

The New York Times

Sharing a Guarded Legacy

By Ted Loos (December 1, 2011)



A portrait of Betty and George Woodman, artists and the parents of Francesca Woodman, a photographer who committed suicide at age 22 in 1981. Credit: Benjamin Norman for The New York Times.

WHEN a curator from the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome contacted Betty and George Woodman a dozen years ago, he made what would be, for most parents, a welcome request. He wanted to borrow from the Woodmans' cache of rare vintage prints by their daughter — the photographer Francesca Woodman, who died in 1981 — to mount a show of her work.

“We refused,” Mr. Woodman said recently, seated in the large Chelsea loft where he and his wife have lived and created their own art for 31 years. “He said, ‘We take very good care of work — we had several El Grecos here last year.’ And I told him, ‘Well, El Greco didn’t have his father looking out for him.’ ”

The Roman curator got lesser, more recently printed images for his show.

The Woodmans are choosy about sites for their daughter’s work, and they have been holding out for years for the ideal place to burnish her legacy. Recently they got what they had been hoping for.

The first major American museum exhibition of her work in 25 years, “Francesca Woodman,” had its debut last month at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, where it will remain until Feb. 20. The show, which features 176 vintage photographs along with 5 videos, will open in March at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

Francesca Woodman committed suicide at the age of 22, jumping from a window. She had only about five years of photography behind her, much of it done as a student. Working in black and white, she frequently took self-portraits or depicted other young women, sometimes nude. Often the figures are only partly visible or blurry, as if trying to escape the frame.

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY



Francesca Woodman in "Polka Dots" (1976), a part of an exhibition of her photographs at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art that will also be shown at the Guggenheim Museum.
Credit: Courtesy George and Betty Woodman

Even though they are quite small, about 5 by 5 inches, Woodman's haunting photographs have drawn admirers for decades. Writing in *The New York Times* in 1986 the critic Michael Brenson wrote: "Mythology, literature, painting and photography seem to have been in her bones. She also had the rarest link with her medium. Like the self she flaunted and concealed, the camera is both public and private, a force both of glamour and detachment."

Around the same time the art historian Rosalind Krauss wrote about Woodman as a feminist hero, and to this day she is still a go-to artist to represent the perils and pleasures of being young, creative and female.

"We get about one request a week from someone wanting to use one of Francesca's works for the cover a book," said Mr. Woodman, 79. "And I always say, 'I want to see the book.'"

The continued interest in her work has put the Woodmans, who control her estate and archive, in an unusual position. They are both professional artists, and Ms. Woodman, 81, in particular, has met with success; she had a large solo exhibition of her ceramics at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2006. But they also have what amounts to a side job: furthering the reputation of their daughter without seeming to be pushy, all while working through the grief over her death that lingers decades later.

"She's a very active presence in our lives," Ms. Woodman said. "Sometimes George feels she's a little too much for us."

The couple has a dedicated space in their loft for a part-time curator who handles the estate. Woodman produced more than 800 different images in her lifetime, and there are thousands of negatives on hand. "Her claims on us are fairly considerable," Mr. Woodman said. "It's a lot of work."

The couple enlisted a powerful ally in 2004 when they chose the gallerist Marian Goodman, who shows top artists like Maurizio Cattelan and Thomas Struth, to represent Woodman's vintage photographs: those printed in her lifetime, which are most prized among collectors. (The gallery sells images only if the archive also has an original version of it.) On their own the Woodmans also create, sell and lend so-called estate prints, in editions of 40, from their cache of negatives.

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Ms. Goodman was instrumental in getting the San Francisco show rolling. “We’re always trying to interest museums,” she said of her job as a dealer. “That’s part of our calling. And this show is so deserved.”

She said she admired Woodman’s work because it was “so distilled.” Ms. Goodman added: “It’s hard to imagine what she would have done if she had grown older. This work is like seeing someone under a bell jar, completely caught in time.”

In 2007 Corey Keller, a photography curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, was talking with Ms. Goodman about another project. “Knowing how important photography is to us, Marian said, ‘The Woodman family is ready for an American museum to pay attention to Francesca’s work,’ ” she recalled.

Ms. Keller admired the work but was familiar only with some of most famous images, including “Polka Dots” (1976), which depicts Woodman in a polka-dot dress, kneeling in front of a peeling wall. (The image serves as the cover of the current show’s catalog.)

“I had some initial skepticism when I came to the project,” Ms. Keller said. “I said I needed to know more.” She then traveled to New York several times to look through the negatives at the Woodmans’ loft, a privilege they had allowed few other people. “I thought I knew her work, but I didn’t,” Ms. Keller said. “I’m amazed at the continual level of discovery coming from pictures made in such a small period of time.”

The works in the exhibition were almost entirely lent by the Woodmans, and many have never been on display before, including “My House” (1976), which shows Woodman covered in plastic wrap and huddled in the corner of a dilapidated room.

The 1981 suicide heavily colored “The Woodmans,” a documentary about the family released in 2010 that Mr. Woodman called “rather sensational.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be about Francesca,” Ms. Woodman said. “It was supposed to be about all of us.”

Their son, Charles, is a video artist. Last year a gallery in Boston mounted an exhibition of all four family members’ work, and in February a similar show will take place in Miami.

“Our son looks at this differently than we do,” Ms. Woodman said. “It’s been very hard for him to have his sister die and then become a famous artist.”

The younger Mr. Woodman acknowledged the complications. “You can’t help but compare yourself to members of your own family, and her success sets a high standard,” he said.

Even his sister’s choice of medium lingers. “When Francesca became seriously interested in photography, I decided I wasn’t going to go in that direction, that was her baby,” said her father, who spent years concentrating on painting but also dabbled with a camera on the side.

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Since her death Mr. Woodman has pursued photography as his primary medium — but with careful attention to boundaries. “My familiarity with her work and its importance has made me want to produce something that can’t be confused with hers,” he said. “I try to have a space which is my own.”

Although the couple expressed pleasure with the new exhibition, future sites mean future worries for the Woodmans — both as perfectionist fellow artists and as parents. For one thing, Ms. Woodman isn’t sure that the ceiling height in the Guggenheim gallery designated for her daughter’s photographs will flatter them, something she acknowledges is partly a mother’s concern.

“All artists are looking for a certain immortality,” Ms. Woodman said. “We try to be responsible. We try to protect her.”

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