



Nan Goldin Gets Your P.A.I.N.

*Nan Goldin Talks Activism, America's Opioid Epidemic,
Toxic Philanthropy, and Her Upcoming NYC Exhibition*

by Christian Viveros-Fauné (April 21, 2021)



"Salome, Carmelo Bene," still from "Sirens" (2019–20).
Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery

Flashbulb memory. The words came to me on a deserted New York street in March as I waited for an Uber ride to meet Nan Goldin. A term coined by psychologists James Kulik and Roger Brown in 1977 to describe remembering in the wake of collective traumatic events—think the Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. assassinations, the mid-air disintegration of the Challenger Space Shuttle, the global infarction produced by 9/11—the idea fits the virtuoso New York image-maker like one of her popular collaborations with the streetwear brand Supreme.

The memoirist of several bohemias and multiple generations affected by the twin plagues of AIDS and drug addiction, Goldin's exceptionally vivid snapshots have long crystallized whole eras while keening in accents belonging to, among other dirgeists, Marianne Faithfull and Charles Aznavour. Her images burn with soul-singeing immediacy—those animating her legendary slideshow *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1986–2021), which hit the zeitgeist of the 1980s with the strength of a revelation, and newer photos she routinely shuffles into her scored projections (which she calls "films") and books.

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Three of these audiovisual works, along with some 40 photographic prints, will be featured in a museum-size show at Marian Goodman Gallery, opening April 27, her first New York outing since 2016. Their cumulative effect is as stirring as a Joan Didion dispatch, as sweeping as an Andrei Tarkovsky long-take. Just like flashbulb memories—which routinely kick off with the phrase “I remember when”—you can never really get Goldin’s pictures out of your head.

I visited Goldin’s elegant Clinton Hill walk-up the day *The New York Times* first published the word “coronavarsary.” I was there to talk timely topics: her new exhibition, life during lockdown, toxic philanthropy, and the headlines she has made since beating drugs in 2017 and becoming the leader of an astoundingly effective global anti-addiction movement. The activist group she founded, P.A.I.N. (Prescription Addiction Intervention Now), has drawn a bead on the numbered Swiss bank accounts of pharmaceutical giant Purdue Pharma, along with those of its owners, the billionaire Sackler family, unrepentant profiteers of the Oxycontin scourge. The “most evil family in America”—according to Tennessee Congressman Jim Cooper—is currently mired in bankruptcy court, thanks in no small part to Goldin. Its members stand accused by two dozen U.S. state attorneys general of having cravenly fueled a runaway opioid epidemic that the CDC says has caused more than 450,000 deaths since 1999.

Goldin and her team of staunch allies—“There’s ten of us, maybe,” she says—have fought with the strength of thousands: They’ve mobilized public opinion against Purdue and the Sacklers by exposing the rank hypocrisy attendant to the family’s seven- and eight-figure gifts to museums, universities, and hospitals. As a consequence, those accepting dirty money have had to return gifts or rename galleries and buildings. P.A.I.N. has protested or won concessions from the Louvre, London’s National Portrait Gallery, the Tate, the Serpentine, the Smithsonian, the Guggenheim, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, among other institutions.

(Elizabeth A. Sackler, founder of the eponymous center for feminist art at the Brooklyn Museum, has come out publicly against Purdue Pharma; her father, Arthur M. Sackler, died in 1987, before Oxycontin was produced. Goldin’s take: “She’s not off the hook.” Arthur Sackler developed the firm’s marketing prowess for another Purdue Pharma drug, Valium.)

Even in post–George Floyd America, it’s rare to see a successful artist like Goldin step into the ring as an activist. Given the potential political and financial conflicts, one can’t help but wonder how her activism influences her art. The answer, it turns out, is very much in line with her convictions. After organizing against the opioid epidemic for four years and testifying before Congress last October, she recently told the *New York Post* that she plans to vet which local venue, if any, will receive her upcoming European retrospective. “I told the director [of the National Portrait Gallery in London] that he cannot offer my show to MoMA as long as Leon Black is there,” she said. “How can MoMA stand by Leon Black, a man aligned with Jeffrey Epstein, who was responsible for the sex trafficking of teenage girls?”

For those avoiding business and culture news during lockdown, Leon Black is the co-founder and ex-CEO of Apollo Global Management. He was forced to relinquish his position as CEO in January after it was revealed that he paid sex offender Jeffrey Epstein \$158 million, effectively bankrolling his activities after he pled guilty to soliciting prostitution from a minor in 2008. In March, hundreds of art world notables—among them artists Ai Weiwei, Nicole Eisenman, and Goldin—posed a troubling question: How is it that Black was forced to step down from one of the world’s largest private equity firms yet remains chairman of the board of the Museum of Modern Art?

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"Best friends going out, Boston" (1973).
Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery

"I've written statements demanding Leon Black step down," Goldin says to me, leaning back on a white ottoman while drawing on the first of umpteen cigarettes. "Museums are supposed to be a salvation from all of this corruption, they're supposed to be repositories of learning and beauty, places where you go to escape the horrors of the world. They're not supposed to be deeply ingrained with a den of thieves. I would love to show at MoMA, but you have to stick to your ethics."

Sixty-seven years old and slight of build, the legendarily empathetic Goldin routinely shows flashes of steel: She looks like she could crush, or at least properly shame, a posse of Proud Boys if roused to do so. The idea comes to mind as she scrutinizes New York's increasingly conservative museum environment. "That's the problem with showing in a New York museum right now," Goldin intones from behind a puff of smoke. "None of them are very clean, to say the least. I guess the Whitney has a little better reputation right now, but only because they fired Kanders."

The embodiment of the museum world's previous boldface adventure in toxic philanthropy, Warren Kanders served as vice chairman of the Whitney Museum of American Art until 2019. He resigned after months of protests over his ownership of Safariland, a manufacturer of law enforcement supplies that includes tear-gas grenades; these were used by the Trump administration to repel migrants at the U.S.–Mexico border, and later against Black Lives Matter protesters. (Kanders divested himself of the parts of his company producing "crowd-control solutions" in June 2020, less than a year after leaving the Whitney; on March 26, Leon Black told MoMA that he would not stand for reelection as chairman of the board in June.)

On the eve of the fourth anniversary of her newfound sobriety, Goldin resembles what she has become: a survivor who is also a renewed artistic and activist dynamo. Quick-eyed under a ginger top, she wears her resolve confidently, with an honesty that is alternately jagged and vulnerable. Her forthrightness, and no small amount of self-deprecation, is reflected in two of her more visible tattoos: her right forearm proclaims, "I'm sorry" in crayon colors; her left reads, "Invisible," which she definitively is not.

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

“For me, being in quarantine is not so different than the last 20 years of my life,” she says, after telling me that the *Village Voice* was the first publication to write about her work, in 1983. (“It was just a tiny little blurb by J. Hoberman,” she adds impishly, “but I was more thrilled by that than I was by any long piece since.”)

“I was only out of rehab for a couple of years before the lockdown started,” Goldin says, while introducing her friend Thora Siemsen, the trans woman writer who became her live-in companion during the COVID quarantine. “She came to interview me and never left.” Goldin credits Siemsen for inspiring her to pick up her camera again. “Fortunately, she came to stay and now lives here, otherwise I would have gone insane.

“I’ve been very prolific during quarantine,” Goldin explains, as she torches another American Spirit Orange. “I started taking pictures again, which I hadn’t done in a long time. P.A.I.N. raised money for ourselves and other charities: I’ve done six major print sales since the pandemic started. We’re also part of another group called Oxyjustice, which helps opioid victims file claims against Purdue Pharma; we’re following the Sacklers in bankruptcy court right now. There were also congressional hearings, you might want to watch those....”

Goldin’s relationship with the Sacklers and Oxycontin, their pharmaceutical hellspawn, began in 2000 after she “fell into a swimming pool in India and broke every bone in [her] wrist.” She was prescribed Oxycontin after surgery; then again in 2014 following a second operation. Her experiences with heroin in the 1970s and ’80s, she says, left her unprepared for OxyContin’s dangers. Goldin has spoken candidly about the lure of illegal drugs—she “dreamed of being a junkie” in her teens and later acknowledged her difficulties “getting off drugs and staying off drugs”—but few things readied her for the grip of prescription Oxycontin.

“They sent me to a pain clinic and they put me on Oxy. They kept prescribing it and telling me, ‘You can’t get addicted because you’re in pain.’ They actually told me that!” For emphasis, she adds a clincher: “It’s basically a bag of dope in a pill.”

Three pills a day turned into 18. Goldin jumped from purveyor to purveyor: first in Berlin, then in New York, where she found a dealer who “never ran out and delivered 24/7.” “I got a private endowment and spent it all,” she says, while underscoring how “all work, all friendships, all news took place on my bed.” She adds, “Like all opiate addicts, my crippling fear of withdrawal was my guiding force.” Eventually, Goldin ran out of money and “ended up snorting Fentanyl,” which led to an overdose. As shadows invade the room, one thing becomes abundantly clear: The strength of her resolve manifests in direct proportion to the narrowness of her escape.

Coming out of treatment months later in suburban Massachusetts, Goldin began the tough process of reengaging with the world on its own terms. She knew nothing of the opioid crisis, she says, “because I was having my own opioid crisis.” Not long after rehab she came across “The Family that Built an Empire of Pain,” Patrick Radden Keefe’s barnburner of an article about the Sacklers, published in *The New Yorker* in October 2017. The essay’s subhead identifies a family of “modern Medicis” who made billions from the suffering of “millions of addicts.”

“Patrick’s book is coming out in April,” she says, pointing to an open copy of Radden Keefe’s article on her coffee table (the upcoming book is titled *Empire of Pain: The Secret History of the Sackler Dynasty*).

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“That piece is my bible,” Goldin explains. “I read it when I was on my way to Brazil to give a talk. I got so upset. I told myself: I’m going after them and their museums, that’s where they live, that’s what they care about. Sometimes you have these resolutions and you never go through with them. But when I got to Brazil I voiced that resolution out loud to a streaming audience of six thousand people. So then I had to do it. Once you make it public, you have to do it.”



“My horse Roma, outside Luxor, Egypt” (2003).
Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery

Back in New York, the editor of *Artforum* got in touch. Goldin agreed to contribute a “letter” to the January 2018 issue. The missive, equal parts denunciation and trench confession, begins with the sentence: “I survived the opioid crisis.” It ends with a demand that the Sacklers and Purdue Pharma be held accountable and be forced to “use their fortune to fund addiction treatment and education.” Accompanying the article are two dozen photographs; among other things, they illustrate Goldin’s relationship to Oxy in ways painfully personal and trenchantly political.

“We published portraits of me high,” Goldin reveals with a sideways smile. “I’m high in all of them. The photos show the drugs, they show the Sackler-branded museums, they show their names all over them. After the article was published I decided to start P.A.I.N. It began with friends and assistants and then it just grew.”

According to a recent tweet from Radden Keefe, the powerful Sackler clan appears eternally “poised to get a release from liability from any misconduct,” raising the specter of justice miscarrying. Perhaps the Sacklers—millionaires who became billionaires by causing a national tragedy—are too big to be punished?

When I ask Goldin what she wants to see happen to the Sacklers, she answers firmly: “I don’t want their name on anything, except the Sackler Act [the proposed bill introduced by House Democrats in March would prevent the Sacklers from evading lawsuits and shielding their assets]. We do want all their money, we want it to go to the communities they’ve devastated. We want transparency, we want their documents released, we want them to face the same jail time as El Chapo or at least small-time dealers ... and we don’t want them walking away with immunity.”

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

Goldin's remarkable anti-Big Pharma campaign is not her first stab at political activism. In 1989, after emerging sober from a lost weekend that lasted nearly a decade, she curated *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* at the Manhattan venue Artists Space. The show was pivotal in the history of New York art and AIDS advocacy. It included work by, among others, Kiki Smith, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, and Peter Hujar, who had died of the disease in 1987. Also included in the exhibition catalog was a searing essay written by David Wojnarowicz, downtown's own Rimbaud. Titled "Post Cards from America: X-Rays from Hell," it read in part: "when I was told that I'd contracted this virus it didn't take me long to realize that I'd contracted a diseased society as well."

Wojnarowicz died of AIDS in 1992. The elegiac note his death and that of others sounded has helped coalesce the elements that make up Goldin's movable celebration of life in diseased America: her early bout with drugs, photographs from the 1970s and '80s, the *Witnesses* show, her activism with AIDS advocacy group Act Up (which she describes as "close . . . but not close enough") and P.A.I.N., and the work she has prepared for her upcoming exhibition at Marian Goodman. As I consider the requiem-like power of Goldin's oeuvre—the photos, the slideshows, the books, the tunes she borrows to score different eras—I'm reminded of the title of a fearsome print by Francisco Goya: *Great deeds against the dead*.

"I invited 12 friends to do that show," Goldin says ruefully about the *Witnesses* exhibition, "many of whom are now dead." Minutes later, as we discuss one of the slideshow works that will go on view at Marian Goodman—it stars trans performers she befriended and photographed in cities such as Boston, New York, Berlin, Manila, and Bangkok—she delivers herself of what can only be called a eulogy.

"I was standing on Second Avenue and 2nd Street one night three years ago and I heard someone call my name: 'Nancy'—because that was my name in the 1970s before I moved to New York. And it was one of the queens I'd lived with in Boston 40 years ago. She is the star of the black and white photos and the only one left alive of all the kids in the slideshow. It was AIDS, almost entirely AIDS."

Titled *The Other Side* (1994–2021), the slideshow in question contains old and new images that the artist weaves into an ongoing, unspooling work whose genesis casts back nearly three decades. First published in 1993, *The Other Side* is also a book. Reedited in an extended version in 2019 by the German publisher Steidl, it reveals Goldin's penchant for updating projects others might consider finalized. About her best-known work, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, the artist once said that she considered it to be her "*Leaves of Grass*, constantly updated and revised."

"I re-edited *The Other Side* last year and included a whole new chapter. I'm not planning to touch *Memory Lost*," she says about the central work at Marian Goodman. "For me, *Memory Lost* is the most important thing I've done since *The Ballad*."

A 24-minute summa on the lure and depths of addiction in projected film and slides, *Memory Lost* (2019) is, put cinematically, Goldin's *Stalker*. Like Tarkovsky's moody movie, it describes, in word and image, a "Zone" full of wonder and untold dangers; like *Stalker's* foretelling of the Chernobyl disaster, it also portrays 20th-century drug dependency in ways that anticipated the opioid addiction of the 21st. Goldin's image continuum—it includes snaps of almost all of yesterday's parties interlaced with crepuscular landscapes—is also punctuated by taped conversations featuring voices belonging to the artist and her friends. "I wouldn't leave my house," one voice says, "the beautiful leaves turning; it was, like, mocking me."

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Memory Lost is dedicated to P.A.I.N., “my group fighting the pharmaceutical companies whose inhuman greed ignited the opioid crisis,” as well as to “all the people in the photos who sustained me through my years of addiction.” The work earns those dedications. In the words of one of Goldin’s voices—the philosopher Gabor Maté—it represents addiction as “totally sane, totally desirable, totally human.”

If *Memory Lost* is the show’s masterwork, its shorter companion film, *Sirens* (2019–2020) is, as Goldin puts it, “an accompaniment,” but no less mesmerizing for that. It is composed entirely of found footage, much of it featuring Donyale Luna, the world’s first Black supermodel. Forty years dead from a heroin overdose, Luna inspired Goldin after she saw her in the 1972 Italian film *Salome*. “I could tell Donyale was really high,” Goldin says, “so I decided to make something about that euphoria.”

“*Memory Lost* is about the darkness of addiction,” Goldin continues, “and *Sirens* is about the ecstasy of being high, so they’re complementary pieces. *Sirens* was fun to make and *Memory Lost* was absolutely heartbreaking.”

As the afternoon draws down, I’m tempted to wind up all the things that make Goldin’s images and activism and biography not just fun or tragic or heartbreaking but instantaneously memorable, but I can’t—there isn’t a nutshell that does it justice. The truth is that it’s not enough to say that Goldin is a great artist. Her work is the reason the camera was invented. ❖

Nan Goldin: Memory Lost
Marian Goodman Gallery
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Through June 12