The Telegraph

Nan Goldin: unafraid of the dark

The photographer Nan Goldin pulled no punches in her studies of the drag queens, junkies and prostitutes that made up her dysfunctional New York 'family'.

By Drusilla Beyfus (June 26, 2009)

Nan Goldin: Picnic on the Esplanade, 1973

'I'm just less absolute.' It was a throwaway remark made by Nan Goldin as we discussed her forthcoming show at the 40th anniversary of the Rencontres d'Arles photography festival. But it could be taken as a lead on the way that Goldin thinks about herself and her work today. Anything less intense about her would lower the temperature like no tomorrow.

Goldin is internationally recognised for a vast body of work, the core of which is a pictures-and-text diary of her personal experiences. She has a confessional approach to her affairs, and is indifferent to conventional limits. Many living photographers have been influenced by her, including Corinne Day, Wolfgang Tillmans and Juergen Teller.

In France she will show her totem piece, The Ballad of Sexual Dependency, a multimedia slide-show created between the 1970s and mid-1990s. Also included is Sisters, Saints & Sybils (2004), a slide and video exploration of her sister Barbara's suicide at the age of 18. The accompanying essay is embargoed in English-speaking countries: 'I did not want my parents to read it,' Goldin told me on a wonky landline from New York.

During our conversation, I picked up the following Goldinisms and reflections, all communicated in her deep, throaty voice:

On portraits: 'I realised a long time ago that outside of commercial work I would never photograph anyone that I didn't want to live with. I didn't think anyone had the right to

photograph a stranger. But now I know that there are other ways that people photograph strangers with compassion, either as a reflection of themselves or where they go deep into a relationship in some way or help people.'

On truthfulness: 'At the Tate Gallery I asked an audience of 150 how many of them believed a photograph could be real. Only five put up their hands. That's not a world I thought I would grow into.'

On attitude: 'A real artist doesn't do themselves. I don't do Nan Goldin.'
What are considered typical Nan Goldins are the shots from The Ballad of Sexual Dependency. The slide-show began as a home movie for friends, then it was included in the Whitney Biennial in New York in 1985, and received a glowing notice, after which Goldin trawled it through clubs, underground theatres, galleries and festivals in Europe, including Arles, where it was shown in 1987.

Photgraph by Nan Goldin: 'Many artists have begun by photographing the people around them, but what set Goldin apart was her habit of living the life of her subjects'

Born in 1953, Goldin was brought up by well-to-do Jewish parents in Boston, Massachusetts, the youngest of four children. She ran away from home, and during her teenage years was fostered by several families. Goldin has said that the conformism of the 1950s made it a hard ride for females who were 'full of raw energy, creativity and sensuality'. She was closest to her eldest sister, Barbara. Goldin herself was on heroin by the end of her teens.

Photography, to some extent, offered a pathway. She had held her first show of photographs at the age of 15, featuring drag queens, a subject that she was to make her own. She progressed in her subject and graduated from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston Tufts University, with a degree in fine arts in 1977.

The initial public response to her material was lukewarm. She recognised that she was not what was accepted as 'a good photographer' on the grounds of her inexperience and inadequate technique. Larry Clark, the acclaimed American documentary artist, became a mentor and is credited with putting her on the right track.

The ruptured emotional side of her relationship with her parents seems to have been repaired over the years. It is in print that she became close to them; she has photographed her mother, and is sensitive to their feelings about Barbara. Critics have commented that Barbara's death is a vein that runs through Goldin's work.

Goldin moved from Boston to New York where she gathered round her a group that she has characterised as her family; they became her subjects, and her shots became the stuff of the family album. A family 'bonded not by blood or place but by a similar morality, the need to live fully and for the moment,' she comments in The Ballad.

'I was one of the first people, at least in the Western world, to photograph my entourage and say that it was as valid as photographing any exotic tribe you don't know,' she told me. 'We were the world to each other. We were not marginalised people as everyone writes of us: outsiders, drug addicts, prostitutes, transvestites, blah, blah.

It was our world… We came from a different planet.' Shot in colour, a snapshot style caught her best mates and lovers at their unconsidered moments in bedroom, bathroom and club bar, mostly where daylight would be an intrusion. Many artists have begun by photographing the people around them, but what set Goldin apart was her habit of living the life of her subjects. She portrays herself, rarely kindly.

Her boyfriend of the time, Brian, beat her up badly. She found out that he had read her diaries and had burnt some of them. 'Confronting my normal ambivalence had betrayed his absolute concept of romance,' she has said. The self-portrait that resulted, showing her battered face, has become one of her most widely reproduced images.

Goldin and her 'family' were involved in a high-risk scene of substance abuse, domestic violence and Aids. Little wonder that she has admitted that photography has been redemptive. But she had a narrow escape: 'When I crossed the line from use to self-abuse my world became very, very dark – between 1986-1988,' she recalls. In 1988, two years after The Ballad was first published, she checked into a detox clinic for drugs and alcohol.

They took away her camera and her copy of The Ballad, saying her images would cause drug and sex urges in the other patients. Whatever the probability of that, her attitude to the relationship she terms 'coupling' has a bleak side. She likens destructive relationships between the sexes – something she surely had direct experience of – to a 'biochemical reaction, it stimulates that part of your brain that is only satisfied by love, heroin or chocolate.'

Turning to herself, she writes, 'My long-term friendships with women have bonds that have the intensity of a marriage… But part of me is stimulated by the conflict inherent in relationships between men and women.' She gives as an example of the power of sexual dependency an episode that followed her sister's suicide. Barbara threw herself in front of a train. Nan, who was 11 at the time, recalls in her diary, 'during this period of greatest pain and loss, I was seduced by an older man… I was obsessed by my desire.'

Maybe in later years this was a trigger for the title of The Ballad. It is taken from Brecht's The Threepenny Opera, whose protagonist Macheath is a notorious bandit and womaniser. The moral tone of the Brecht lyric, The Ballad of Sexual Obsession, sung by the wronged wife, Polly Peachum, is unmistakable: 'Want it or not, he can't ignore that call/Sexual obsession has him in its thrall.'

So perhaps it is relevant that the revised 1996 Ballad text reveals an artist with a number of second thoughts. Many of Goldin's companions died young. Her hopes that by photography she would be able to resurrect their memory proved false – the images served to remind her of how much she had lost. Post-rehab, and in her first work to be done without drugs, she discovers daylight.

What of now? There is little sign of a revisionist turn of mind towards her confessional proclivities. Of course it opens her to a charge of attention-getting in her preparedness to tell all where others draw a veil. Her case rests on her defence of the importance of the subjective viewpoint, as stated in The Ballad: 'I don't ever want to be susceptible to anyone else's version of my history.'

Her current direction leans towards filmmaking. She is working on collages, on projecting slide-shows on a wall. She told me that she is not as interested as she was in showing portraits of people that she loves but is keen to take another step, thus echoing an earlier remark made to me that she wasn't the same Goldin who created The Ballad.

Despite her artistic success, Goldin has troubled finances. According to her, in part this hinges on a draconian contract with a publisher that doesn't allow her to produce books. It is a confused picture as Goldin is not only in demand as a speaker, as a teacher and as a considerable attraction at international arts events, but she also raises healthy sums at auction. Her print At the Bar: Toon, C, and So, Bangkok, 1992, for instance, sold for $7,000 above the top estimate of $20,000 in an edition of 25 in May. All she will say on the question for publication is that she is broke, that in general the market is down, and that you have to be very brave to buy her work.

The exception to that might be her landscapes, which she has recently turned to. Meanwhile, she occasionally works for French and British Vogue, does pictures for the New York magazine The, and has a happy relationship with the German quarterly Kidswear, which allows her to choose her own subjects. She enjoys shooting children, especially the children of friends whom she has known virtually since the womb.

Controversy is never far away and doesn't help with the bottom line. Sisters, Saints & Sybils, which was shot in the chapel of the Pitié-Salpêtrière hospital in Paris, was deemed pornographic by the incumbent priest. In 2007 the Baltic arts centre in Gateshead called in the police, concerned that one of her pictures, Klara and Edda belly-dancing, might breach child pornography laws.

The Crown Prosecution Service later deemed that the photograph, part of a series owned by Sir Elton John, was not indecent. 'It was outrageous and caused a lot of problems for me,' Goldin told me. 'The pictures were of children of really good friends of mine whom I had known since they were born.' (When the children heard about the picture being taken down, they sent a formal letter of support.)

François Hebel, the director of the Arles festival, has been working closely with Goldin for the 40th anniversary. I asked him how he had found the experience – he has said that it is often the case that curators love the work but dread the artist. 'Once she is on your side, she's a good friend,' he said. 'She shows great sensitivity and a rare sense of detail.'

Part of Goldin's input at the festival is a selection of contemporary photographers whose pictures she feels close to – all personal risk-takers. They include Antoine D'Agata, whom Goldin taught at the International School of Photography in New York, and of whom it has been said that 'he seems to photograph everything he experiences, to excess'; and David Armstrong, an old friend of Goldin's who introduced her to the drug culture of New York's Bowery. 'It's amazing that they are all alive,' Hebel said. Something of the same could be said about Goldin.

Les Rencontres d'Arles, July 7 to September 13