

NAN GOLDIN: THE BALLAD OF SEXUAL DEPENDENCY

MoMa, New York

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Born in Washington DC in 1953, photographer Nan Goldin was raised in a middle-class Jewish family in Boston. The rest of her life, as documented through her camera, was a far cry from her suburban childhood. The catalyst for this was, arguably, the death of her older sister and idol, Barbara, who at the age of 19 took her own life by lying across the path of an oncoming commuter train. Having witnessed her sister's rebellion and rejection of middle-class America, although highly traumatic and damaging, Goldin used her death as a signal to make her own way.

By the age of 14 she had left home, and by 15 was using photography as a means of documenting her immersion within marginalised communities. Take, for instance, three of her first black and white photographic subjects – the drag queens Ivy, Naomi and Colette, regulars at Boston's most popular drag bar, The Other Side, taken between 1972 and '74. Goldin attended the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where she studied alongside the likes of photographer and lifelong friend David Armstrong (1954–2014). Soon after graduating in 1977, Goldin moved to New York, where she began recording the debauched lifestyle of bohemians living on the Lower East side.

Her 'snapshot style' captured real moments, including the ruthless party scene she partook in and its hard-drug taking, as well as the weddings and relationships of close friends. Often associated with the American photographer Diane Arbus (1923–1971), courtesy of their mutual predilection for documenting marginal figures, Goldin rejects the term 'outsider'. Rather, she sees her images, whether of same sex couples in a passionate moment of intimacy, or a heroin needle being injected into a vein, as documenting the lives of her surrogate

family and community. Ultimately, this produces a clarity in her work as the unspoken bond of trust between friends is made visible. Goldin becomes the respected and respectful voyeur, capturing moments that would otherwise be left behind closed doors.

Currently on show at MoMA, New York, is Goldin's *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1979–2004). Originally produced in 1985, the photographic sequence of her signature portraits are presented on 35mm slides, with each image (there are over 700 in total) projected one at a time by a carousel projector. Named after the song 'The Ballad of Sexual Obsession' by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, the 45-minute slideshow is essentially an autobiographical photo journal of Goldin's experiences in Boston, New York, Berlin and elsewhere from the 1970s onwards. A carefully curated soundtrack, ranging from punk to blues and opera, frames the narrative sequence. From nude portraits of females to harsh images of bruised faces exploiting the realities of domestic violence (most notably 'Nan one month after being battered', 1984) to pictures of friends cutting the umbilical cord of their newborns, the viewer is granted intimate access into an era that has dissolved. Essentially, it is the memories captured by artists such as Goldin that allow for these marginalised communities to live on. What's more, *The Ballad...* has become a memento mori as it pays tribute to Goldin's friends and loved ones that passed away, mainly from the AIDS epidemic. These includes photographer Peter Hujar (1984–1987) and artist, poet and political activist David Wojnarowicz (1954–1992).

The poignant yet hard-hitting last few minutes of *The Ballad...* includes images of tombstones and the open casket of



Nan and Brian in Bed, New York City, 1983
Nan Goldin
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of Jon L. Stryker

actress Cookie Mueller, who passed away from complications from AIDS in 1989, while Dean Martin warbling 'Memories Are Made of This' echoes through the darkened room. With 'The Ballad' one could credit Goldin for producing an overall image that pays homage to the circle of life, with themes of birth, youth, love, relationships, old age and death all delicately touched upon.

By granting access into the promiscuous lives of her 'family', which include her partners, gay, straight and couples as well as solitary figures, Goldin presents viewers with an overwhelmingly powerful visual experience. The 'realness' of her technique has become ubiquitous in the digital age, with our near-universal availability to document every moment with smartphones. Yet Goldin's images manage to maintain their originality and autonomy through their acute awareness and honesty. Each picture from 'The Ballad' is thought-provoking yet bittersweet, helping to preserve memories and individuals while simultaneously acting as a reminder of everything that has been lost. As the artist states in the afterword for 'The Ballad of Sexual Dependency': "I always thought if I photographed anyone or anything enough, I would never lose the memory, I would never lose the place. But these pictures show me how much I've lost."

— LARA MONRO