

Nans goldin



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## **Nans Goldin**

### **Introduction**

If a still image can speak, it will tell you stories that will capture your imagination. It can describe how the photographer feels when taking the shot; it can also explain the emotions by the subjects to which the photograph has been taken, what the ambience of the location was and what the main feelings are during the poses. Even if the subject of the picture is not a living thing, that subject can be brought to life by the amazing shot captured by the master photographer. Composition and lighting have also contributed to the message the image wants us to understand. But then again still images cannot speak...

Which leaves us; the viewers create our own perception on what might the photo means. This has led to often wrong conclusions for those uninitiated by what the art offers. An image after being viewed can have different meanings, from different people some are quite far from the truth and others almost grasping it. The one, who really knows it and even feels the work, is the person at the back of the lens.

One artist who really understands and definitely has passion for her work is Nancy Goldin, popularly known as Nan Goldin, she is an example of an artist who works at the most intimate level: her life is her work and her work, her life. It is nearly impossible to discuss Goldin's photographs without referring to their subjects by name, as though the people pictured were one's own family and friends. It is this intimate and raw style for which Goldin has become internationally renowned. Her "snapshot"-esque images of her friends — drag queens, drug addicts, lovers and family — are intense,

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searing portraits that, together, make a document of Goldin's life (Anon 2002).

### **Biography**

Nan Goldin was born in Washington, D. C. on September 12, 1953. Soon she moved to Boston with her family. After her sister's suicide in 1965, Nan Goldin took up photography, in order to preserve her memories. Her camera turned into an eye that did not forget. Together with friends Goldin explored the aesthetics of fashion photography and got into contact with the Boston transvestite and cross-dresser scene. In the early 1970s Goldin strove for a documentary and objective depiction of the people, whom she admired for their special confidence. Later Goldin brought her pictures from this scene together in her book 'The Other Side'. After studying at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts and the Tufts University in Boston, she moved on to color photography. In 1974 she produced her first exhibition project 'Image Works' at the university in Cambridge. In 1977 Goldin graduated and one year later she moved to New York. During the late 1970s and early 1980s Goldin's main motifs for her photographs were her friends, whom she regarded as a substitute for her family and who were very important to her. The viewer penetrates deeply into the privacy of the depicted, due to the exact titles of the photographs including name, place and date. Goldin's slide show entitled 'The ballad of sexual dependency' reflects the wild everyday life of her friends. These shows, which are added to a soundtrack of music, are particularly impressive, because Goldin adds and rearranges the slides for every show to reflect changing moods, emotions, impressions and memories. From 1986 Nan Goldin also exhibited abroad. In 1988 she had to

undergo withdrawal from drugs, during which she began with a series of self-portraits, which show an intensified affect control. The loss of several friends due to AIDS infections during the early 1990s made Goldin return to depicting other people. Following the invitation of the DAAD, Nan Goldin spent a year in Berlin and in 1995 her work was exhibited alongside that of other artists as part of the new ' Boston School' at the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art. Only one year later the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York hosted a retrospective exhibition of the photographer's works. Today Nan Goldin is one of the most famous contemporary photographers and her work can be seen in many collections. The artist continues work to her life's own rhythm in New York.

## **References**

### **Nan Goldin**

Nan Goldin is an example of an artist who works at the most intimate level: her life is her work and her work, her life. It is nearly impossible to discuss Goldin's photographs without referring to their subjects by name, as though the people pictured were one's own family and friends. It is this intimate and raw style for which Goldin has become internationally renowned. Her "snapshot"-esque images of her friends — drag queens, drug addicts, lovers and family — are intense, searing portraits that, together, make a document of Goldin's life. Goldin herself has commented on her photographic style and philosophy, saying, " My work originally came from the snapshot aesthetic . . . . Snapshots are taken out of love and to remember people, places, and shared times. They're about creating a history by recording a history."

On September 12, 1953, Goldin was born in Washington, D. C. Shortly thereafter, she and her family moved to a suburb of Boston, where Goldin was to spend several primarily unhappy years before moving away from her family. In 1965, when Nan was 14 years old, her older sister, Barbara Holly Goldin, committed suicide. Deeply disturbed by this event, Goldin sought comfort in her friends: in them, she created an alternate family. Having decided that conventional family life and traditional schooling were not for her, Goldin moved in with a series of foster families, and soon enrolled in an alternative school called Satya Community School. It was at Satya, located in Lincoln, Massachusetts, that Goldin met two people who would be great friends and influences for many years to come: David Armstrong and Suzanne Fletcher. As the memory of her sister started to become hazy, Goldin began to take pictures to preserve the present, and thus her fading memories of the past. She photographed her friends so she would never lose the memory of them, as had happened with her sister. Her photographs were her way of documenting their lives, and, in turn, her own.

It was at Satya that Goldin's fascination with photography truly began to take shape. Goldin, along with her new friends Armstrong and Fletcher, used photography as a way of reinventing herself and those around her. Heavily influenced by fashion photography, Goldin and her companions would dress up for one another. Trying their hands at cross-dressing and drag were commonplace; this early experimentation would shape Goldin's lifelong fascination with the blurry line separating the genders. Through Armstrong, Goldin was introduced to the drag subculture in Boston, and thus a nightclub called The Other Side. There, she photographed drag queen beauty contests

during the early 1970s and became friends with many transvestites. Goldin sought to depict her subjects in a straightforward, non-judgmental way: she saw drag as a way to reinvent oneself, and reinforced this idea by taking photographs of her friends in full drag regalia, as well as in various stages of preparation. In photographs such as *David at Grove Street, Boston, 1972*, *Ivy Wearing a Fall, Boston, 1972*, and *Kenny Putting on Make-up, Boston, 1973*, Goldin depicts her companions in various stages of drag. In the first two, the subjects stare unflinchingly at the viewer, each proud of his transformation, yet still calling attention to the fine line between masculine and feminine. In the third, Kenny is shown absorbed in his own beauty, concentrating intently on creating an alternate version of himself in the mirror. Through these portraits, along with the many others taken of her classmates and friends, Goldin illustrates the confusion and recklessness of the time in which she was creating her art.

It was during this period that Goldin began her course of study at the Boston School of Fine Arts. This transition marks a change in Goldin's photographic style. Prior to college she had used only black and white film, shooting primarily from available light sources (with the exception of some of the photographs made at *The Other Side*, for which she used flash). She soon began experimenting with color, which would become an integral part of her photographic style. The introduction of flash into her work also greatly contributed to what is known today as the "Goldin look." Rarely working from natural light, Goldin illuminates her subjects with careful use of flash that extenuates her vibrant colors. She achieves bright, deep hues by printing her 35 mm film with a photographic process called Cibachrome.

While normal, c-type prints are made from printing from color negatives, Cibachrome prints are photographs printed from slides. This process allows the photographer to achieve optimum colors and contributes greatly to the sharp, bright quality of color in Goldin's prints.

Goldin's 1978 move to the Bowery in New York City marked a major life change, both in her career and her personal life. Goldin's photographs of this period reflect her hard-living lifestyle: excessive use of drugs and alcohol and abusive relationships were commonplace in Goldin's circle of friends. Goldin wrote, " I believe one should create from what one knows and speak about one's tribe . . . You can only speak with true understanding and empathy about what you've experienced." True to her credo, Goldin documented everything: drunken parties, relationships good and bad, evidence of beatings, all of which created an intense portrait of a close-knit group of friends. In the early 1980s, these photographs would be shown in the form of slides during Goldin's now-infamous slide shows.

A melange of photographs and music, these shows were originally held at punk rock clubs in New York City in order for Goldin's friends (and photographic subjects) to see the photographs that she had taken of them. Tin Pan Alley was one of the most frequent spots for these events, a locale that conveniently provided a working place for such up-and-coming artists as Kiki Smith, Cookie Mueller and Barbara Ess. At the time, the show (later called The Ballad of Sexual Dependency), which was made up of color photographs lit with flash, ran approximately 45 minutes. As Goldin evolved as an artist, the show also changed, and more photographs were added and songs were changed. Despite changes to the content of the show, the basic

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atmosphere of intimacy remained, and Goldin's visceral style communicated raw emotion. It was in 1986 that Goldin began to take her show on the road, traveling abroad to exhibit her work. *Ballad* saw screen time at both the Edinburgh and Berlin Film Festivals.

By 1988, Goldin's drug and alcohol abuse had begun to take a toll on her life and work, and she entered a detoxification clinic. Though she had previously experimented with self-portraiture, it was in this clinic that she created many images of herself. Photographs such as *My Bedroom at the Lodge*, *Self-portrait in front of clinic*, and *Self-portrait with milagro* reveal an introspective Goldin, somewhat humbled by her experiences at the hospital. In *Self-portrait with milagro*, the viewer sees Goldin in her room at the clinic, sitting up on her bed. She leans toward the camera, taking up most of the frame; the remaining portion of the frame is taken up by her institutional bed pillows and a small crucifix hanging on the wall. Goldin's proximity to the camera has caused her face to be slightly blurred compared with her sharply defined hand, which is resting on the pillows. This slight blurring, combined with the cramped composition of the photograph, communicates Goldin's feeling of being trapped within the hospital. The colors in the photograph are neutral except for Goldin's mouth: situated in the center of the photograph, it is covered in bright red lipstick. This flash of color in the institutional setting catches the eye, then leads it down the pyramid-like positioning of Goldin's body to her ringed hand, tense on her pillow. *Self-portrait with milagro* is a fine example of the simple way in which Goldin uses seemingly haphazard composition to carefully build the feeling (in this case, her claustrophobia in the hospital) that she is trying to communicate.



During this time, Goldin faced an additional personal struggle: many of her close friends were dying of AIDS, which was then a relatively new disease. Perhaps most important of these was Cookie Mueller, a friend since 1976, the year in which Goldin started photographing her. Goldin's series, entitled *The Cookie Portfolio*, is comprised of 15 portraits of Cookie, ranging from those taken at the parties of their youth to those from Cookie's funeral in 1989. During the next few years, Goldin continued to photograph her slowly dwindling circle of friends, many of whom were afflicted with AIDS. She showed these photographs in many group exhibitions across the country and around the world and spent a year in Berlin on a DAAD grant, sponsored by a German organization that brings artists to Berlin.

In 1994, she and her longtime best friend David Armstrong collaborated on a book called *A Double Life*. Composed of photographs taken by both Goldin and Armstrong, the book displays their differing styles of photographing the same person. Also included are some of their portraits of one another. A 1995 show at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston grouped Goldin, Armstrong and fellow photographers and friends Philip-Lorca DiCorcia, Mark Morrisroe, Jack Pierson and several others, and dubbed them the "Boston School." This name stuck, and the photographers have since been referred to by this title.

The Whitney Museum of American Art held a retrospective of Goldin's work in 1996; it was called *I'll Be Your Mirror*. Composed of photographs from every period of her career, the exhibit also boasted a showing of a version of *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. Goldin continues to photograph and recently had her first solo show in London, at the popular White Cube

Gallery. Her work continues to evolve with her life. Of this she writes, " My work changes as I change. I feel an artist's work has to change, otherwise you become a replication of yourself." With Goldin's close, immediate style and stunningly beautiful images, there is no threat of her becoming a replication. <http://fototapeta.art.pl/2003/ngie.php>

Your approach towards photography is very personal. Is not it a kind of therapy?

Yes, photography saved my life. Every time I go through something scary, traumatic, I survive by taking pictures.

You also help other people to survive. Memory about them does not disappear, because they are on your pictures.

Yes. It is about keeping a record of the lives I lost, so they cannot be completely obliterated from memory. My work is mostly about memory. It is very important to me that everybody that I have been close to in my life I make photographs of them. The people are gone, like Cookie, who is very important to me, but there is still a series of pictures showing how complex she was. Because these pictures are not about statistics, about showing people die, but it is all about individual lives. In the case of New York, most creative and freest souls in the city died. New York is not New York anymore. I've lost it and I miss it. They were dying because of AIDS.

You decided to leave the United States because of the effect the AIDS epidemic had on the community of New York gay artists and writers?

I left America in 1991 to Europe. I went to Berlin partially because of that, and partially because one of my best friends, Alf Bold, was dying and I stayed with him and took care of him. He had nobody to take care of him. I mean, he had lots of famous friends, but he had nobody to take care of him on a daily basis. He was one of people who invented the Berlin film festival. This was also the time when my Paris photo dealer Gilles died of AIDS. He had the most radical gallery in the city. He did not tell anybody in Europe that he has AIDS, because the attitude here was so different than in the United States. There was no ACT UP in Paris, and in 1993 it looked very much like in the US in the 1950s. Now it has changed, but at that time people in Europe told me: ' Oh, we do not need ACT UP. We have very good hospitals'.

**Your art is basically socially engaged...**

It is very political. First, it is about gender politics. It is about what it is to be male, what it is to be female, what are gender roles... Especially The Ballad of Sexual Dependency is very much about gender politics, before there was such a word, before they taught it at the university. A friend of mine said I was born with a feminist heart. I decided at the age of five that there was nothing my brothers can do and I cannot do. I grew up that way. It was not like an act of decision that I was going to make a piece about gender politics. I made this slideshow about my life, about my past life. Later, I realized how political it was. It is structured this way so it talks about different couples, happy couples. For me, the major meaning of the slideshow is how you can become sexually addicted to somebody and that has absolutely nothing in common with love. It is about violence, about being in a category of men and women. It is constructed so that you see all different roles of women, then of

children, the way children are brought up, and these roles, and then men, then it shows a lot of violence. That kind of violence the men play with. It goes to clubs, bars, it goes to prostitution as one of the options for women – prostitution or marriage. Then it goes back to the social scene, to married and re-married couples, couples having sex, it ends with twin graves.

You were one of the few photographers who started to take color pictures. How did it happen?

I accidentally used the roll of color film in my camera. I thought it is black and white, but it was color.

Unlike Egglestone and the other photographers using color, your pictures were discovered quite late.

Some people discovered my photography early. It was just very underground. It was very good what they taught us at the art school: that you have to suffer to be an artist; that you do not need material, financial success, but you have to be driven. A lot of great artists came out of my school from that period. Some of them are my friends like David Armstrong and Philip Lorca diCorcia. When I first started to take pictures of drag queens my influences were glamour magazines, fashion magazines. I like Horst, Cecil Beaton, and the early work of Newton, I like Guy Bourdin. I did not know about art photography. In 1974, I went to school and there was a teacher who showed me Larry Clark. It has entirely changed my work. I knew that there had been somebody else who had done their own life. You know his book Tulsa? I knew that were precedents for using one's private experiences as art.

So you just switched from this glamour photography to this very personal approach?

No, I did not just switch. It was a long process of learning about the history of photography. He introduced me to August Sander, Weegee, Diane Arbus. The drag queens hated the work of Arbus. It was not allowed in the house, because they hated the way she photographed drag queens. She tried to strip them of their identity. She did not respect the way they wanted to be. Arbus is a genius, but her work is about herself. Every picture is about herself. It is never respecting the way the other person is. It is almost a psychotic need to try to find another identity, so I think that Arbus tries on the skin of other people. I have written a lot about Arbus.

Some critics find connections between you and Arbus. What do you think about such comparisons?

The daughter of Arbus thinks that there is no connection at all. I think there is some connection, because both of us have an unusual degree of empathy, but it is manifested in a different way. She was a photographic genius and I am not a photographic genius. My genius, if I have any, is in the slideshows, in the narratives. It is not in making perfect images. It is in the groupings of work. It is in relationships I have with other people.

Is it not connected with your fascination with literature? You mentioned FaulknerÉ

Faulkner wrote about one tiny community and he wrote around 25 great novels and many short stories. They are always set in the place he loves. It

has an invented name, but it is a real place. It is all based on what he knows. I always fought strongly against traditional documentary photography. It has changed, but in the 1970s it was always strong white men going to India, making exotic pictures of something they have no idea of. I always felt that I have right to photograph only my own tribe or people, when I travel, to whom I get close to and that I gave something to. I never took pictures with a long lens, it is always short and I have to get close to people I photograph.

What is the relation between the diary you write and the pictures you take?

Nothing. My diary is really boring.

Have you not tried to put together both diaries, textual and visual, and do something like Peter Beard?

No. I think these are two different thingsÉ

Have you ever published parts of this diary?

No, I would never do this. I am writing it for myself and nobody else. My wish is to burn it immediately after my deathÉ

Some of your pictures are blurred. You did it on purpose?

Actually, I take blurred pictures, because I take pictures no matter what the light is. If I want to take a picture, I do not care if there is light or no light. If I want to take a picture, I take it no matter what. Sometimes I use very low shutter speed and they come out blurred, but it was never an intention like David Armstrong started to do what we call, he and I, " Fuzzy-wuzzy landscapes." He looked at the back of my pictures and studied them. He

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started to take pictures like them without people in them. They are just out of focus landscapes. He actually did it, intentionally threw the camera out of focus. I have never done it in my life. I take pictures like in here when there is no sun or light that I think all my pictures are going to be out of focus. Even Valerie and Bruno and whatever I take, because there is not enough light, and so I use a very low shutter speed. It used to be because I was drunk, but now I am not. The drugs influenced all my life. Both good and bad. I heard about an artist in Poland, Witkacy, who wrote down on his paintings all the drugs he was on. Depending how many drugs he took, that is how much he charged for the portrait. I saw his portrait at the National Museum, a kind of German expressionism, and I loved it.

I saw your pictures in the 50th anniversary issue of Aperture magazine. What shocked me most was the relation between them and the new Leica ad - this one with your hands holding the M7, very artistic and black and white - I never thought of your photography being as classic as Leica.

I always use Leica. Previously it was M6, and recently I work with M7 camera. I received one as a salary for this particular ad. However, I immediately lost it while photographing the "Valerie floating" series. I was swimming with her holding my camera in one hand and taking pictures at the same time. It was really difficult. The camera got broken, but the photographs were really worth the price.

How do you feel having these radical works being shown at the most prestigious museums?

In Paris, for instance, I had a choice between the Centre Pompidou, where all the people go, and the most beautiful museum in Paris, Musee de la Ville de Paris. I liked the women who worked at the museum, but I also loved the man who was taking over the Pompidou. I am very loyal to anybody who has helped me, especially before I was famous. Some told me that I should choose this beautiful museum, but I chose the Pompidou, because I wanted people to see it. To the beautiful museum go only artists and elites.

What are you going to do next? After the Devil's Playground and the Matthew Marks show in New York?

I do not know. I never know. I think it is going to be something different, because I have been through hard times. We will see how the market will react to this, but I do not care about the art market at all. My dealers are becoming greedier and greedier. They start talking to me in this strange way saying " We will show this and this picture, because they are going to sell well." I am worried about that they no longer even pretend to have any ideals. At least my American dealers.

Interview by Adam Mazur and Paulina Skirgajllo-Krajewska