

## Nan Goldin *The Other Side*

Galleri K, September 4 - October 4, 2020

Nan Goldin got her first camera as a fifteen year old at Satya Community School in Boston, and has been photographing her friends and her surroundings ever since. The photographs in the exhibition “The Other Side” at Galleri K were primarily shot in the 1990s. In 2019, most of them were included in a presentation of Goldin’s works at Marian Goodman Gallery in London under the title “Sirens”. This show was selected as the best of the year by The Guardian.

Galleri K has long held an interest in Nan Goldin’s art, having first exhibited her work over twenty years ago. Presenting Goldin’s work in a solo exhibition at this point is a natural follow-up to last year’s showing of Francesca Woodman’s photographs. Woodman was, during her short lifetime, a contemporary of Goldin, and the two don’t just share the medium of photography; despite their diverging means of expression, both artists’ oeuvres are characterized by the close entwining of their work and their personal lives.

In the works on show at Galleri K, Goldin was photographing from the inside of an environment she herself was a part of. For a period starting in the early 70s, she lived in a community with a circle of friends who, according to Goldin herself, primarily consisted of drag queens and trans people. Goldin and her friends hung out together in clubs, on the streets and in the bedroom. She describes these friends as people who created themselves and their identities during an era when there wasn’t yet a vocabulary for their fluid gender affiliations. Goldin’s work from this period remains relevant today. The people in these photographs have paved the way for increased awareness of alternative gender identity and a greater extent of inclusion and freedom in this regard – at least in our part of the world. At the same time they represent a courage that is desperately needed in places where living as one’s true self still involves a great deal of risk. The photographs in the exhibit “The Other Side” are powerful images of an environment and an era, but Goldin’s way of imparting her surroundings also makes the pieces universal and gives them a certain timelessness. In the same way that memories live freely in relation to the chronology of time, Goldin’s photographs are also effective beyond the time and place of their execution, and make the people described appear with an unbounded presence.

The friends Goldin photographed between the 70s and 90s were both her models and her audience. They gave her their uniquely qualified feedback when she first exhibited her pieces as a slideshow in bars and clubs in Boston and New York. In several of the photographs being exhibited at Galleri K, these friends almost appear to be co-creators. Through their use of clothing and makeup and with their whole striking visual appearance, they create images themselves; the boa draped across the slender figure’s shoulders is greener than the foliage in the background, the red-painted mouth is the color that radiates in a dim room, and the body that bears the sequins consciously strikes a pose.

Most of Goldin's friends from this time are dead, and in several pieces she has exposed the HIV and AIDS crisis that was also a prominent part of this environment. The piece *Gotscho kissing Gilles, Paris*, which is included in this exhibit, is an icon of the crisis: The green light colors the sick man's face against the pillow, his ear is folded over, and the white sheets contrast with his t-shirt's lively motif that might've been relevant a long time ago. The kiss from the other man meets the place where the suffering is most clearly expressed – at the base of the nose, at the tight pull of the skin around the eye sockets that reveal that the person in the bed is unlikely to recover. The two heads are connected, and for a moment, the kiss suspends the notion of the isolated individual and the final distinction between life and death.

Goldin's works are often said to possess a special kind of empathy, and it's easy to agree with this description. Her photographs show a warmth, closeness and love for the people she portrays. But how is this visible? In what way does empathy manifest itself in the imagery? It may have something to do with the night's yellow lamplight, with people who are so close they appear blurred, or with what disappears in the dark and yet is still a part of the story. Cinematic, but without sequence; these are compact moments that continue beyond the edge of the image. Hands are seen holding cigarettes and lipstick, arms are wrapped around bodies. And we encounter a gaze that captivates. Eyes look into the camera, subjects look at each other, or they meet their own gaze in the mirror – a single person in each image – or in images placed together in a grid, where individual vulnerability occurs simultaneously with the strength of togetherness.

Goldin's play with gaze, including that of the viewer, is at times confusing and complex. In the piece *Joana with Valerie and Reine in the Mirror, L'Hôtel des Beaux Arts*, the image's simple motif – a female figure in a chair – conveys a more intricate story in the mirror next to her. The mirror becomes a picture within the picture, where other sides of the situation are playing out. The woman in the chair forms the right side of the photograph. Her posture is more relaxed than the straight-backed chair suggests, and her long hair hangs loose. With her gaze lowered, she looks to the right, out of the picture, and another person's hand rests on her naked thigh. The short-haired woman to whom the hand belongs is reflected in the mirror. She looks to the left, she too with lowered eyelids. Behind her is yet another woman in her underwear, cropped off at the neck by the mirror frame, only her body visible.

At first glance, one notes the two portraits: two faces turned from each other, gazes going in different directions. They each seem to be alone, but the mirror shows that the short-haired woman is in close physical contact with the woman in the chair; her hand not just resting, but rather *holding* the other woman's thigh in a more embracing gesture. In reality, perhaps the eyes of the two women are meeting, or perhaps the figure in the chair is looking at the third person – the woman in her underwear. The photograph shows several sides of the same scene, and the faces express something private, almost introspective, while the bodies are intertwined. The relationship between these people allows for individual introspection, even in a situation with such close contact with others. In this way, the trust between them – a trust that also includes the photographer – becomes visible to the viewer as well. In addition,

we are given color: the drapery in the background is vibrant and red and lends its emotional power to what is unfolding before it. The color belongs in the hotel room's interior, while the sparse lighting – common in many of Goldin's photographs – emphasizes it and unites it with the rest of the motif in a contextual affinity.

The humanity of these works has a clear political aspect. Being able to create and assert one's identity, regardless of conventional frameworks, is still met with resistance, and structural conditions continue to lead to different kinds of exclusion. The acceptance intrinsic to Goldin's gaze seems to be fundamentally necessary in our time – a time that Goldin herself recently described as shockingly conservative.

*Nan Goldin was born in Washington, D.C. in 1953. She lives and works in New York, Berlin and Paris, and has also worked internationally on projects in Zurich, Tokyo, Bangkok and Manila. Her work includes both photographs and film. The Whitney Museum in New York, the Pompidou Center in Paris, and the Whitechapel Gallery in London have arranged retrospective exhibits of Goldin's art. Recent solo exhibitions include "The Ballad of Sexual Dependency", Tate Modern, London, UK, 2019; Fata Morgana, Château d'Hardelot, Condette, France, 2018; Weekendplaner, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, Ireland, 2017; Nan Goldin, Portland Museum of Art, Portland, ME, USA, 2017; "The Ballad of Sexual Dependency", Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA, 2016. Over the years, Goldin has been the recipient of several prizes and purchased by a number of institutions. The Norwegian National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design purchased the piece Couple in bed from the exhibit at Galleri K – a piece that was previously acquired by a number of important museums in the United States.*

*Recently, Goldin has been engaged in activism; she arranged a series of protests against the Sackler family, who, through their ownership of the pharmaceutical company Purdue Pharma, have earned large sums off of the painkiller OxyContin – while also being well-known sponsors of several museums and universities in the United States. The drug is highly addictive, and Goldin has first-hand experience with it; after an arm injury, she became addicted to this very drug. Her involvement has led to a number of museums, including The Metropolitan Museum and The Guggenheim Museum in New York, as well as the Tate Museums and The National Portrait Gallery in London, rejecting donations from the Sackler family.*

by Else Marie Hagen  
(Translated by Olivia Lasky)