

Nan Goldin Survived an Overdose to Fight the Opioid Epidemic

The photographer is known for her gritty images of New York City life. Now she's become a leading activist in the struggle against addiction.

By Thessaly La Force (June 11, 2018)



The artist Nan Goldin in Washington.
Credit Caitlin Teal Price

ON A RECENT April morning, the artist Nan Goldin and around 100 protesters entered the Smithsonian Institution's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery on the south side of the National Mall in Washington. The Sackler Gallery is a squat, geometric building that unspools into a subterranean museum beneath one of the Smithsonian's public gardens. Its founding collection of some 1,000 works of Near Eastern, Asian, and Southeast Asian art was donated along with \$4 million in 1982 by a physician, Arthur M. Sackler, whose name is carved on the building's exterior gray granite walls. Goldin and the group marched past an exhibition called "Encountering the Buddha" and positioned themselves along the atrium's staircase and around a shallow fountain that sits at the bottom of the building. A lacquer wood sculpture called "Monkeys Grasping the Moon" by the Chinese artist Xu Bing dangled above, 72 feet long. The few visitors already present that morning observed the proceedings with curiosity.

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A tense hush had spread through the cool and dark gallery, which Goldin shattered, leading the group in a gravel-voiced chant: “Arthur’s skills was marketing pills! Pills for profit! Addiction equals profit!” When she finished, the gallery fell silent. Suddenly, everyone pulled oversize prescription pill bottles labeled as OxyContin, MS Contin and Valium from their bags and threw them across the floor, down the stairs, and into the fountain — the sound of their falling like rain on a roof. Goldin and the protesters around her briefly staged a “die-in,” lying down on the stone floor. Then they assembled outside, placing more bottles atop a pink granite marker also bearing Arthur M. Sackler’s name. Goldin spoke about the opioid crisis. Then she called out the people she believes are largely responsible for it: the Sacklers.

It was the third protest Goldin had staged against the Sacklers since publishing an essay in the January issue of Artforum announcing that she had survived a three-year addiction to OxyContin. The drug — promoted as a long-lasting, extended-release narcotic to relieve intense chronic pain — was introduced to the United States in 1996 by Purdue Pharma, which is owned by the Sackler family, and was aggressively marketed to doctors as a safer alternative, with less potential for addiction, to other opioids then on the market. But OxyContin was not the safe drug Purdue Pharma suggested it was. Since 1999, more than 200,000 overdose deaths in the United States have been attributed to OxyContin and other prescription opioids like hydrocodone, morphine and methadone. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, 80 percent of those who started using heroin in 2011 had previously misused prescription painkillers. And since Purdue reformulated OxyContin in 2010 to make it more difficult to abuse, heroin use has skyrocketed. In a 2015 report, the Drug Enforcement Administration announced that deaths caused by overdosing from prescription drugs and heroin had “reached epidemic levels.” The Centers for Disease Control reports that in 2016, the most recent year for which finalized data is available, an average of 116 Americans died each day from an opioid overdose.



Protesters and onlookers inside the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington. Credit Caitlin Teal Price

Goldin overdosed, too, and lived to tell it. Her overdose was on fentanyl, which she thought was heroin; she had turned to the black market after her doctors caught her two-timing her prescriptions. Her addiction began in 2014, when she was living in Berlin. She needed surgery on

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her left wrist because of a pinched nerve that caused what she described as torturous, screaming pain. Goldin, who had become addicted to heroin in the 1970s and '80s, was aware of OxyContin's dangers. But she took it anyway. "I had heard it was a really evil drug, but I didn't think it would do me," she said. "I thought I had a lot of control." Instead, her life was reduced to a hermetic state of trying to avoid the symptoms of withdrawal, floating among apartments in New York, Berlin and Paris. In 2017 she entered a rehabilitation facility in Massachusetts, and it was there, while in recovery, that Goldin — a photographer previously known for her documentation of New York hedonism, who has since become one of the most active protest artists in recent memory — began to learn about the drug that nearly killed her.

THE SACKLER NAME can be found not just on the walls of the Smithsonian, but on dozens of buildings and wings at some of the most prestigious institutions across the world, including the Louvre Museum in Paris; the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Serpentine Galleries in London; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the American Museum of Natural History, the Guggenheim Museum and the Dia Art Foundation in New York; and Yale, Columbia and Harvard universities. But search for the Sackler name within Purdue Pharma's website, marketing and research materials, and it scarcely can be found. Two recent investigative articles that Goldin read late last year — one by Christopher Glazek in Esquire and the other by Patrick Radden Keefe in The New Yorker — outline in precise detail how the Sackler fortune was built by drugs. Goldin argues that the Sacklers have laundered their reputation with their philanthropy, and that their legacy as those who have profited from helping to create the opioid crisis will eventually supersede their charitable giving in the public consciousness. "They have a chance to change the meaning of their names," Goldin told me. She wants Purdue to direct 50 percent of its future profits to funding effective treatment, the reduction of harm, and education, and to halt the aggressive marketing of its painkillers. She also wants institutions to stop taking Sackler money.

That day in Washington, Goldin was joined by the community organizer Jennifer Flynn Walker of the Center for Popular Democracy; the two began working together this year after Flynn Walker learned of Goldin's experience with OxyContin. Later that afternoon, after the protest, Flynn Walker organized a news conference inside the Capitol, inviting Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and Representative Elijah E. Cummings of Maryland to speak about the Comprehensive Addiction Resources Emergency Act, a bill they had recently introduced to combat the opioid epidemic. The legislation seeks \$10 billion a year for 10 years to provide treatment, support and research, and includes targeted funds for the cities and states in America hit hardest. "The time for headlines is over; the time for political posturing is over; the time for action is now," declared Warren. Senator Benjamin L. Cardin of Maryland and Nancy Pelosi, the House minority leader, were also on hand to thank Goldin and the coalition of organizers who had come that day. "We are deeply in your debt," said Pelosi.

Responding to an article in ARTnews about the protest, a press representative for Jillian Sackler, the widow of Arthur M. Sackler, said that "Arthur Sackler died nine years before OxyContin was introduced and had nothing to do with Purdue Pharma, and his family have not benefited from OxyContin profits." The Smithsonian recently echoed this sentiment, adding through a representative that it was not changing the name of the Sackler museum although it

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“understood the reason for the protest.” Purdue, which announced in February that it would no longer market its opioid products to doctors, pointed to its efforts in education, drug monitoring programs and working with law enforcement. “We share Ms. Goldin’s concerns about the prescription and illicit opioid abuse crisis,” said a Purdue spokesman, Robert Josephson, “and we are committed to being part of the solution.” Goldin is uninterested in these responses and has so far refused Purdue’s invitation to sit down to talk. She says that Arthur Sackler, who ran an advertising agency that successfully marketed the drug Valium in the ’60s, essentially created the model that was later used by his brothers, Raymond and Mortimer, founders of Purdue Pharma in 1991, to sell OxyContin for profit, ultimately at the expense of lives. As a result, she believes that all Sacklers have an obligation to help end the opioid crisis.

It is rare these days to see a lone artist like Goldin — especially one both critically and commercially successful, whose work is in dozens of important museum collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art — step into the ring as an activist. By giving her name to this cause, Goldin has helped legitimize it and has become a figurehead for a group of people — those all too often dismissed as addicts — who have largely been treated as invisible. The fight against the opioid crisis is not one that draws easy sympathy. There are no breathtaking photographs of glaciers melting into the Arctic Ocean to pull at your heartstrings, and there aren’t any fresh-faced high school students on CNN demanding better gun laws. Opioids are perceived as an embarrassing blight in already depressed areas of the country, and addiction is largely seen as a metaphor for weakness, a failure of the will. The movement’s numbers are haunted by the ghosts of the most ordinary of people — an injured high school football player, an unemployed single mother, a former heroin addict. Which makes Goldin’s story, and her involvement, all the more crucial.



From left: outside the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington; inside, protesters tossed blue and orange “prescription” bottles into a fountain.
Credit From left: courtesy of Megan Kapler; courtesy of TW Collins

PEOPLE HAVE NOT always thought of Nan Goldin as a political activist. She is considered a pioneer in color photography and is today considered one of the greatest living American photographers. Her work belongs firmly in the canon alongside that of Peter Hujar, Robert Mapplethorpe, Sally Mann and Diane Arbus. Both her career and her life were almost derailed by her own addiction to drugs, which is part of what catapulted her to fame in the first place. Goldin’s legacy is of capturing a gritty and louche New York in its most intimate moments, of

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romanticizing lawlessness and unconventionality, and it is that legacy that aided her comeback in the 1990s, when she began to take more commercial pictures.

Born in Silver Spring, Md., in 1953, Goldin grew up with aspirational Jewish middle-class parents. When she was 11, her older sister Barbara, whom she worshiped, committed suicide at the age of 18. Goldin left home by age 14, eventually enrolling at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, where she studied photography. By 24, she had moved to New York, where she lived downtown in a loft on the Bowery and was working at a bar called Tin Pan Alley in Times Square, which was then a seedy neighborhood in service to the sex industry. It was in New York, really, where Goldin found her footing as an artist.

She is perhaps best known for one of her earliest series, “The Ballad of Sexual Dependency,” which she started showing in 1979 in clubs and underground cinemas and published as a book in 1986. “The Ballad,” as Goldin calls it, grew into an arrangement of 680 photographs that she took over a span of three decades, set to songs from the Velvet Underground, Yoko Ono, James Brown, Klaus Nomi and others and played as a slide show. The title is lifted from a song in Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill’s “The Threepenny Opera.” In the early years of showing the work in the ’70s and ’80s, Goldin changed the number and kind of photographs in “The Ballad” depending on who the audience was and what she was feeling that day, which lends it a sort of beautiful impermanence, like the shifting contours of a beach dune from high to low tide. The images, most of which were taken in New York, Provincetown, Paris, Boston, Berlin, and Mexico between 1979 and 1987, are of Goldin, her lovers and friends, and their lovers and friends — all captured in the most vulnerable, raw moments. In one, the writer and actress Cookie Mueller sits alone at a table in Tin Pan Alley, her arms crossed, lost in a moment of reflection. In another, a man is straddling his lover, her red T-shirt hurriedly pushed up her torso. It is pleasure-seeking and joyous, isolating and discomfiting. It mirrors the emotional swells of existence, and seeing it is not unlike being caught in an infinite loop of Goldin’s life at the time.

A decade after making “The Ballad,” Goldin’s style became co-opted by the fashion industry. For a 1996 article in *The New York Times Style Magazine* written by Jennifer Egan, she photographed James King, a promising 16-year-old model from Omaha, Neb. King admits to Egan that she got into drugs at the age of 15. Goldin’s photographs are haunting — King possesses a soulful, fragile beauty; she’s rail thin, with deep sorrowful eyes. One of King’s boyfriends from around that time, the 20-year-old fashion photographer Davide Sorrenti, would die a year later from a genetic blood disorder that was complicated by his heroin use. Later that year President Bill Clinton delivered a speech denouncing the glamorizing of addiction: “The glorification of heroin is not creative; it’s destructive. It’s not beautiful; it’s ugly.” Whether Clinton was referring to Goldin or not was unclear. But throughout her career Goldin has dismissed “heroin chic,” the term critics have deployed in describing her work. When I look at the fashion imagery generated in the 1990s — by David Sims, say, or Mario Sorrenti (Davide Sorrenti’s older brother) — I see the moral panic, but not much Goldin. It’s easier to see her influence in the photographs of artists like Juergen Teller or Ryan McGinley, although both serve up a glossier and more professional version of Goldin’s style. Still, Goldin has admitted in previous interviews that early in her career she fetishized becoming a “slum goddess”

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"Cookie at Tin Pan Alley, New York City, 1983".
Credit © Nan Goldin, courtesy of the artist.

and a junkie — that her interest in heroin in the '70s was more social until it wasn't, and everything spiraled out of control.

IF GOLDIN IS best known for romanticizing underground subcultures, there has long been a political subtext to her work. Her early photographs of drag queens were presciently unconcerned with gender. Her documentation of her own sexual abuse is profound, most notably in "Nan one month after being battered" (1984). It is a deeply uncomfortable image: Goldin's left eye is still bloodshot, her face still bruised. The image is alarming, but most markedly, it is without shame. Because of the AIDS crisis, "The Ballad" is also, however accidentally, a relic of a lost age. It serves as a hypothetical fork in the road, a bacchanalian path onto which the culture could have turned had AIDS never arrived.

In 1989, Goldin, whose addiction to drugs had isolated her from the world, emerged sober and clear-eyed. To her dismay, she saw her community slipping away, her friends dying or already dead. She curated a show for the downtown gallery Artists Space called "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing," in which she asked various New York artists to respond to the epidemic. The show was an elegy of sorts, featuring those Goldin had already lost: a self-portrait of Peter Hujar, who had died in 1987, for example, and Vittorio Scarpati, who died in 1989, in a hospital bed, photographed by Philip-Lorca diCorcia. Kiki Smith contributed a companion piece, a silk-screen on muslin, to what she made for the AIDS Memorial Quilt to commemorate all the women, including her own sister, claimed by the epidemic. Goldin described the show's genesis in her opening text, explaining how her addiction gave her "a profound loss of identity" and how she began to reconstruct herself through her work. "But when I came back to life," she wrote, "I have had to face that there could not be all the joyous reunions I'd envisioned when I resurfaced from my own hell."

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One of the show's catalog essays, called "Post Cards from America: X-Rays from Hell," was written by the artist David Wojnarowicz, who would also die of AIDS-related complications in 1992. The piece provides the clearest bridge to Goldin's current work, summarizing the tragedy of a country's indifference to a generation left to die. "My rage," Wojnarowicz wrote, "is really about the fact that 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."



"James eating an apple at the Jean Colonna show, Paris, 1995".
Credit © Nan Goldin, courtesy of the artist.

I MET GOLDIN again two weeks after the Smithsonian protest in her Brooklyn studio overlooking the East River. She greeted me from a brown velvet couch that looked as if it were an artifact from her Bowery apartment and studio of 38 years. (The novelist and essayist Darryl Pinckney once wrote of it: "Nan's Bowery loft had no windows or else they were covered and this made her parties long, hilarious, dangerous events. You had no idea what time it was or how light the sky was getting out there.") She moved in 2014. Petite, with cropped red curly hair, and dressed in black, Goldin was smoking a cigarette and drinking a ginger beer. An eclectic assortment of books were stacked on a shelf nearby: "A Concise History of Posters," "Borderline Personality Disorder: A Clinical Guide," monographs on Eva Hesse, John Kelly, and Joseph Cornell. Three skateboards from a recent collaboration with Supreme were still wrapped in plastic, leaning against a box.

In the last few years, Goldin has been painting and drawing in addition to taking photographs. When she does take pictures, she uses a Fuji 6x7 camera, but she also takes a lot with her iPhone. "Everyone is a photographer who takes a picture," she told me. "It's the most accessible medium in the world." She showed me a selection of paintings she made while sober. There is a surreal quality to them, an artful gentleness to the lines and colors that resembles that of her photographs. In a self-portrait from February, the canvas has been scratched so that the lips

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appear sewn shut — an echo of Wojnarowicz’s iconic image from Rosa von Praunheim’s 1990 documentary “Silence = Death.” “I was alone for a while over New Year’s, and I didn’t speak to anyone for a few days,” Goldin explained. In “Cleopatra Masturbating,” a nude Cleopatra touched herself while a snake bit her left nipple, which bleeds. In the background are cats and dogs.

Goldin asked if I ever tried an opioid. I told her that in college, I took OxyContin once; it made me feel sick. She nodded. I asked her what opioids felt like for her. “They make everything all right. They’re like a padding between you and the world,” she said. “It’s this round warmth that’s covering you.” She looked away. “Everything is bearable suddenly.”

The drawings she made while high are shakier, and also, she said, more automatic, as if being high made it more easy to access the part of herself that her more conscious mind couldn’t touch. “An Unknown Species With Unknown Substances” depicts a four-legged creature smoking a cigarette surrounded by prescription bottles. (“OxyContin?” I asked. “Unknown substances,” she responded.) Despite the misery they were borne out of, the drawings were both bizarre and amusing.

Two of Goldin’s photographs were exhibited at the Matthew Marks Gallery booth at the Frieze art fair in May. I asked her if she felt that her critique of the source of cultural donations made her feel a responsibility to manage who buys her own work. Wasn’t it possible that someone who profits from Purdue Pharma — or from any other variety of human misery — could buy one of her photographs? There are artists today who refuse to sell their work to the Zabludowicz family, whose wealth has historical roots in arms dealing. After the election of Donald J. Trump, Richard Prince disavowed one of his artworks depicting a screen grab from Ivanka Trump’s Instagram feed and returned the \$36,000 payment he received for it. Goldin deflected the question: “Somebody said when I started this, they’re going to deaccession you [at the Met], but I don’t think they’re going to.” She shrugged. At first, this struck me as an unsatisfactory answer. The Sacklers’ support of the arts is still a net good — their money has supported generations of artists over the decades, including, arguably Goldin. Goldin doesn’t deny this: “We’re not asking museums to give back money. We’re asking them to refuse future donations. And to make statements.” The firmness of her stance on the matter made me realize that the only responsibility an artist like Goldin has is to her own work. The same can’t be said for the Sacklers.

Goldin was pleased with how the Washington protest went, but her anger at Purdue Pharma was palpable. “Supposedly, the brain can’t tell the difference between emotional pain and physical pain,” she said. “They are deeply connected, and Purdue has preyed on both.” She indicates that she was afraid of being targeted by the Sacklers. The day before the Smithsonian protest, she attended the screening of a documentary by Madeleine Sackler, whose father Jonathan is on the Purdue board of directors. Goldin was escorted out of the screening by security. “They call me out by name,” she said. “These are big people with a lot of power.” Goldin’s model for activism is the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, or ACT UP, which was started by Larry Kramer in 1987. It was a clarion call for legislative action, medical research and treatment in response to the AIDS crisis. In the early 1990s, ACT UP protested the tobacco

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company Philip Morris, which provided generous philanthropy to the arts while financially supporting Senator Jesse Helms, known for denouncing the “homosexual lifestyle” as the cause of the spread of AIDS in the United States and countering the legislative needs of the gay community. Goldin remembered it well. But when we began to talk about the AIDS crisis more directly, she became visibly sad.

“I lost everybody who carried my history,” she said, not really speaking to me anymore, but to the space in front of her. “We were supposed to grow old together. There is no one for me to even talk to about those years.”

I thought of her friends I’ve seen in her pictures: Mueller, her husband Scarpati, Wojnarowicz. “It was like the plague,” she said. “The bubonic plague.”

Goldin’s documentation of the AIDS epidemic — both with “Witnesses” and with her own photographs — was a crucial form of artistic expression in response to a great injustice. But her current activism, organized under her newly formed group, Prescription Addiction Intervention Now, or P.A.I.N., is in many ways different — both in terms of whom she is aiming for and what she is questioning. Few have articulated as well how the art world, as defined by its large institutions, has a moral obligation to help those suffering at the hands of corporate greed. By targeting institutions receiving money from a family like the Sacklers (whose net worth is estimated to be around \$13 billion), Goldin is challenging what might be viewed as the art world’s often nefarious economy.

Artists have long created work that points to injustice and inequality, from Picasso’s “Guernica” (1937) to Dread Scott’s “A Man Was Lynched by Police Yesterday” (2015). But as the art market has ballooned, it has changed, as have the artists who define its success. The artists are now professionals, just like the dealers and curators who promote them. And protest today is respected for how skillful its messaging is — activism, with its symbols and hashtags, has become as slick as advertising. Famous activists have podcasts and multimillion-dollar book deals and get to meet Anna Wintour of Vogue. Goldin, who has only around 69,000 Instagram followers for both her artist’s profile and P.A.I.N. combined, has never been on Facebook. P.A.I.N. meets once a week, give or take, in her Brooklyn apartment. It is surprising, then, to see Goldin’s analog methods have such an impact against such obstacles.

As Goldin spoke about P.A.I.N., she suddenly changed, grew steely and distant. She began to talk about how she wants to put pictures on bus shelters of people who have recovered from opioid addiction — to “break through the shame,” she said. There was a protest she wanted to attend in front of the federal courthouse in Cleveland later that week, where hundreds of lawsuits by United States cities and counties against Purdue and other opioid manufacturers, distributors and retailers have been consolidated. Many of the protesters would like to see the potential settlement money go directly back into treatment. Goldin has been making a film about P.A.I.N. that includes visiting clinics in rural areas of the country. She threw out some statistics on overdoses, and how fentanyl can be found these days not just in heroin, but in cocaine as well. I got the distinct sense that all of this — the work of turning the personal political — had also helped make the world a little more bearable for Goldin, too.

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THE NEXT NIGHT, Goldin arrived at Silvercup Studios in Queens to appear on the set of “The Deuce,” the HBO show created by David Simon and George Pelecanos. “The Deuce” is set in the same New York City that produced Goldin during the late 1970s. It was a time when the city was nearly bankrupt, and when a certain kind of poverty and freedom abutted against a strain of American puritanical moralism. Goldin was a huge fan of Simon’s work — both his cult television

show “The Wire,” which aired from 2002 to 2008, and his 1991 book “Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets.” Simon is six years younger than Goldin, but Goldin pointed out that they were both born in Silver Spring. (Simon told me, “My understanding of New York then was vastly inferior to anyone who was experiencing it — I was a 17-year-old idiot, and Nan Goldin was living the events and capturing it in a primal way.”)

One of the story lines in “The Deuce” follows Vincent Martino, an entrepreneurial working-class man played by James Franco who ends up running a bar called the High Hat, which is directly modeled after Tin Pan Alley. The bar was a watering hole for artists, prostitutes, pimps, drunks and whoever else might have walked in that night. For this particular episode, the High Hat’s walls were hung with a small selection from “The Ballad.” In the scene, Goldin, as a patron, regarded them, including one of herself called “Buzz and Nan at the Afterhours, New York City” (1980). Franco stood beside her. They were strangers to each other, yet they enacted that inexplicable moment that happens in art viewing, where a sense of familiarity can grow between two people and compel them to speak. (Goldin: “They call that art? I coulda done that.”) In the photograph, Buzz, a pimp, leans toward Goldin, who is wearing a madras dress and pearls. There is a reluctant intimacy between the two. The black leather of the booth behind them is imposing, and the glasses on the table imply a night that has already passed into the next day.

There is an obvious nostalgia for the late ’70s in a show like “The Deuce.” By the end of the ’80s, the party was over. The city had ceded its bohemianism to its newfound wealth as the toll of the AIDS epidemic climbed higher and higher. Goldin will always be remembered for that period because of her work about it, but also because she survived it. Perhaps now she will be seen as standing for something else — for epitomizing the opioid crisis, for sticking up for those too poor or too weak to fight a shadowy corporation for themselves. As she put it earlier: “I can’t stand by and watch another generation disappear.”