

## Saint Goldin

After growing up in a middle-class Washington suburb, her father a professor, her mother a housewife. After seeing her sister Barbara interned for misbehaviour and violence against her mother. After learning that her sister took her life on the rails of a train line... after all that, the woman who would become Nan Goldin, one of the most significant photographers in contemporary art, left Washington for Boston. She escaped her family. She escaped the suburbs. She escaped to save her skin and the transference that was occurring. "I thought I had to kill myself at age eighteen. My parents started to treat me like Barbara. At thirteen I wanted to grow up to be a junkie. At fourteen I left home [...]. At eighteen I started to shoot dope, and shoot pictures. That saved my life."<sup>1</sup>

Shooting up. Shooting other people. Nan Goldin's life became a long photo session. She did not kill herself as her sister had done but, drugged by memories, the remembrance of her sister, she was forever haunted. Before her eyes, the faces she wanted to preserve. In art's demand for attention, she became a warrior-photographer, a Medusa mirror of what we must not forget: human suffering.

Instead of having her head lopped off by parental revisionism, Goldin placed a camera's eye in front of her own. Positioning the lens between the world and herself, she set out to produce an archive of present time to fight erasure, the trauma of forced forgetting imposed by her parents who wanted to wipe away their older daughter's suicide. Since that day, Goldin has gone through life holding a lens in her hand, her shield against the world. She tore that shield from other people and thrust it before them, a mirror whose reflection they did not wish to see. Goldin is both Medusa and Perseus: no one can vanquish her gaze, and she will not die of its reflection. Her seeing, her witnessing gaze, her eyes never closed to the truth, yet not threatening. For Goldin, there is nothing terrifying about the truth; therein lies her freedom. She fights for truth like a vigilante, unshakable, never exhausted, a resister and survivor in her desire to bear witness.

Goldin believes in real life. She grabs it and takes a stand. She isn't afraid of the risks or effects of random chance. Taking pictures is neither an artifice nor a sacrifice. Goldin shoots images and, through them, fires on reality. In art's *hic et nunc*, the lens is her weapon.

If, as a warrior woman, she inspires fear, it is because she will never surrender. Goldin does not quit, she imposes her gaze. She is a monster of perseverance, one take after another, carrying a love that cannot die; she projects its images so others can carry it too. Passion can freeze the blood as hatred does, and Goldin makes us imagine the Gorgon in love, as ugly as she is frightening, but alive and full of desire, whose eyes never close. Goldin's dark curls conjure up snakes, those vectors of evil, the Medusa head that Perseus bore like a trophy after lopping it off, though it continued turning others to stone even after death. Women refused to be victims, and so Medusa's face is reborn. It changes: Lilith, Eve, Salomé, Mary Magdalene... We discover it among the woman saints of the first centuries; their struggle for faith set them against the men with whom they lived. It became the face of all those girls who left their families to keep from being swallowed up, artists who dared show their bodies and made them speak, a whole army of

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, Nan Goldin quotations throughout are from *Sœurs, Saintes et Sibylles*, Paris: Éditions du regard, Festival d'automne, 2005.

women, foot soldiers in the war against the images people want to stick them with, images to paralyze them, anaesthetic figures to confuse them, exclude them because they are terrifying or unworthy, the flags of countries where a woman still does not have the right to exist.

The year is 1986. Goldin is thirty-three years old, the age of the crucifixion.

A plague has fallen upon us. It began with a rumour that spread, grave and frightening. It was still only a whisper, sounds echoing around something unformed that people knew almost nothing about, but that was becoming more worrying. The rumour swelled, the number of cases increased, mostly men, young men, they died quickly and in terrible suffering. It was a state of emergency. There was talk of a virus that attacked needle users and homosexuals, there was talk of a plague come from heaven, a punishment, an expulsion. People refused to look upon these men covered with sores, sickness written on their bodies, stigmatized. The rumour grew ever darker, fed by forces of fear, arrogance, and contempt. A bad dream, the end of the world through the exchange of blood and liquid love.

The year is 1986 and I am seventeen years old. AIDS has arrived. We will come into adulthood with this sword of Damocles over our heads, a constant threat, as our parents look on in panic with their nostalgia for the peace and love of their youth. I am seventeen years old; I take my first steps toward love that will never be completely free. We will always be uneasy. We will always be in mourning. Rock Hudson, Klaus Nomi, Freddie Mercury, Liberace, Gia Carangi, but also that neighbour in the suburb where I grew up whose body I watched waste away almost overnight, the light gone from his eyes, his head slumped, his shoulders bent until one day the man he loved returned home alone. Death came quickly, without warning. It would leave us no hope.

I am seventeen years old and I have begun reading Michel Foucault, Guy Hocquenghem, and Hervé Guibert, whose death I mourned in December 1991, incredulous, thinking one day I would be as old as he was, and like him perhaps I too would be stolen from life. His words will always shine like the revelation of what words can do, and images too, the faces Guibert loved and photographed. Soon I would be pondering the photos of Robert Mapplethorpe in wonderment and silence, faced with his disappearance. How is it possible? What will we become? I listen, I hear, I tremble, and I cry. People tell me, “You have your whole life ahead of you,” and I see my hand in the hand of AIDS. “There’s life before AIDS, and after AIDS,” Nan Goldin said.<sup>2</sup> For me, there was only one life, the only one I know because I grew up with AIDS, I built my life with it. I learned to love with it. I have never pictured myself without it.

The year is 1986. I am seventeen. Chernobyl. I lift my eyes to the clouds and imagine them radioactive, haunted by images of bodies turned to dust on the other side of the world. I wonder, why not ours? Death is everywhere, in the classrooms and the hallways at school. The iron curtain has fallen on free love. We did not escape the atomic mushroom after all. A reign of distrust settles over us, paranoia like a prophylactic between our bodies.

AIDS and Chernobyl mark the beginning of our adult lives. We are the generation identified by Robert Capa, the war photographer, the generation of anonymous figures, faceless, without a future, disabused, disengaged, disaffected youth who grew up with the death of Elvis, leftover disco, and the superheroes of TV series. We are Generation X. Challenger blowing up live on TV, Pan Am Flight 73 hijacked, welcome to the Oprah Winfrey show. Above all this, the

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<sup>2</sup> THE DIGITAL JOURNALIST: *20 years, Aids and Photography*, 2001.

<http://www.americansuburbx.com/2012/04/theory-nan-goldin-on-cookie-mueller.html>

shadow that took the place of the nuclear hotline. Generation X is the AIDS generation. The Cold War is over, and AIDS is the new trench warfare.

Montreal, the Museum of Contemporary Art. The Nan Goldin retrospective. The year is 2003. Portraits, self-portraits, landscapes. *Guido on the dock, Venice*. His thin form in a long dark coat conjures up some messenger. I move among the pictures in a silence worthy of a church or library, and in the glaring light of the sun, neon tubes, candles that bring out the grain of the skin, the detail of matter. The lens is so close it is a caress. Goldin breathes with her subjects, her camera like a God whose love is everywhere, a great beating heart that unites the dead and the living. There is the fear that photographs might steal their subjects' souls. But Nan Goldin takes them with her lens the way she might hold them in her arms, checkmating the devil.

The year is 2003. I am struck dumb, astonished, drawn to these images that speak to me and keep me close. I am happy, and fascinated. These people exist, they have existed, their lives can be found here. The images look at me and attract me, locking in my attention. Here is the proof, the remains of the past that say, "This is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but." Mine is an act of faith, I am a believer. I accept Goldin's invitation and I take her images into me. An injection of reality. Images like AIDS. Faces stick to my DNA and mutate inside me, fastening onto my identity. I am transfigured.

Goldin asks us to see her models with the same gaze she casts upon them, damaged witnesses, branded, engaged, taking her place and theirs, showing them as if she were speaking for them. Every time my eyes fall upon them, they are living, they look back. I am Barbara, Hyman, Lillian, Suzanne, David, Bea, Ivy, Cookie, Lola, Brian, Gwen, John, Raymonde. I am these lost friends who are somehow still alive. The faces that Goldin will never get over, ones she refuses to forget; she goes on living but will not abandon those who have disappeared. Goldin will not forget death, and I, standing before her images, stand by her.

The year is 2005. In Paris, Nan Goldin publishes *Soeurs, Saintes et Sibylles*, the missal-book, the companion to her installation in a gallery that is also a hospital, and the other way around: the Chapelle Saint-Louis in the Salpêtrière Hospital. The work marks a passage and helps us return and read, looking back at the photographer's work. Begin this way: enter the book, the album of memory, as you would a church, humble, pious, and quiet. Goldin's book tells us which saint to worship: Saint Barbara, who carries her lost sister's name.

Saint Barbara is the woman saint of all woman saints, the martyr who represents all women who have been sacrificed. Hers is the face Goldin brandishes to terrorize evil, and make those who persecute and imprison women tremble in fear. *Soeurs, Saintes et Sibylles* opens with the story of Saint Barbara as on a tragic coincidence, destiny's mark. The name itself is a sentence, but in Goldin's eye and in her writing, from this twinning an imaginary sisterhood is born that can break through isolation. Break Barbara Goldin out of her prison by making her part of the chain of sacrificed women, suicide sisters, those who have been interned for their rebellion. From this photographic family that Goldin spent her life putting down on paper, a family of friends and lovers, a family of the marginal and the excluded, the oppressed, she brings forward a substratum. The first layer is Barbara, the first link in a chain of women who appear as the nerve centre of her work. Desperately seeking Barbara. Nan Goldin, orphaned of her sister, spent her life recovering her. Each photograph is born of the same desire: to make imprints of the living, prevent death from dying, resuscitate her sister. Forty years after Barbara's suicide, in this book with the violet and gilt cover, like a casket, Goldin buries her.

At the heart of the work, Barbara is the first ghost who arrives last, once the party has really started. An elementary regret remains hidden and afterward, Goldin reveals it as her inspiration, the foundation of what she spent her life creating. A testament for the disappeared. A mausoleum built not to preserve the dead but to let them live on. An origin of the world, always fresh.

*Soeurs, Saintes et Sybilles*. The installation was created in what was once an insane asylum. The spectators, caught in the trap of images, find themselves incarcerated. Three hundred and fifty people lost consciousness during the exhibition. Goldin succeeded in provoking what Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot was so skillful at conjuring from his female patients at the end of the nineteenth century in that same place: an attack of hysteria. Disturbance, shock, trembling, fainting, terror: the body begins to speak and express the intolerable in its silence; through the flesh it says what cannot be spoken about suffering. The act of seeing has its price; not without pain do the scales fall from our eyes. In the Salpêtrière, this old asylum for women that calls forth the hysterics of the past as well as Barbara's internment in a hospital for the insane, her pain is transfused, shared; Goldin's sister is commemorated, and she is freed from solitude. As if it wasn't enough to remember Barbara, as if Goldin needed more faces and more bodies. An army of ghosts begins to dance behind the two sisters.

Goldin photographs the way a heart beats or eyelids blink. The images are produced at a frenetic pace. The slide shows are stroboscopic flashes. They strike like the lightning of sudden awareness, an interrogation or punishment, an epileptic arousal. Surrounded by screens, the viewers, standing on a passageway in the middle of the chapel, look down on a hospital cell installed far below, at ground level. The cell is peppered with images. The legend of Saint Barbe, before she became known as Barbara. Goldin family photos. Portraits of Barbara. Nan's self-portraits. On this catwalk, at the heart of the *panopticon*, the viewers assume the position of guards. They see everything from their vantage point, but what they did not foresee is that, from this position of power, they would become the target of a firing squad. They will not emerge unscathed from this hail of images, they will be shaken by the explosion of photo-bombs. The past unfurls, memory is driven in like a nail, and the audience is hit. These images concern them. Because they must not forget them either.

On the chapel floor, the stage for the installation that accompanies the photo show, the viewers discover a hospital room with a bed and night table. Cigarettes, beer, telephone, medication, ashtray. A wax woman is lying under a sheet, her breast exposed. The effigy of Nan Goldin, this patient is a saintly figure. Hands hold her down. Her long black hair curls around her face. Her forehead is furrowed with pain. Her eyes are wide open. She knows the truth, but they want to keep her quiet. Goldin opens her imaginary world to the audience, then pulls the sheet over it. This territory is not ours, but we cannot remain outside it. Junkies, transvestites, AIDS sufferers, battered women, dysfunctional and decomposing families, failed love. Bungalows, hospitals, trains. Noisy bars, shimmering water, melancholy skies, park benches, haunted houses. And at the end, when all the lights have faded, a gravestone: "Barbara Holly Goldin May 21, 1946 – April 12, 1965."

*Soeurs, Saintes et Sibylles*. The first station. The opening page of the catalogue that accompanies the Salpêtrière show is a preliminary image, a photographic incipit, a piece of popular hagiography. A photograph of the shelf in Goldin's studio where her favourite books are arranged, the holy books, sisterly sibylline books I recognize because they are mine as well. This

studio is a chamber, a laboratory of thought, and it's also my studio. The books are part of me, they gaze upon me, I know them. My encyclopedia. My Library of Alexandria.

The second station. A photo of Barbara as a child, a Colombina mask over her eyes. *Barbara in mask*, the caption says. This second door carries me further, it's a zoom in on the true reason for the quest, the loss. Here, Goldin's sister appears. Barbara, at a party, eyes half-hidden by a mask. Her eyes seem to have stopped in surprise, silhouetted by matter, off-centre in relation to the openings cut from the cardboard—an out-of-frame look. A frame-up, if you will. In Barbara's photo, the eyes are off-centre behind the holes in the mask in the same way her face stands in relation to the rest of the picture, blurred at the edge of the frame as if she did not have her own place, as if she were a prisoner. A sad clown, a little dancer missing her ballroom prince. Solitude, despair, a little girl forgotten so soon.

Then my eyes are drawn to another centre away from the black holes, an invisible, encrypted centre. Sibylline, Barbara looks on without us being able to see her. We know she is looking, but we don't know what she sees. We might doubt she could see anything at all since her mask has slipped over her face, down her nose, half-hiding her eyes. Her face appears, almost blind, fleeting, handicapped, deported, expatriated, at the edge of erasure. A death mask. The Mouth of Truth will clamp down upon us if we stare at it with lying eyes. Goldin forces us to see, she awakens the pleasure of the gaze—scopophilia—but everything can always change. That's the risk we have to take, beaten by her punishing images, where beauty attacks us with the Stendhal syndrome. For the duty of remembering, we become statues. Pulled into the inversion of Sodom and Gomorrah, if we avert our eyes, we will be punished. From this point onward, we are prisoners of what we must look upon.