of the female statues that adorn the Trianon gardens were accompanied by a soundtrack made up of readings from the treatise by Goldin and nine French actresses including Elodie Bouchez, Catherine Deneuve, Charlotte Gainsbourg and Isabelle Huppert. In the year that #MeToo had raised the stakes for women’s equality higher than ever, Goldin’s piece was right on the button.

Walking back through the eerie silence of Versailles in the late afternoon, I checked my phone to find that Goldin had been arrested in New York outside governor Andrew Cuomo’s offices. “I went to jail for six, seven hours,” she explains later. “I was alongside a group of activists called Housing Works, who were formed in the Aids epidemic. We got arrested for blocking the governor’s entrance because we were demanding that he sign on for safe injection sites [local centres where opioid addiction can be treated and prevented].”

Goldin, now 66, first became known for her 1970s and 1980s photographs of friends in the gay and transvestite scenes in Provincetown, Boston and downtown New York.

Her pictures came out of the underground world they inhabited, partying, dressing up, posing, kissing, weeping, making love. Drink and drugs were familiar protagonists and there were few gender distinctions. She chronicled her own relationships in the same relentless way.

Taken in badly lit apartments, bars and nightclubs and hotel rooms, her photographs share a palette of rich, dark, luminous colour. In New York, she seems to have lived much of her life in semi-darkness anyway.

“Nan’s Bowery loft had no windows, or else they were covered, and this made her parties long, hilarious, dangerous events,” the writer Darryl Pinckney remembered in 1996. “You had no idea what time it was or how light the sky was getting out of there.”

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At the beginning of the 1980s she put together a slideshow of several hundred pictures set to a soundtrack that ran the gamut from James Brown to Bizet, Lotte Lenya to Petula Clark. She called it “The Ballad of Sexual Dependency”, after the title from a song in Brecht’s The Threepenny Opera.

At first she showed versions in friends’ apartments and arthouse cinemas; then, in 1985, it had its first major public screening at the Whitney Biennale, and the following year it was published as a book. (Today, “The Ballad”, which runs at 45 minutes, is seen as Goldin’s seminal work. When Tate Modern screened it last summer, the gallery was packed.)

By the mid-1980s, as drugs and the Aids epidemic took its toll, the mood of her pictures grew darker. Goldin found herself taking her camera to hospital wards and hospices where some of her closest friends were wasting away and dying.

In 1988, her own use of heroin became so bad she went into rehab. Eighteen months later, back in New York, one of her first acts was to organise an exhibition, Witnesses Against Our Vanishing, which brought together works by some of the artists whose lives had been destroyed by Aids.

One of them, her close friend Cookie Mueller, died six days before the show opened. Another, the artist David Wojnarowicz, wrote a long, bitter piece in which he criticised rightwing politicians for not funding Aids research and thereby facilitating the spread of the virus.

When I ask what it had been like to lose so many of her subjects, I choose the wrong word. “They’re not my subjects,” she says flatly. “They were my life. I lost all my friends. And you can’t find people like that again. All the people that had my history. All the people that I was meant to get old with. I’ve lost my community. I’ve had friends since. But I don’t have a community like that again.” ‘

She continued to photograph, taking landscapes and moody skyscapes, blurred, sweeping images washed with colour. She photographed her friends’ children. She built her photographs into grids, piecing together fragments from the past to make new works for the future.

She made multimedia installations, setting her work to music and moving closer to her first love, film. “Yeah,” she says casually. “I didn’t like photography, I only used it as an excuse to make films later on.”

In 2004, she made a 39-minute three-screen video with a collaged soundtrack called Sisters, Saints and Sibyls. For the first time she had made a work that confronted the central tragedy of her life head-on.

When Goldin was 11, her sister Barbara died by suicide. She was 18. Goldin, the youngest of four children, had been close to her sister, who was wild and unconventional. Her parents — who had based the family in a polite suburb north of Washington DC — had struggled, committing her sister to mental hospitals.

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In her introduction to “The Ballad of Sexual Dependency”, Goldin wrote about her anger at the way her sister had been treated. “I saw the role that her sexuality and its repression played in her destruction. Because of the times, in the early 1960s, women who were angry and sexual were frightening, outside the range of acceptable behaviour, beyond control.”

She was determined to escape the same fate. At 14, she ran away from home and moved in with foster families. She’d been given a camera in her teens, and began to photograph her friends.

In 1974, she started studying at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and four years later she moved to New York. Leaving home, she wrote, “enabled me to transform, to recreate myself without losing myself”.

When I ask Marvin Heiferman, the curator who worked with her on the early formulation of “The Ballad”, what he felt motivated her, he traced a straight line from her early photographs to her current activism. “Nan would often talk about growing up and about her sister’s death, and about the fact that there were things that weren’t spoken about, that weren’t visible,” he says.

“And what made me respond so strongly to her work was her giving visibility to certain aspects of people’s lives that I had never seen depicted with that kind of honesty, drama, romance and directness. [There was] a certain kind of fearlessness about it that always characterised the work.

“So when this Sackler thing started, I thought, it’s about being seen again, it’s about Nan using her art-world visibility. This is a kind of anger against indifference.

“The inaction during the Aids crisis, that was about indifference. So that’s part of what fuels this. And I think she understands — given her relationship to opioids, her experience — I mean, here it comes again . . . and what can she do?”

When I ask Goldin the same question, she says: “I was actively involved with the Aids crisis and my work was always credited with being political on a personal level, dealing with gender and sexual politics, although the language has shifted enormously now.

“But my early work was very much part of the conversation — and still is, I guess — about sexual politics, the role of women, about power. Or the lack of power.”

How much had her own earlier experiences with drugs influenced her? “When I started this group, I was afraid that I would be discredited when the discussion became about my previous addiction to heroin. But it hasn’t been at all,” she says. “Because [OxyContin] is stronger than a bag of heroin, and I should not have started it to begin with, obviously.”

She continues: “People stay on it forever because of the fear of withdrawal. And withdrawal is a form of torture beyond words. You have no skin. It’s a darkness without end.” I’d been amazed, I say, at how fast people become addicted to OxyContin. “Yeah,” she says. “It’s evil.”

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The day before I met Goldin in London, John Kapoor, the co-founder of Insys Therapeutics, which manufactured a fentanyl oral spray marketed as Subsys, was found guilty, along with four other executives, of bribing doctors to prescribe the drug. “I’ve been aware of him since I started Pain,”

Goldin says. “He turned fentanyl from a drug to treat cancer and end-of-life pain into a sexy drug across the board. It’s the first head of a huge pharmaceutical company like that to be charged criminally.

Because,” she adds, “the Sacklers are only facing civil charges. And we are afraid they are going to settle and get away with [it].”

In June, Insys agreed to pay \$225m to settle fraud charges and filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. In July, a judge in Ohio released data that showed how manufacturers and distributors of opioids had continued to push their products despite being aware of the severity of the crisis.

In August, a judge in Oklahoma ordered Johnson & Johnson to pay \$572m to the state, ruling that the company had instigated “false, misleading and dangerous marketing campaigns” that had caused “exponentially increasing rates of addiction and overdose deaths”. Johnson & Johnson plan to appeal. And in September,

Purdue Pharma filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. Purdue Pharma and several states are now pushing for a \$10bn-\$12bn settlement but many states are refusing to agree to it, and several are pursuing members of the Sackler family for more of their personal wealth.

Does Goldin believe the Sacklers are going to avoid further consequences? “That’s what I am afraid of. It looks like that. The judge is trying to round it all up into one [settlement]. Twenty-four states have already signed on to the bankruptcy deal; \$10bn-\$12bn looks so good, but they’re paying it off with OxyContin.

“That’s the most cynical thing of all. They get people addicted. And then they use the same drugs that ignited the crisis to pay it off.”

With all this going on, it is hard to see how she has found the time to make new work for her show. “I haven’t been shooting so much in the past few years,” she says. “I’m deeply into my archive. I am making new works from my photographs. Using existing images. That’s what I’m interested in. And in recontextualising them. Images that were never seen, or photos that were out-takes . . .”

She breaks off: “I’m not sure I could have done that without Pain,” she says, adding hollowly, “I have Pain to thank for being sober.”

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She has been working on two new video pieces, scored by Mica Levi. “The first, Sirens, is about euphoria, sensuality, about how it feels to get high, a lot about women. It uses short excerpts from existing films. In the second, Memory Lost, I used my photos, some Super 8 that I shot in the 1970s and the answering-machine tapes from the 1980s. It’s about the darkness of addiction, what the world looks like from deep inside addiction.”

“I thought it was important to take something that was there in her work and give it a new form of activism,” says Guido Costa, who has been working with her on her new project.

“Because [Goldin] was a witness in the past for a sort of underground lifestyle. And now, once again, she is witness to a sort of underground movement against the power of the new capitalism. I think it is the most important part of her work actually.”

“I could be a full-time activist,” Goldin admits during our most recent call, when I ask how preparations for the show are going. “But for the next two-and-a-half weeks I have to be an artist.”

“Nan Goldin: Sirens”, runs at Marian Goodman Gallery, London W1F 9DY from November 14 to January 11 202; [mariangoodman.com](http://mariangoodman.com)

A new edition of Nan Goldin’s “The Other Side” is published by Steidl. Nan Goldin will be in conversation with Nicholas Cullinan, director of the National Portrait Gallery, on November 17; [npg.org.uk](http://npg.org.uk)