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'All the Beauty and the Bloodshed' Review: Nan Goldin's Art and Activism

A new documentary focuses on the photographer's struggle with OxyContin and her protest against the art establishment that took money from its makers.

by Manohla Dargis (November 22, 2022)



"Nan in the bathroom with roommate, Boston," a photograph by Nan Goldin, featured in Laura Poitras's new documentary "All the Beauty and the Bloodshed."
Credit...Nan Goldin

Among the thousands of items in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection is the 1980 Nan Goldin photograph titled "Heart-Shaped Bruise, NYC." In it, a woman lies splayed across a messy bed wearing pulled-down stockings and a dress that's been hitched up just below her rear, exposing some bared leg imprinted with a bruise shaped like a heart. The woman's head is outside the frame, so it's easy to focus on this bit of skin, to let your imagination run wild, fired up by the image's unsettling power, its allure and its menace.

That unease is emblematic of Goldin's photography, whose images of bruised bodies and bared souls include a self-portrait that she made in 1984 after being beaten by a lover. The image, "Nan One Month After Being Battered," is in the collection of the Tate Galleries in London. In 2019, the Tate evaded unwanted attention from Goldin, who had begun staging protests of institutions that had taken money from members of the Sackler family whose company, Purdue Pharma, developed the opioid painkiller OxyContin. The Tate simply announced it would no longer accept their donations.

"All the Beauty and the Bloodshed," Laura Poitras's intimate documentary about Goldin, her art and her activism, starts on March 10, 2018. That day, Goldin brought her fight against members of the Sackler family to the Met with a protest that turned its popular Temple of Dendur exhibition — an Egyptian temple installed in a gallery named the Sackler Wing — into a symbolic battlefield. It was a clash that pitted the artist against members of a family that is both extraordinarily wealthy and, as the journalist Patrick Radden Keefe wrote in a 2017 New Yorker article, is "one of America's great philanthropic dynasties." It also pitted Goldin against the art establishment that had helped make her an international art star.

As tourists, guards and journalists watched, Goldin and her activist brigade entered the gallery and began chanting “Sacklers lie, thousands die!” It was a critical step in Goldin’s campaign to draw attention to the role of Purdue Pharma in the opioid crisis, a crusade that Goldin had boldly taken public two months earlier when Artforum published her chronicle of her opioid addiction. As she testified before a House committee in 2020, Goldin became hooked in 2014 after being prescribed OxyContin for surgery. As her habit escalated — she went from three prescribed pills a day to 18 — she supplemented it by spending all the money from a private endowment. When she ran out of money for OxyContin, Goldin turned to illegal sources, nearly dying when she inadvertently snorted fentanyl.

Goldin has repeatedly shared her grim story since going public with it, but nowhere as movingly as in “All the Beauty and the Bloodshed.” Poitras is best known for her 2014 documentary “Citizenfour,” about Edward J. Snowden, the National Security Agency contractor turned whistle-blower, and she proves an ideal match with Goldin. Both are activist-artists, and Poitras is conspicuously on Goldin’s side from the get-go. While that makes the movie rather less dialectic than it could be and leaves some areas underexplored — Poitras shows little interest in parsing the issue of generational guilt for some Sackler family members — her admiration for Goldin warms the documentary, easing you through its rougher passages.

Elegantly shaped and paced, “All the Beauty and the Bloodshed” relates two entwined stories. One tracks Goldin’s emergence as an anti-opioid activist, starting with her first learning about the Sacklers to her actions — she protests, shares and testifies — and ending on an upbeat note in December 2021, when she and her activist brethren savored a crucial if provisional triumph. Intertwined with that narrative is an often melancholic portrait of Goldin that begins in her difficult childhood in suburban Maryland, continues through her liberating art-school years, her role in New York’s downtown scene, her anguished experience during the AIDs crisis and her emergence as a major artist.



Click image to view video.

The movie’s bifurcated shape isn’t novel, but Poitras’s marshaling of all this information is exceptionally graceful. She has an abundance of fantastic material at her disposal — including a generous selection of Goldin’s artwork — but what makes the movie work so well is how Poitras seamlessly uses the different sections of Goldin’s life to weave a coherent portrait of the artist. You see how her tragic older sister, Barbara, who died young, shaped Goldin and how Barbara’s death and the family’s sometimes ghastly history helped determine Goldin’s artistic trajectory and led her to friends who informed her sensibilities and served as muses.

Most powerfully, the documentary details the connection between Goldin's experiences during the AIDS crisis and her time in the opioid trenches. In each fight, powerful institutions are called to account by people fighting for their lives, which might sound inspiring but is more accurately an index of this country's cruelty. The section on the AIDS crisis is crushing, and it's a reflection of Poitras's ethical politics and grasp on her subject that she spends so much time on friends of Goldin's who didn't make it out of the catastrophe alive, including the artist David Wojnarowicz, a dazzling, furious genius who died in 1992. In the movie, you see that Goldin keeps a portrait of him by another lost friend, Peter Hujar, above her fireplace — it's a beacon.

"All the Beauty and the Bloodshed" is filled with such grace notes; it's also more impressionistic than completist. After seeing the movie, I was surprised to read that Goldin has two brothers, whom I don't remember even being mentioned. Maybe they didn't want to be in the movie, perhaps they're dull. Whatever the case, their absence is a reminder that Poitras hasn't embraced the usual journalistic norms in directing this documentary. She has a point of view, she has passion, she has politics, and there never was any danger of her both-siding this raw, emotionally ferocious story of the world that Nan Goldin inherited and remade, one that she continues to remake with her brilliance and with all the bruises that never heal.