

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

BORDERCROSSINGS



PHOTOGRAPHY

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Endings and Beginnings: The Generative Photographs of Nan Goldin

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Introduction by Meeka Walsh

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Nan Goldin, *Greer and Robert on the bed, New York City, 1982*. All images courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, © Nan Goldin.

Nan Goldin's *Diving for Pearls* is a beautiful book of pairings published in 2016 by Steidl on the occasion of the exhibition of her work at Kestner Gesellschaft in Hanover. Lyric correspondences Goldin identified, or harmonic, images echoing each other or gesturally complicit: the handsome, wise face of a friend paired with a Dürer from the Louvre; the caught hand gesture of a child at a Coney Island House of Horrors with the 19th-century painting *The Nightmare* by Louis Janmot at Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyon; and Goldin's self-portrait, 1998, double-exposed and then again, against a double-exposed photograph of David Wojnarowicz and Peter Hujar from 1983.

Pairing is the expansive impulse of Nan Goldin, who values collaborations and things being open to elaboration and additions—to get the story right, as she has said. In looking at the images on the spreads of this entrancing book, it is my sense that as well as being a close looker, Goldin is also a good listener. The book has about it an aural component, being richly about tone, like the information that comes to you after a bell has stopped pealing. So her own self-portraits abutting the photographs of two friends, now lost among the multitudes still resonant in her memory, are both carefully conceived and intuitive, consistent with the manner, she says, that determines her work.

In the interview that follows, “beauty” is spoken. Goldin says, about her photographs from *Eden and After*, “I desire the beauty. I’m attracted to people who are beautiful. And my people are all kinds of beautiful.” Across the page from her self-portraits are the photographs of David Wojnarowicz and Peter Hujar. In 2018, the Whitney Museum mounted a retrospective exhibition of the work of David Wojnarowicz. An article about the exhibition in the *New York Times* (Christine Smallwood, September 7, 2018) quoted his having said, as reassurance to photographer Zoe Leonard, that her photographs needn’t be only political in content. He told her, “Zoe, these are so beautiful, and that’s what we are fighting for. We’re being angry and complaining because we have to, but where we want to go is back to beauty. If you let go of that, we don’t have anywhere to go.”

In her newest body of work, a series of portraits of Thora Siemsen, beauty is where Goldin has gone. Gone inside, as well, quarantining (not the locked-in quarantine of addiction she’d described) but in, to her Brooklyn home, with Thora. Thora’s beauty is the kind writer Glenn O’Brien identifies in *Diving for Pearls*. Through Goldin’s eye, he says, “We begin to see beauty not as an unattainable ideal, but within reach, where it belongs. Unofficial beauty. Dissenting beauty. Rebel beauty.” And further, “True beauty isn’t found in dramatic bones, ethereal settings,

trompe l’oeil cosmetics and hair, but in the atypical and the eccentric accidents of behavior.”

In an apartment with the world outside gone silent and still, two people taking time, Goldin marking the passing of time and deepening relationship, which she describes as a kind of romance between friends, but impelled by beauty, love and desire. Portraits of Thora’s open face, photographs of Thora’s pale odalisque body, the camera’s subject reading, resting, floating.

In the photo *Thora at the Mirror*, Thora leans in—the gesture suggesting the careful application of mascara to lashes. Half the photograph is in deep shadow, the other partially lit, showing the rich wood of the vanity. Intersecting the image is Thora—in shadow and light. A luminescent pearly light. The long back cleaved and drawing attention to the vertebrae, both perfect and unnaturally attenuated, like Ingres’s *La Grande Odalisque*, 1814, whose face is revealed through her turned head—Thora’s only partially visible in the mirror. Ingres is called up, his rendering flesh warm and flawless, but Caravaggio also comes to mind with his use of light and shadow—revealing, concealing—a safe place into which to withdraw.

In Thora’s open but also questioning gaze back to Nan Goldin, who holds the camera, there’s the metre of time, a suggestion that it’s there, even in this current period of entropy. You read time, too, in the sky photographs Goldin has taken in the course of her travels over 30 years. She says she exhibits them unframed, unbound, limitless in the way the sky is. She’d said she wanted to photograph emptiness, which has to be something indeterminate, easiest to see if beyond grasping, beyond our focus, out of focus. The skies can be read that way, but Goldin says she never intentionally put a camera out of focus. She told us, “When I took those pictures, that’s how I focused. It’s out of focus because my eyes were out of focus.” So you see the way she saw and, to the extent that real, felt empathy is possible, we can, when we lift our eyes to her photographs, be inside her head and, for a moment, join her there.

Generosity is a quality that suffuses all of Goldin’s work. Free of judgment, instead filled with admiration for her subjects, she’d written in her introduction to the first edition of *The Other Side*, in 1992, “This is a book about beauty. And about my love for my friends.” They are her gifts to show her friends how beautiful they were, how much she regarded them for their courage “in recreating themselves according to their fantasies.” They are her family, relationships better than any other for having been chosen. Her books open with dedications to people who’d been close but are gone; she leaves no one behind. But the work has changed. She told us the pictures in *The Ballad* smell like sex, and the people

have dirty feet. The photographs were analogue and the outcomes often unpredictable, where, as she said, technical mistakes allowed for magic.

Relationships have changed, too. In the conversation that follows she said, “In the past I have been attracted to people who lived hard and close to the edge and ended up burning up. I’m not so attracted to that idea anymore.”

The quiet photographs of Thora are dye sublimation prints, mounted on aluminum. Goldin said she’d loved the early slide shows with the immediacy of the projector’s whir and the slides clicking into place, but the digital process is giving her something else. Looking at Thora, you see the depth of the black and shadow and the milk, pearl, marble light, as luminescent as the subject it rests on. This is the work now.

This interview was conducted with the artist at her home in Brooklyn on May 25, 2021.

BORDER CROSSINGS: I’m interested in how artists are shaped. When you were 17 you attended what you have described as a hippie free school based on the Summerhill philosophy, where you never studied the same thing from one day to the next. It must have been a fairly progressive school because you were watching films by Jack Smith and Andy Warhol.

NAN GOLDIN: It was brilliant. It was run by graduate students from MIT, who got us a grant from Polaroid, and that’s how I became a photographer. For me, it was a great system because I had been thrown out of every school I went to and it was the only one that wouldn’t throw me out. My father had taught at Boston University, and there was a film history teacher there who allowed us to come to his classes, and there was also a cinema in Harvard Square called the Orson Welles that showed four films a day, so we went there. You have freedom when you don’t have classes, so basically what we did was go to the cinema. And I took pictures. We would be studying things like expatriates in Paris and “ontology recapitulates phylogeny,” whatever that means. I retained none of that knowledge, but I did retain the movies I saw.

Were you a wild kid? You have said that your dream was to be a junkie and that you wanted to be “a slum goddess.”

I worshiped Donna Jordan and I worshiped Viva. I had a period in my life when I was isolated at boarding school. I’ve never really talked about it, but that school was very strange. It was basically run by a pederast, his mother and two Great Danes. The teachers were all male and very few girls attended as students. We were in a house down the road from the main campus and I had

nothing to do at that point, so I started to listen to the banana album and get copies of the *East Village Other*. That became my dream. I especially wanted to rebel against suburban America and everything it represented. When I started doing dope in 1972, it was very, very underground. It was basically being used by jazz musicians and my boyfriends.

But having been at the free school was what turned you on to film?

Of course. I had a Super 8 camera in the late ’60s and I used to have my friends sit nude and I’d zoom in and out of them. I thought I was making Warhol films. Unfortunately, we can’t find any of that footage but we did find the stuff from the late ’70s and some of that material turns up in *Memory Lost*.

That’s the footage where Chrissie is on the beach at Provincetown.

Yes. It’s Gabor Maté speaking. He’s a philosopher, writer and harm-reductionist who ran clinics in Vancouver. He was the head doctor at the first legally supervised injection site in North America. He made it famous and it’s called Insite. Anyway, he wrote a book called *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*, which is my bible, and at the end of the film his is the voice you hear over the Super 8 footage. He talks about how using drugs comes from a normal human need for relief from trauma and that the things we get from using them are what allow us to survive as human beings. He asks people, “What do you get from it?” And they say they feel more social, they feel better in their skin, they feel smarter. That’s what he meant when he said that doing drugs is totally human and totally normal.

So when Chrissie falls backwards into the ocean at the end of *Memory Lost*, is she drowning or is she falling back into some kind of rebirth? It’s as if you sound the siren call at the end of the film.

That’s true. She’s falling into the nurture of water. I didn’t think of the symbolism, but the way she’s falling back indicates a relief, a sense of complete trust and euphoria. The main thing I want to make clear is that I’m not anti-drug in any way; what I’m against is the stigma around drug use. Even though I started P.A.I.N. (Prescription Addiction Intervention Now) to fight the opioid profiteers, I’m not fighting the actual opioids. I work with people who are still using. I have no value judgment on that at all.

The last eight minutes of *Memory Lost* are very dark.

The whole thing is devastating. I’ve had critics crying when they leave the exhibition. It’s devastating to me. Most of it is about the darkness

1. *Picnic on the Esplanade, Boston, 1973.*

2. *The Back, 2011.*



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of being trapped in addiction and it's as dark as it gets. But I end with Gabor trying to destigmatize it. And that's the point. *Sirens* is about the pleasure and euphoria and sensuality of using drugs and *Memory Lost* is about addiction, the darkness of my addiction and what I saw when I was there. That's my eye on the world during that period.

It's not just your eye. In the final section of the film, there are at least 10 images of you. Did you deliberately load yourself into the tail end of *Memory Lost*?

It's my arm and my wrist that were crushed in an accident. You can see the bone in it. Those drugs are mine. Yes, that's the part about me.

There is one shot of a cornucopia of drug bottles and then the last image in that section is a single pill bottle inside what looks like a safe.

It's a hotel safe. I took it at the time because it was real. I travelled a lot, I lived in a lot of hotels, and the only thing I kept in the safe were my pill bottles.

The movement from their large number to the single bottle inside the safe is an example of your strategy. I was fascinated by how carefully chosen the images are, not just in the way they work with the music but with the choices you make in visual sequencing. Were you thinking how one image connected to another?

Absolutely. Every single frame in that film is thought about and is related to what comes before and after. It's very, very tight. But in another way, both *Sirens* and *Memory Lost* were made intuitively. My philosophy is, "Let the critics tell me what it

means. I don't always know but I make what I feel." We used to call it the "post-rational school." It comes from deep in the stomach, where, by the way, your real brain is located. That's what I listen to. I couldn't write an exact sentence about the meaning of what using that last frame meant, except that it worked perfectly. I tried lots of other endings. I tried putting in my group to politicize it in an obvious way. But then I think the film is political in its entirety, especially with what Gabor says and because of the dedication to my group at the end. But I have to say working on it was hell. Making that piece was the most upsetting two months of my life.

To make it you went back into your own archive. Were any images in it new?

Let me think. None of them are recent. I'd say the most recent was from 2014. Most of the pictures are from the '90s and 2000s. When I got sober, I realized I'd lost those years, but they're starting to come back. In my free-floating memory there are about 15 years that are more or less a brownout. I often don't know where I was, what significant things happened or what year people died. But I always had my books to look at, so through them I can find out what I did when. But I have to say that the experience of being alive over the four years since I got sober is overwhelming.

One of the things I found haunting in *Memory Lost* was your bracketing the film with Super 8 footage from the '70s, and the addition of the phone messages from the '80s. When did it occur to you that those different media and their content would be a way that the story could be told? The combination is terrifically effective.

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I'm so glad to hear that because I have to say I think it's my most important piece since *The Ballad*. Here's how it happened. My friend Guido Costa, who I've known since 1995, came to see me in Paris and we had decided what the show at Marian Goodman in London in 2019 was going to be. But I'd been really suffering about it. We had determined that it would include images of Paradise burning in California. I took pictures off the TV and I was going to have a whole wall but it didn't happen. The show was also going to have a new piece called *Salome* that would be installed in a round room in London and it was going to have *The Other Side* slide show and the big skies, all of which, except for *Salome*, are in the show in New York. But I needed to do a piece on addiction, and so Guido said, "Why don't you do a piece on your own addiction and talk to scientists and philosophers?" That was when I decided to talk to people, my own people, who had actually lived through addiction. I had started thinking what elements I could use. I was very, very afraid of making this piece, which is why I made *Sirens*, and why I was working on *Salome*, a three-screen short piece taken mostly from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. I had seen *Salomé*, the picture Carmelo Bene made in 1972 starring Donyale Luna, and I could tell that she was high, so I decided to make a piece using her and then to find other kinds of drug-related, euphoric imagery. All this other activity was a way to avoid making *Memory Lost*. So my studio manager, who is a close friend, and my editor went through the answering machine tapes and they started to work on editing that material. As I said, the decision to use all these

1. *Roommate in the kitchen, Boston, 1972.*
2. *Lola modeling as Marilyn, Boston, 1972.*
3. *Ivy's back, Boston, 1973.*
4. *Best friends going out, Boston, 1973.*
5. *Fashion show at Second Tip, Toon, C, So and Yogo, Bangkok, 1992.*



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1. *Sunny on my bed, Paris, 2009.*2. *Sunny's back in haute couture (Armani Privé), Paris, 2008.*3. *Nan and Joey on the bed, St. Mortiz Hotel, NYC, 2006.*

elements was intuitive. I just asked, "What tells the story? What memories from the '80s do I have?" Fortunately, I had saved those answering-machine tapes and then I found the Super 8 film. I needed to make a piece that had as much density as possible, so that you can feel the experience rather than having it described to you. We had no storyboard. We just put it together like a puzzle, bit by bit. All the sequences and images are choices, whether they're structural or intuitive or unconscious, but I can't say that there was a plan. The plan showed itself to me. It revealed itself to me as it went along.

What I noticed as I listed the ways you were using certain clusters of images was that you had covered the four elements of the classical world: air, earth, fire and water.

Exactly. But I'm just realizing that now. That also wasn't planned. I can't tell you enough how anti-intellectual my work is. It really is coming from itself. It tells me what to do.

Allen Ginsberg had this notion that mind has its own way of shaping things. He says "mind is shapely," which means that chaos, then, is something we have to work hard to create.

I work in an opposite way. I work with chaos and I make order out of it. And I would say it's my stomach and not my brain that is telling me what to do.

In *Eden and After* (2014), your book of photographs about children, Guido quotes from a poem by William Wordsworth where children come into the world "trailing paths of glory." It's a



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recognition that the imaginations of children are untrammelled before they're obliged to live in our adult world.

My philosophy is that children know everything when they're born. I mean, look in their eyes. They know the shit; they know what's going on and then they unlearn it as they're socialized. What I'm talking about is before speech. I haven't done any research on this, it's just my belief system. That's how I saw them when I was making that book. I had photographed children extensively for years in the 2000s. I had been taking pictures of my friend's kids since they were born and then I started photographing children for this fabulous German magazine called *Kid's Wear* in the 2000s, which is where some of those pictures come from. The main thing was to allow the children to go wild and do whatever they wanted to do. Some of the kids in that book are my godchildren and I'm still close to them as adults.

In your photographs of children, you find perfect, dazzling human beings. There is Lucian's exquisite, androgynous beauty, or the adoring relationship that exists between Mia and Georgia.

Yes. Even if it's not political, I desire the beauty. I'm attracted to people who are beautiful. And my people are all kinds of beautiful. I have a wide, wide range, including my appreciation of the beauty of children.

Were you looking at Larry Clark's *Tulsa* around the time you were making the photographs that are in *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*?

Tulsa was a huge influence for me. While I was living with the queens and had photographed them a lot, I took a course in studio photography, but I couldn't understand anything technically. So I went downstairs and there was a class in photography being taught by this great teacher, Henry Horenstein. The first thing

he did is show me Larry Clark's work and it gave me permission to take my own personal work seriously. It was actually the only photography book done by a photographer from his direct experience at that time. When I was 17, Guy Bourdin was my favourite photographer and I stole Paris and Italian *Vogue* every month and the queens and I pored over them. Later I hung out with Helmut Newton and he took me to a bordello in Berlin and I photographed him going into a room with a woman. The next day he called and threatened me. I wasn't going to use those pictures anyway, but that ended our relationship. So we were best friends for a day. At this point I don't revere either of their work, although I still think Guy Bourdin was an extremely visionary creator.

Initially, *The Ballad* was viewed through a very limited sexual lens. At the end you build in more images of people together sexually, but to read it that restrictively is to miss all the other cues in the book about how relationships develop and how they sustain themselves.

Absolutely. The slide show starts with the romantic myth and the societal version of what a couple is and then breaks it down and ends with couples coupling. And it concludes with death. People get buried together because they believe they'll be together in the afterlife, which would be nice, but you should be careful who you choose to have in the grave next to you. But I think the way people write about *The Ballad*—that it's about drugs and sex and hipsters—is ridiculous and very reductive. The reason the slide show and the book have been successful for decades is because people write into it their own histories. That's what I've been told so many times by people of all ages and from all kinds of different societies. *Nan one month after being battered* (1984), which is the linchpin of the piece, is about the culmination of one relationship, and I published that picture so that I wouldn't go back to him. I didn't show it for the sake of the public, but

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Full moon over Bois de Vincennes, Paris, 2004.

Sunset like hair, Sete, France, 2003.



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Jimmy Paulette and Tabboo! in the bathroom, NYC, 1991.

Misty and Jimmy Paulette in a Taxi, 1990/1991.



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1 & 2. Installation view, "Nan Goldin, Memory Lost," Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, 2021. *Sirens*, 2019–2020.



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I was very touched to have other women come out about being battered. By showing your own experiences, people are able to share what they have in common with you. I was told by a boy from Turkey last year that he was suicidal and then he saw *The Other Side* and the book gave him hope. If I can help people survive, that's the ultimate purpose of my work.

One of the ways that you've helped people survive, as well as feeding your own imagination, is by constantly changing the work. *The Ballad* begins in 1978 at the Mudd Club for Frank Zappa's birthday and keeps evolving from that point on.

Yes, in the beginning I was holding a projector and there was ambient music and it developed from there. Any time I present it, or sell it to a museum, I make it unique by changing some pictures. Now, I want to take it back to where it was in the '80s. I want to keep the structure, the music and the timing, but I want to make the imagery less about the pictures I took after recovery. I think I need to maintain the time when it was first made. It gets lighter and more tidy and more beautiful after I got sober and started seeing the light, the way light affects skin and all these things that weren't my life in the '80s, when I lived in the dark. Not figuratively but literally.

So for 10 years after 1978, you were living a nocturnal life in your imagination?

Not in my imagination, in my life. In 2017 when I got sober I was going to sleep at 8:00 in the morning, and then I went to the hospital and I had to get up at 8:00 in the morning. It was such an extreme reversal. For 25 years I hadn't gone to bed before 5:00 a.m. That's not my mind anymore; that's not me and my life at all. I'm happy to see the day and I'm happy to live in the day. But in those years, I was completely nocturnal.

I admire the flexible way that you approach your work. With *The Ballad* and *The Other Side*, as well, you work the way Walt Whitman did in *Leaves of Grass*. He kept adding to his book. I gather you see the project of your work as being one that necessarily will continue to change.

That's true. I don't know if it's so much based on Whitman as on my need to tell whatever story I'm telling more and more accurately. That's true of both *The Ballad* and *The Other Side*. I think with *The Other Side*, the old and the new book have a very different frame. The introductions are different and the slide show has changed in that there's a new chapter of a trans woman friend of mine from the 2000s. There is a vast difference between that and life in the '70s when the queens couldn't go out in the daytime. There was none of this language and none of this awareness and none of this acceptance by society. I think the book traces that difference much more. I think each book is true to its time and this goes for the slide shows as well. In fact, yesterday I wrote a completely new afterword for the 10th reissue of *The Ballad*. I had to bring it up to my present life and my view of the past. So, yes, they are constantly re-edited. As for *Memory Lost*, the only thing I changed was to add the song "I Want to Be Evil" at the top. Originally it was silent at the beginning and then I added Eartha Kitt, which is a song I lip-synched at the time. I also re-edited some chapters of *Memory Lost* by taking out people

who I felt wouldn't want to be contextualized in that way. But I don't think it's a constantly evolving piece.

When you shift songs, you also shift the content. You go to Bangkok and Manila and the song introducing that segment is Peggy Lee's "Fever"; then when we hear John Kelly's "Wigstock," Misty and Jimmy Paulette are introduced.

That's true. I don't look for a certain kind of image, but if I have an image that goes with the lyrics, yes. In the case of *The Other Side* I have the content and then I find the music. With *The Ballad* sometimes I had the music and then I found the imagery. I've always said that in *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, the narration is the lyrics, and I'd say the same in *The Other Side*. So the music and the edit of the pieces are very closely interlocked, which is not happening in *Memory Lost* obviously, or *Sirens*. There's more freedom because there are no lyrics. It's a different way of working. I'm excited by working with composers now. It's a big step for me to be considered as a filmmaker.

When we hear Eartha Kitt we see images of your friend called Roommate, who is posing as if it were a quasi-fashion shoot. It's a rather lyric opening to what ends up being a much darker story. As a viewer, I get set up.

Yes, because that's only the beginning and then it dives deeply and doesn't really ascend again until we come back to the Super 8 footage at the end. It goes deeper and darker with the imagery of me. There is a coda where Marianne Faithfull is singing on an answering machine and during that segment, I show one of the fancy London rehabs I lived in. That's the midpoint. After that it's different and it changes to a score from my friends Soundwalk Collective, who taped it in a courtyard of students rehearsing in an opera school. So the beginning of that chapter becomes expansive with the skies and then it contracts again.

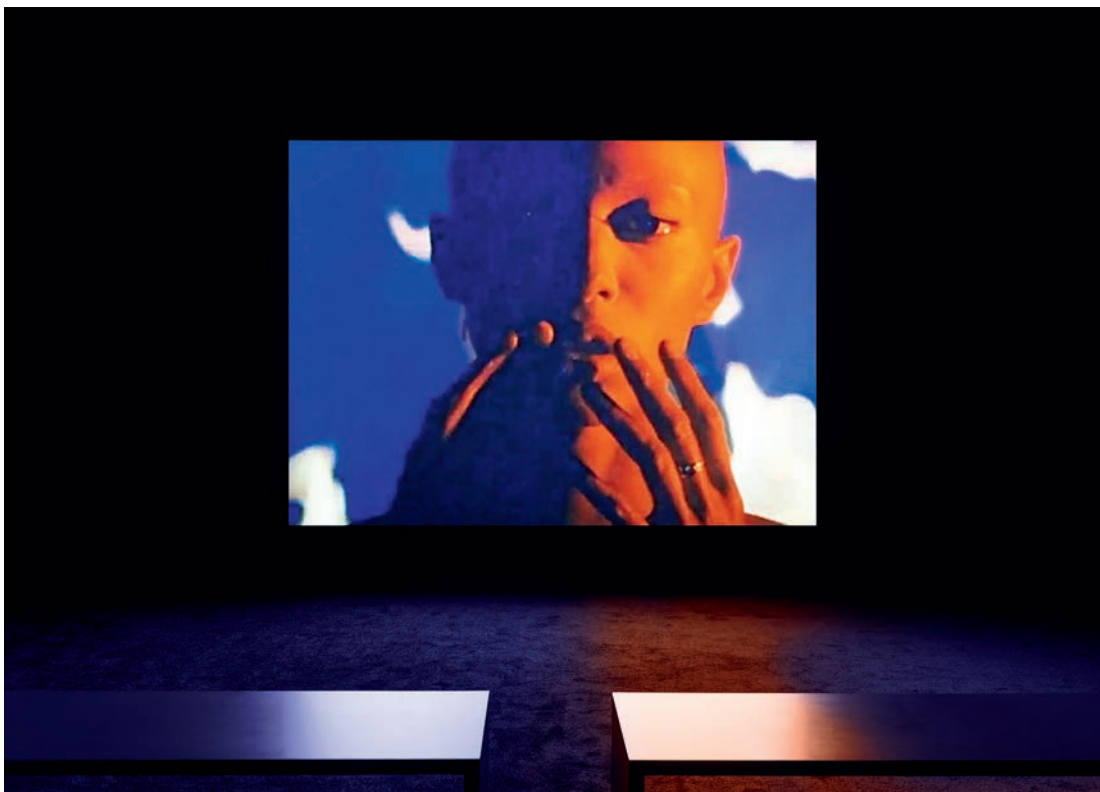
A number of your skyscape images are out of focus, as if they were being seen by someone whose perception had been altered. Some of them also have cuts on the surface. Were you trying to make the image and the material consistent with the idea of a breakdown?

Absolutely not. I didn't do anything intentionally with the photographs themselves. Some reviewers have said about the show at Marian Goodman that I put this camera out of focus on purpose to make it pictorial. I never intentionally put a camera out of focus. When I took those pictures, that's how I focused. It's out of focus because my eyes were out of focus, and the scratches occurred because there were periods where the slides were not taken care of. None of this is fabricated. I have a real issue with people who think I use an app to put things out of focus.

David Armstrong did soft-focus landscape photographs in the '90s.

Yes, but that was intentional. David studied my work carefully, and when he started that project he said he wanted to replicate the soft backgrounds of my pictures. David and I were very closely interlinked at the time. We were living together and he was my editor for many years. That's always a very important

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1 & 2. Installation view, "Nan Goldin, Memory Lost," Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, 2021. *Sirens*, 2019–2020.



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relationship in my life—to have editors around me. Actually, I don't do much that's not collaborative.

In one sense your whole world has been a series of collaborative relationships.

Totally. I still don't do things without collaboration. *Memory Lost* had a lot of collaboration from Guido, Laura Poitras, and Alex Kwartler and Marie Savona, my studio managers and resident genuises. I involve the people who work for me very closely.

The show at Marian Goodman is about memory, and memory is also a part of art history. The images from *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* have become iconic; they're now part of the history of contemporary photography. Do you think about the fact that you are one of the most significant contemporary photographers and that these images are indelibly etched into our sensibilities?

It's very optimistic for you to say that they'll never go away. I wonder how long history will be able to maintain itself. The catalogue for my upcoming retrospective might be called *It will not end well*, and that's my feeling about the world. I don't imagine there'll be this kind of history much longer. I have a fear about what's going to happen to human consciousness with computers and AI. But let's say that doesn't happen and that history is maintained. I don't think about it too often, but, yes, I'm proud to be part of that history. It was my dream when I was a child to make a mark on the world. I feel like I have done that and it gives me great pleasure. While my fame hasn't brought me riches, it has definitely opened doors and has brought riches other than financial ones. People think I'm a rich artist, but I never have been. Actually, I give all my money away.

Would it be fair to describe your world through the title of Marianne Faithfull's "Crazy Love"? Crazy love for the people you photograph seems to characterize the way you came at their world.

Yes, that song definitely nails it on the head. I specifically chose it for Joey because that's her and the story of her life.

In *The Other Side*, Joey gives off so many emotional registers; she seems capable of being a series of different characters. I think it's not accidental that the final image in the book is her impersonating Marilyn.

But she never performed. She was the most beautiful woman on earth and when you read the interview between Sunny and Joey, you hear her life. She was a queen, as is Sunny. They're proud to be called queens and they're not particularly supportive of having that language rewritten. Joey is a goddess, a survivor who lived through so much. She wasn't performative in her identity, but she did look like Marilyn at certain moments. It was a dream of mine to make my friends into stars. Sharon and Joey are alive and they're still stars. I wanted Cookie and David to be superstars.

You were able to make a fashion photograph into a kind of portrait. There are beautiful images of Sunny wearing designer frocks, but they're also part of your ongoing portrait narrative.

I haven't heard the word "frock" forever. I love it. But almost every fashion shoot I've done has included a friend as an inspiration and a collaborator. Sunny looked gorgeous in those photographs, but she was gorgeous in her daily life. She still is. Because people get older, I always ask if I can photograph them. That's why I can't really do street photography. In the last few years since I started going out all the time, I have loved the idea of shooting strangers, but it doesn't work because I have to ask them and then they take on a role. Even at the burlesque today where I was shooting, I asked all those women if I could photograph them. They have a certain trust because I ask and in most cases they're allowed to re-edit. People often take out pictures of themselves, but as we get older, we look back on earlier pictures and we have more acceptance of them because we were young and thin and beautiful. So often I'm able to put images back in, but it's an ongoing process that involves trusting the control of other people. If you photograph people in a certain way, they feel they have control of the image in the end.

Your photographs invite close scrutiny. There's an image where Joey is laying on a couch wearing a see-through, gold-patterned floral dress. She looks ravishing, but the noticeable thing about that image is that the bottoms of her feet are dirty. It makes you think of Caravaggio, whose models had dirt on the bottom of their feet because they were real people.

I've always said about the pictures in *The Ballad* that they smell like sex and the people have dirty feet. That wasn't intentional; it's just that the people had dirty feet and I love that aspect of it.

You also have a picture of a woman in a bathtub. Apart from her beauty and the rise of her breasts above the water, you notice the mark her bra strap made on her flesh. You realize that she has just stepped into the bath. The photograph invites a recognition of the subject's humanity; she's not posing in any way. They're real people in real situations.

Yes, it shows that the reality of humanity is in its fragility.

In *Sirens* there is an irresistible sequence from a 1963 farce called *Hallelujah the Hills* of Peter Beard running naked through a snow-covered forest. He was an exquisitely beautiful man with a perfect body. The equivalent female beauty in the film is Donyale Luna, the first Black supermodel, and Veruschka. What made you move towards those two figures in *Sirens*?

Veruschka was my ideal growing up. I thought she was the most beautiful woman in the world and then Donyale surpassed her. But Veruschka is still in the canon of my beauties. She's so sensual when she comes out of the water in her jewels. But Carmelo Bene's movie is insane. My favourite section in the whole film, and the weirdest one, is when Salomé is scratching off a man's skin and biting him with her hands out, her mouth open and screaming. That kind of nails it when you're talking about relationships. In the past I have been attracted to people who lived hard and close to the edge and ended up burning up. I'm not so attracted to that idea anymore, when so many of my friends died young.

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

In 1996 you did an interview with David Armstrong and Walter Keller. At the time, you said that you photographed out of “beauty and love and desire.” Are you still organizing your work out of those same compulsions?

Have you seen my new photographs of Thora in the Marian Goodman show? Those are taken out of beauty and love and desire. I don’t mean desire as a sexual thing, but as the possibility of a kind of romance between friends. I have friendships that are not normally defined as friendships. They’re more or less like lovers without sex. I believe in friendship as the ultimate relationship. When sex comes in, it’s problematic, and your blood families are always problematic. You don’t choose them, but you choose the friends you want to go through your life with. Lovers come and go. Friends are more or less here to stay. ■



1. Installation view, “Nan Goldin, Memory Lost,” Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, 2021.

2. *Thora on my white bed, Brooklyn, NY, 2020.*

3. *Portrait of a lady, Brooklyn, NY, 2020.*

4. *Thora at home, Brooklyn, NY, 2020.*



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MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY



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MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

1. *Thora on my black bed,*
Brooklyn, NY, 2020.

2. *Thora Floating,*
Connecticut, 2020.

3. *Thora on my white bed,*
Brooklyn, NY, 2021.

4. *Thora in the grass,*
Woodstock, NY, 2020.



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