

The Guardian

Nan Goldin: 'I wanted to get high from a really early age'

*Photographer Nan Goldin burst on to the art scene in 1986 with *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, hugely influential images that chronicled the druggy New York demi-monde she and her friends inhabited. Now 60, her latest work is all about children. So has the queen of hardcore photography finally mellowed?*

By Sean O'Hagan (March 22, 2014)



Self-portrait by Nan Goldin: 'I didn't care about "good" photography, I cared about complete honesty.'
Photograph: © Nan Goldin, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

The first thing you see as you enter Nan Goldin's living room is a coyote, its head thrown back and its teeth bared as if in mid-howl. To Goldin's delight, it startles me. She hugs it as if to prove it is indeed a stuffed creature, then carries it over to a tall corner window – "It likes the light" – from where it can intrigue those passing beneath her third-floor window in Brooklyn.

As metaphors go, the coyote is a good one for one of the most celebrated and controversial photographers of our time. Goldin is an outsider by instinct and nocturnal by nature, someone who lives on the edge of society by her own rules. She made her name in the 1980s, visually recording with an unflinching eye her own wayward life, and the often dissolute lives of her circle of friends, which included addicts, hustlers, transvestites and prostitutes. In doing so, she redefined what photography could do and what it could be – a mirror of oneself as well as the world.

Her epic series *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* was originally devised as a slideshow set to music to entertain her friends. Featuring songs by, among others, the Velvet Underground, James Brown, Nina Simone and Charles Aznavour, it portrayed her friends – many of them part of the hard-drugs subculture on New York's lower east side – as they partied, got high, fought and had sex. It was first publicly shown at the Whitney Biennial in New York in 1985 and was published as a photobook the following year. It remains a benchmark for all other work in a similar confessional vein. Other acclaimed books include *I'll Be Your Mirror* (1998) and *The*

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Devil's Playground (2003). According to the New York Times in 2003, The Ballad... "forged a genre, with photography as influential as any in the last 20 years".

The photography curator and writer Susan Bright agrees. "One only has to teach a class of undergraduate photography students to realise her influence. Her ideas infuse all new work that deals with close family members, friends or ideas of community. She gave legitimacy to an approach that has crudely been adopted and understood as "snapshot style" or "diaristic". I would go as far as to say her work has come to represent an entire style."

In short, we are now living to a degree in a world that Nan Goldin created long before the digital camera and Instagram made it ubiquitous: a self-absorbed, often revelatory world where the everyday and the exotic exist in uneasy cohabitation. "I can't be held responsible for all that has happened since," she says when I bring this up, her eyes flashing and her enervated east-coast drawl undercut with just a hint of anger. "Most of that stuff is so easy and lacking in any kind of emotional depth or context. Nowadays, people forget how radical my work was when it first appeared. Nobody else was doing what I did."

Now 60, and clean if not quite serene, Goldin remains an unapologetically difficult character – "I've yet to meet an artist who isn't," she says at one point. "It goes with the turf." She has just moved house when I meet her and an adjacent room is full of unpacked boxes. It is late in the afternoon but she shuffles about making coffee and searching in her bag for cigarettes, like someone not yet fully awake. Her manner is welcoming, if initially a little suspicious, and, with her mane of curly red hair and seeming aversion to eye contact, she certainly has a presence. The anger that, she admits, drove her for years, has been tamed and, if there are still occasional flashes of impatience, she is generous with her time and eager to talk about her new book, her first in 11 years.



Alyssa's glance at 3 weeks old, Paris, 2010. Photograph: Nan Goldin, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

Entitled *Eden and After*, its perhaps surprising subject is children – or, more accurately, childhood. As its title suggests, she portrays it as a heightened, almost sacred, space. "Children are from another planet," she says. "They know and see stuff that we don't." She tells me she is "ecstatic" about the new book, having overseen its production from beginning to end. Comprising around 300 images taken over the past 25 years or so, *Eden and After* follows the trajectory of childhood from birth to pre-pubescence through loosely themed chapters with symbolic titles such as *The Arrival*, *The Garden*, and the very Goldinesque *I'm a Little Girl*, *I'm a*

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Little Boy. It prompts the question: has the queen of hard-core autobiographical photography finally mellowed?

"As a person, I would say yes," she answers, "but, creatively, this book is another part of a bigger journey insofar as I have always photographed my close friends and many of these pictures are of my friends' kids. Because of the subject matter, it's a lot more obviously hopeful, but it's not just about hope and joy. Kids are sad, too, and angry. It's really about the autonomy of being a child, about flexible gender and freedom, the wildness in children that gets hammered down as they grow up."

Despite the often provocative nature of her subject matter, Goldin has always insisted on the tenderness of her way of seeing, the hope as well as the despair. With *Eden and After*, that hope is made manifest. She shows her long-time creative collaborator, Guido Costa, with his pregnant wife, Caterina, and later with their daughter, Isabella, and the experimental film-maker Vivienne Dick with her son, Jesse, as well as children she has photographed for *Kidswear* magazine, with which she has a contract that allows her to choose her own subjects.

The book is stalked by familiar ghosts, not least her close friend the late Cookie Mueller, an actress who starred in several underground films by cult director John Waters. Goldin tracked Mueller's life through the good times and the bad, through excess, addiction, recovery, marriage and even death – both Mueller and her husband, Vittorio, died young from Aids and the final portraits Goldin made of each of them was as they lay in their caskets. Here, Mueller is hymned as a loving mother, tenderly at one with her son, Max. To anyone who has followed Goldin's career, and grown familiar with her cast of characters, these images have an added layer of poignancy. As the years go by, one senses that mortality itself is her underlying subject and that all her books are books of remembering.

"Yes," she agrees, "but my work is full of light now, too. Sometimes people don't seem to see that. They refer constantly to *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* and think I am the same person that took those pictures. That series is stark. It's all flash-lit. I honestly didn't know about natural light then and how it affected the colour of the skin because I never went out in daylight. The work I do now has so many different tones. There is a huge difference in it and in me." As if on cue, the late-afternoon sun suddenly illuminates the room in a warm orange glow. She stands up and stares out of the window. "In Manhattan," she says, "I could barely see the sky with all those tall buildings, but out here in Brooklyn, I have space to breathe."

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Cookie with Max, at my birthday party, Provincetown, Massachusetts, 1976.
Photograph: Nan Goldin , courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

Photography, as Nan Goldin has often attested, has not only illuminated her life, but saved her soul. "Every time I go through something scary, traumatic," she once said, "I survive by taking pictures." Born Nancy Goldin into a middle-class Jewish family in Lexington, a suburb of Boston, she was the youngest of four children, with two brothers and a sister. The traumas seem to have started early. She was close to her sister, Barbara, who from an early age rebelled against the constrictions of middle-American respectability. "My sister taught me to hate suburbia from a very young age," says Goldin, "the suffocation, the double-standards. 'Don't let the neighbours know', was the gospel. Well, the neighbours certainly knew what was going on in our house, because they heard it."

She will not be drawn further on her troubled relationship with her parents, but says that she made peace with both her father, who died last year aged 99, and her mother, who now suffers from dementia. She does talk openly and movingly about Barbara, though, whose rebelliousness became so troublesome for her parents that she was placed in various institutions during her teens. She took her own life, aged 19, by lying down on the tracks in front of an oncoming commuter train. Nan was 11 when it happened.

"I don't think you ever come to terms with a suicide," she says quietly, "especially if it is someone you admired and needed and whose death was so violent. It's an act that never destroys just one person. But, there was no ambiguity about what she did and I take that as courage. A lot of people reacted by trying to take the blame for it, but I would simply say, 'She did it.' It was her life and her decision. She may have been driven there by her demons, but it was still her decision."

For a long time afterwards, Goldin was "almost completely silent". She withdrew into herself and became unmanageable. "I got thrown out of every school I went to even though, believe it or not, I barely talked above a whisper. I was shy, but disruptive, which was kind of hard for people to deal with." The photographer David Armstrong, who has been one of her close friends since they met at school, recently recalled her precocious reputation. "All the cool kids who met in the morning to eat hash brownies talked about this legend, Nan Goldin, who got kicked out of school the year before." Goldin laughs at this recollection. "It's true. I was 13 or 14 and I arrived out of nowhere in the last semester and started selling pot in the playground. I was trouble."

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Edda Being Taught to Smile, Berlin, 1991. Photograph: Nan Goldin, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

She found her voice, she says, at Satya, the "hippy school" in Lincoln, Massachusetts that she attended with Armstrong. It was modelled on Summerhill, the pioneering free school in Suffolk,

where children and teachers are given an equal say in what is taught and how. At Satya, where she spent most of her time horse-riding in the woods or watching old Hollywood films, she thrived socially. "I didn't get a formal education, but I did get a voice and I learned to relate to other people," she says. "For me, it was a truly liberating experience." It was there she was given her first camera by a teacher and began taking Polaroids of herself and those around her. From the start, Goldin was an instinctive observational photographer.

At 15, she had her first show in Boston, which featured a community of drag queens she was then hanging out with. "I wished I could put them on the cover of Vogue, because all I knew about photography came from the fashion magazines," she says, laughing. "I was a good shoplifter and I would steal Italian and French Vogue and we'd pore over them for hours. The queens would fight over my photographs and rip up the ones they hated."

Initially, because of her subject matter alone, she was compared to Diane Arbus, who had made her name with photographs of so-called freaks and outsiders in the 1960s. Goldin, though, says she knew nothing about art photography or documentary when she saw Arbus's work for the first time. "What I remember most is that all the queens I knew hated her. Violently. In her portraits of drag queens, she stripped them and showed them as men. To me, the queens were not men. My work was much more respectful to them. I've never thought of a drag queen as a man. That's really the last thing I think about when I look at them. They weren't women either, by the way, they were another species."

She pauses for a moment, lost in thought, then says, "That was way before all this transgender crap. Fucking postmodern and gender theory. I mean, who gives a shit? People made all that crap up to get jobs in universities. I once told my students to just take LSD if they wanted to see the world clearly," she says, grinning and lighting another cigarette. "You can see why I didn't really fit in as an academic, but they still ask me to come back and teach."

When she left school, she briefly attended night classes in beginners' photography. "I basically wanted to learn to use a big camera," she says, "but I dropped out of that particular course immediately, because I am technically retarded. But I did meet Henry Horenstein, a teacher and

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photographer, who had looked at my work. He asked me if I knew Larry Clark's work so it was worth it for that alone. I saw Clark's book Tulsa, and it had a huge impact on me."

Published in 1971, Tulsa is a diaristic chronicle in black and white of the lives of a bunch of wayward young people from the photographer's home town. Clark, who later directed the controversial film Kids, photographed them using heroin, having sex and playing around with handguns. For many critics of the time, that was a morally questionable stance, but it redrew the boundaries of what was permissible as documentary subject matter. It was the single touchstone for Goldin's The Ballad of Sexual Dependency.

Goldin attended the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, alongside David Armstrong, the art photographer Philip-Lorca DiCorcia and the performance artist Mark Morrisroe. She graduated in 1977 and moved to New York soon after and began taking the photographs that would become The Ballad of Sexual Dependency. She rejects the term "outsiders" for her

subjects, referring to them instead as her "family". They were, she later wrote, "bonded not by blood, but by a similar morality, the need to live fully and for the moment". In finding and celebrating this surrogate family, Goldin was also acknowledging her sister, who, as she once put it, "was born at the wrong time and had no tribe, no other people like her".



Misty and Jimmy. Photograph: Nan Goldin , courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

When the book was published, it defined what came to be known, somewhat reductively, as "the snapshot style". Shot in often saturated colour and flash-lit, it was initially dismissed, she says, mainly by male photographers. "I didn't really care about 'good' photography," she once said, "I cared about complete honesty."

"David [Armstrong] and I called our work the dust and scratch school," she says, "because all we cared about was the content. We didn't give a shit about prints." The Ballad... is best experienced, Goldin says, as an installation. "The slideshow is really my medium. I wanted to make films. That was always the ambition."

Constantly reedited and revised by her since then, The Ballad... is an evocation of a time and a place and is now imbued with a deep sense of loss that people seem to connect with deeply. At the Arles' photography festival of 2009, which was curated by Goldin , an outdoor screening held several hundred people in thrall. Likewise, in the more intimate setting of a dark room in Tate Modern a few years ago, when it was shown as part of a themed show, Exposed:

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Voyeurism, Surveillance and the Camera, it proved the most popular attraction. "In my experience, people usually spend five or 10 minutes in an installation," says the Tate's curator of photography, Simon Baker, "but Nan's installation was full all the time. It's the mixture of narrative and music that keeps people watching. She is a master of sequencing. Many photographers have followed Goldin, but very few have produced work that is so monumental in scale and yet so powerfully intimate. She really is out there on her own."

And "out there", with all its connotations, was where Nan Goldin was for a long time. She is one of the few artists – William Burroughs might be the only other one – whose work's quality does not seem to have been compromised by heroin use. But, while *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* chronicles a twilight world of cavalier drug use, it also portrays, even more graphically, the inevitable downside, including her own addiction, an abusive relationship and the deaths of some of those closest to her as the Aids epidemic of the late 1980s scythed through the gay subculture of New York and beyond. She is, I suggest, lucky to have survived.

"You could say that. When I was 19, I put the needle down and I think that decision saved my life. And, though I mixed heroin and coke [Goldin continued to use heroin but not intravenously], I never smoked crack. There is something genetic inside me that is about surviving, but, so many people I know have gone that I do have survivor's guilt." How bad did it get, though? "Oh, it got dark. After *The Ballad* was published in 1986, I spent two years in my room. Drugs became my full-time occupation and about the only people I saw were my dealers. I never answered the phone. I have the answerphone tapes, but I'm afraid to listen to them." She pauses again, as if wary of what she is saying. "But, for years, I used drugs before I abused them, and I had a good time. People take drugs because they feel good. Especially people who don't have a skin, who are really raw like I was. With heroin, you don't feel any pain. For me, cocaine was worse than smack. It's an evil drug. It sent me to the bottom."

Does she think now that drugs were a way of numbing the pain of her sister's death? "No, I can't use that excuse. I wanted to get high from a really early age. I wanted to be a junkie. That's what intrigues me. Part was the Velvet Underground and the Beats and all that stuff. But, really, I wanted to be as different from my mother as I could and define myself as far as possible from the suburban life I was brought up in."

In 1988, Goldin went into rehab, clutching her camera and a copy of *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, both of which were immediately confiscated by the staff. "They said the book would cause drug and sex urges in other people there," she says, shaking her head. "Can you imagine having a sex urge from *The Ballad*? That just baffled me."

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Lou Lighting Aurele's Cigarette, Sag Harbour, 2000. Photograph: Nan Goldin, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

She got her camera back in a halfway house, where she tentatively began taking some self-portraits that are studies in utter vulnerability. Without heroin and cocaine she felt unmoored, and for a while was unsure if she would ever take a good photograph again. "I came out of rehab and I didn't even know how to catch a bus. I honestly didn't know who I was or what I was when I first got clean." Slowly, uncertainly, she began working again. "When I say the camera has kept me alive, I mean it literally," she says. "My work is who I am."

There have been a few relapses since, including a "major" one in 2000, when she was prescribed strong painkillers for a serious injury to her hand, but her work has always got her through. At the 2009 Arles festival, she showed *The Ballad* and a new installation, *Sisters, Saints and Sibyls*, an ode to her sister, Barbara. It is a characteristically ambitious, sometimes symbolically overloaded, work in which she intertwined the lives of Saint Barbara, her sister and herself. "I

brought myself into it as the third character to show the legacy," she says now, "but maybe there should not have been so much of me in there."

It was made at considerable cost to herself over an intense eight-month period. "My father did a huge thing for me," she says, quietly. "He got all the records from all the hospitals my sister had been in. It was incredible that he did that for me. Five hundred pages of stuff. They had a social worker waiting to talk to him when they arrived. I should have had a social worker waiting for me."

With this accumulated evidence of her sister's troubled life, she also set out to make a biographical film. "I met all the people she had ever known, went to every place she had ever been, all the hospitals and the place where she killed herself. I was with a few close friends and we shot for months, but then I just could not edit it. I had a breakdown." So, there was no catharsis? "No. And the film never got made. Now that my father has gone, I could tell the whole story, which is even worse. It's not just about me and my sister, but my parents as well. But, you know," she says, looking uncertain, "maybe I don't need to do that now."

Mellow now, Nan Goldin seems to be in a good place. I read back to her something she said in an interview a few years back: "I'm just less absolute." What did she mean by that? "Did I really say that?" she says, looking puzzled. "I guess it was one way of saying I'm not as angry any more. For such a long time I was fuelled by rage. Only the junk stopped that anger, but it came back big time in 2000." She drags on her cigarette and shakes her head. "I alienated a lot of people

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and lost a lot of friends because of it. When I'm angry, I'm really smart. I become much more verbally astute. I go for the jugular. It gets exhausting and you feel fucking terrible afterwards."

I notice she has the words "I'm sorry" tattooed on her forearm. When did she stop being angry? "A couple of years ago. I was raging and a close friend just yelled 'fuck you!' in my face and walked away. I was stunned and then I just thought, thank you. I was so grateful because up until then I didn't know what it felt like to be on the receiving end."

Lighting up yet another cigarette, she suddenly announces that she is tired of talking about herself, stands up and stares out of the window at the fading light. We talk about her working method and how it has changed through the all-powerful surge of digital technology. "I grew up working in Cibachrome and having a printer that understood my work but, after 40 years of working that way, it is all suddenly gone. And they don't make slides any more. Now, I don't even see half my work because it's scanned. A scan has no magic."

We spend a further few minutes leafing through Eden and After, and she says she is worried that some of the images of naked children will cause controversy. She mentions the show at the Baltic in Gateshead in 2007, when one of her photographs, Klara and Edda Belly-dancing, owned by Elton John, was removed from the exhibition on the grounds that it was pornographic. Goldin has never, she says, courted controversy, but, perhaps unsurprisingly, controversy has stalked her – most surreally in 1997, when the then US president, Bill Clinton, made a statement in which he accused "Dan [sic] Goldin" of promoting heroin chic during one of the perennial moral panics over fashion's use of skinny, blank-looking models.

"The thing is," she says, "I hate that kind of glamorisation. I thought the Clinton gaffe was hilarious, but I was appalled that my work was being judged that way, because I never took pictures of people doing drugs to make a fashion statement. My work has nothing to do with that. It's about honesty and trust. I know that most of the people I photograph trust me. I still ask people if I can use their picture when I publish a book. It's about respect, really. I mean, in the end, all you have left is your integrity, right?"