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We Are Francesca Woodman

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Department of Visual Arts

2012

Abstract

We Are Francesca Woodman

By Charlie E. Watts

I was wandering the halls of the Pompidou Centre in Paris the first time I encountered Francesca Woodman's haunting images in person, and I was immediately captivated. Previously, I had seen her work printed in books and was reminded of my own. As I continued to learn more about her, I discovered that the similarities extended beyond photographic style to having had similar life experiences. For example, Woodman's summer home in Florence, Italy, was mere kilometers from my grandfather's olive grove in Vaggio. In my series, *We Are Francesca Woodman*, I have created images inspired by Woodman's photographs and tried to understand the thought processes behind her inspired and beautiful works. In my own images, I transmogrify the feminine form in various decaying interiors through the use of long exposures, just as Woodman did herself. The resulting images from this ritualized process of creating have an aspect of performance. After all that I have learned from my research about Woodman, I believe that my approach to this series with the dedicated purpose of interpreting her work has allowed me to make the penultimate connection with her art. This study and reinterpretation of another's art has helped me toward reaching a pivotal place in finding my own artistic vision.

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Acknowledgements

This would have not happened without the unimaginable amount of help from my committee members. My heart forever goes out to Jason, Jan, Sarah, and Victoria.

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The Dissimulation of Francesca Woodman

Photographs and Essays by Charlie Watts

1. Photographs by Charlie Watts



San Galgano 25, Watts, Silver Gelatin Print, 2012, 11 x 11 inches



Dissimulation, Watts, Silver Gelatin Print, 2012, 11 x 14 inches



Tired, Watts, Silver Gelatin Print, 2012, 11 x 11 inches



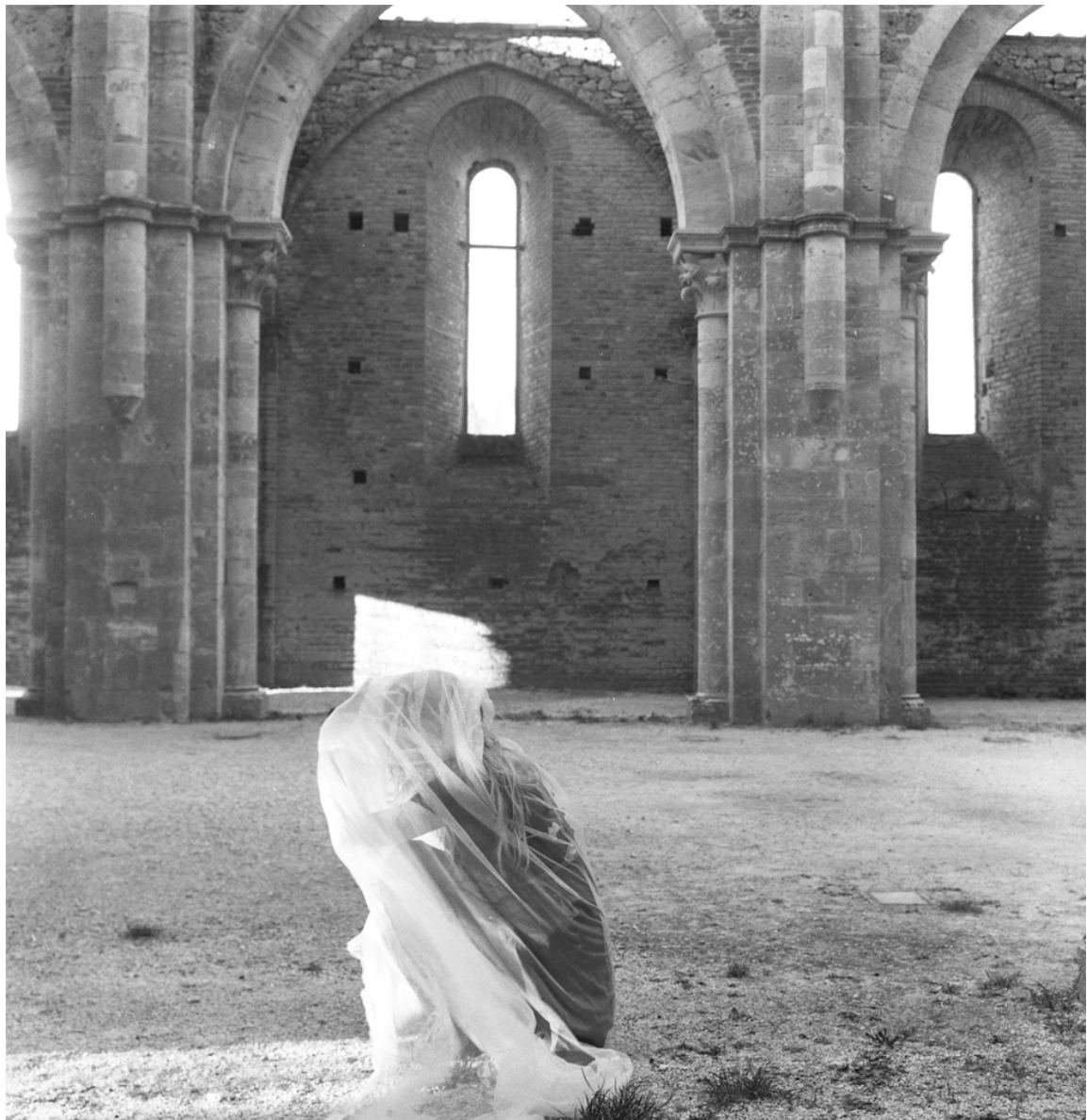
Fictitious Fixation, Watts, Silver Gelatin Print, 2012, 11 x 11 inches



Napping in La Specola, Watts, Silver Gelatin Print, 2012, 11 x 11 inches



Mother, son, Watts, Silver Gelatin Print, 2012, 11 x 11 inches



San Galgano 15, Watts, Silver Gelatin Print, 2012, 11 x 11 inches

2. Failed Ritual in the Embodiment of Francesca Woodman

Aphorisms and Comparisons of Charlie Watts' Photographic Abstractions of the Human Form through Mimicking Francesca Woodman's Photographic Oeuvre¹

By Fen Fubloch

1.

During the past year, the precocious and ambitious photographer Charlie Watts has immersed herself in a mission to create work by embodying that of the late Francesca Woodman. Both artists have made art that relies heavily on the use of blur, creating painterly, otherworldly photographs and placing femininity in abandoned landscapes. Advancing this mystification of use of blur in abandoned space, Watts initiates an allegorical dissemination and surrealist attitude of photography in nonsensical arrangements in her quest to inform her work through remnants that Woodman left behind.

2.

Inevitably, both of the young artists have used the laws of chance in the creation of their work. Both concentrate heavily in the realm of self-portraiture. Therefore, they exist on both sides of the camera- never directly seeing what pragmatic event is thus occurring on the other side. While both artists deal with the ideas of chance by using blur, absence of intentionality is not present because they have extensively documented compositional aspects of future work through a vast number of sketches and studies. Woodman's work takes a certain anti-aesthetic compared to other contemporaneous artists of her time (Cindy Sherman and Joan Jonas, for example). Instead she has created her own unique aesthetic more closely related with early 20th-century Pictorialism. Current movements in photography are harkening to the past. Therefore, Watts' vintage images are not unique, given popular trends that use antiqued photographic methods (even if that approach is an app on the iPhone). Innate painterly sublimatory intentions of the photographs are seen frequently in both of these artists' portfolios, as lace blurs into fur in a vintage world. Both Woodman and Watts use an industrial camera that is subverted by the mnemonics of their artisanal hands to create photographic art that appears more like dreamscapes than realistic representations. Their photographs are quiet, simple photographs that resemble experimental paintings rather than technical amalgamations constructed with calculations, chemicals, and precise executions.

3.

One of the most bewildering aspects of Watts' work is her inability to be still, like Woodman, as she leaps and bounds throughout the frames of her medium format negatives. Through the use of blur in both Watts' 2012 *Sister Flying* and Woodman's *Untitled*, the photographers create images that allude to flight. In both images, a young woman appears to be taking off in flight when in fact a long exposure captures their figures in mid-jump. The figures in both are not entirely readable in the photographs—making them appear more ghostly than human.

¹ This satirical essay was written for those who seek to infer meaning from my work as compared to that of Francesca Woodman. It was inspired by Benjamin H. D. Buchlok's essay, The Chance Ornament Aphorism on Gerhard Richter's Abstractions in *Artforum*, February 2012.



Untitled, Woodman, Rome, Italy, 1979



Sister Flight, Watts, Silver Gelatin Print, 2012, 11 x 11 inches

Woodman's mastery of blur is wildly acknowledged as many essays compare her to "a ghost of the otherworldly."² It is known that both Watts and Woodman contemplated the legacy of Surrealism with its approach to the unreal, unimaginable world of the unknown.³ This can clearly be seen in these two works with themes of the unknowable are woven throughout the photographs.

4.

A question of imitation as flattery or unoriginality lingers in the work created by Watts. Why would Watts mimic Woodman's work so closely rather than developing her own path towards individuality? This incompatibility can be recognized by Watts' deployment of photographs from 2011 to 2012 that closely imitate other images. In Watts' 2012, *Untitled 303*, the photograph effaces any reference to originality as it directly calls upon Woodman's *Untitled*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976. In Woodman's work a nude woman is seated with her legs open to the camera. A disturbing Commedia dell'Arte mask is shoved between Woodman's legs to cover the genitals. Woodman blatantly flaunts her fetishized sexuality with the use of the mask. By obscuring her genitals, the poser draws more attention to her sex, with a face where her vaginal area should be. Dovetailing with this work, Watts' 2012 *Untitled 303* mimics the composition with a skull taking the place of the mask.

5.

Sensuality is unencumbered in Woodman's work as she manages to have such an intimate connection with her camera. Her desolate stare captures the viewer while Watts tends to shy away from the camera in her work. Watts lacks the critical self-reflexivity and frequently seems under duress to produce a work in the guise of Woodman. When questioned about some of her other work, she appears to have an intense predisposition to differentiate her work from Woodman's. However, traces of Woodman are very much interlaced in most of what Watts has created in the 21st century. Even so, the work produced by Watts is extraordinarily interesting. Through the ritual of photographing while trying to embody Woodman's work, Watts has reached a beautiful penultimate failure in this critic's opinion. The success of her failure is integral to this photographic set as she takes from this project a guided step into her photographic career.

² The Blur of the Otherworldly, Mark Alice Durant, *Art Journal*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (Autumn, 2003), pp. 6-17. Published by: [College Art Association](http://www.collegeartassociation.org/)

Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3558517>

³ Surreal Reflections

Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation by Whitney Chadwick. Review by: Sue Taylor, *Art Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (Summer, 1999), pp. 118-119. Published by: [College Art Association](http://www.collegeartassociation.org/)

Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/777958>



Untitled 303, Watts, Silver Gelatin Print, 2012, 11 x 11 inches



Untitled, Woodman, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976

3. We Are Francesca Woodman

A brief study of her photographs in light of her films

by Charlie Elizabeth Watts

I am not going to share my private life with millions of people. I don't find a need to do that and nobody else close to me does either.

-Francesca Woodman

It's true, I am afraid of dying. I am afraid of the world moving forward without me, of my absence going unnoticed, or worse, being some natural force propelling life on. Is it selfish? Am I such a bad person for dreaming of a world that ends when I do? I don't mean the world ending with respect to me, but every set of eyes closing with mine.

— Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything is Illuminated*

Foreword

For the past year, I have been on a journey with Francesca Woodman. A meticulous study of her work has inspired and informed my own photographic practice. When I set out on this project, my motivation was based on purely selfish reasons. From the first moment that I encountered Woodman's work, I loved it. It resonated deeply with work that I had produced in recent years, seamlessly combining the feminine figure with abandoned space. The more I saw her photographs, the more fascinated I became. Other similarities began to emerge as I learned that her family home in Italy was close to my childhood haven, my grandfather's farm outside of Florence. I thought that by studying her genius --and I mean it, her true genius⁴-- I could better understand her work and use that understanding to inform my own photographs and imbue them with deeper meaning. How wrong could I have been? I feel more disconnected from Woodman's

⁴ There has been an ongoing debate in several articles about whether Woodman was an artistic 'genius,' or just a very talented student who hadn't fully realized her artistic practice.

work than when I began this study. My reading of nonsensical papers, journal articles, even books about her work have catapulted my understanding into a meaningless muddle. Whereas I thought that study of her work would bring me closer to understanding it, the more critiques that I read, the less I seemed to care. I still valued the work itself, but not these lofty interpretations of her work. I thought a review of her journals, of critical opinions of her oeuvre, of the outside world's judgments about what she had created would translate into inspiration in my own photographs. I misguidedly believed that I could figure out her ambition and dedication and then emulate that. However, the propaganda surrounding her work has tainted my childish awe of her amazing collection. Despite my disillusionment, I want to finish what I started. In this paper, I seek to address several of the critical themes that have arisen around her work, including feminism and the importance of biography to inform an artistic creation. I will dismantle these misguided readings through a comparison of Woodman's films to her photographs. Finally, I will discuss how Woodman's art has informed my own artistic journey over the past year.

Biography

After Francesca Woodman's suicide in 1981, it took authorities several days to identify her corpse because it was so distorted by the fall. Eerily, in retrospect, the dissolution of the human form, which was so common in her photographs, was sadly realized in her ultimate demise. Woodman had a distinct affinity for decaying and decrepit interiors where, through motion, she dematerialized with parallels to the way she ended her own life. A common element that runs through Woodman's work is her unique way of masking her face throughout her photographic oeuvre

and life. One aspect of the work that struck me was her virtuosity of depiction of the female form in motion. At first glance, one of her photos appears to be a fairly straightforward image of a puppet or doll-like figure: a woman standing in the middle of an empty room frozen in a confounding and unreadable stance. In fact this photograph is part of a series of works, in which the artist portrays herself.

Sometimes she is dancing. In other examples, she is throwing herself to the floor. In *Untitled, Providence, Rhode Island*, the movement of the figure's head is of central importance, specifically because of its blurred painterly quality, which along with the awkward pose, delivers an emotional intensity and implies a loss of identity.

The effacement of the artist was purposeful, as Woodman stated repeatedly that she produced studies of the human form, the figure, and not a self-portrait as such.



Untitled, Woodman, Providence, Rhode Island, 1978.

Woodman uses masking in many ways to create this concept of the non-self portrait. She uses her hands, mirrors, motion, and hair, among other elements to hide her face within the image. Mirrors, windows, and reflections appear throughout her work and point to an extended consideration of the medium of photography. Through props, manipulation of technology to create facial masking, and a hermeneutic predisposition towards interpreting Woodman's work, the very nature of Francesca Woodman's practice is designed to confirm that one cannot know her through her imagery. Therefore, I am arguing that several popular ideologies for understanding her work have incorrectly canonized Woodman as a feminist and assumed that explanations about her biography can be derived from her photographs. A competing ontology of presence oscillates against ontology of absence because her photographs mask just as much information as they show. The text within the image is sufficient to create an intoxicating image, but the nature of this text disables the questions of her biography to linger. In this paper I shall examine her biography and her practice and show her work doesn't inform her as a person through a comparison of her films with her photographs.

Francesca Woodman was born in 1958 in Boulder, Colorado, into a family of artists. Her father was the noted painter George Woodman, and her mother was the internationally celebrated ceramicist Betty Woodman. Art and culture made up the very fabric of the family. Francesca started making art as soon as she could hold a paintbrush in her hand, explaining her precocious beginnings. She started taking photographs when she was 13. And already, even then, her work ethic was of a practicing artist. Over the course of her artistic career she was incredibly prolific,

producing 800 negatives.⁵ The first major exhibition of Woodman's work took place at Wellesley College in 1986 and was accompanied by a catalogue, *Francesca Woodman, photographic work*, with essays by Rosalind Krauss and Abigail Solomon-Godeau. The show then travelled to five other colleges.

After this landmark exhibition, there were important shows all over Europe in the late nineties, many of which repeated the standard narrative about the work, focusing on the details of the artist's life. She did not get an important retrospective in America again until the fall of 2011. The current exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is the first comprehensive treatment of Woodman's entire oeuvre, and as such, it stands as an incredibly valuable contribution to our understanding of this artist's work. The catalog includes Cory Keller's essay, "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman," which discusses the artist's life and practice in unprecedented detail.⁶ Keller interviews Woodman's teachers and friends and family, but despite being informative, his essay fails to contextualize the work in a broader sense. Furthermore, much of the literature dealing with Woodman's work varies from comprehensive volumes to specific scholarly books that center on a single subject, such as the Kantian sublime. These trends in thinking about the young artist come to dramatically varying conclusions although they may

⁵ Townsend, Chris, Francesca Woodman, and George Woodman. *Francesca Woodman*. (London: Phaidon, 2006) 6.

⁶ Woodman, Francesca, Corey Keller, Jennifer Blessing, and Julia Bryan-Wilson. *Francesca Woodman*. (New York: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in Association with D.A.P./Distributed Art, 2011) 169-185

have begun in a similar vein. Since Woodman's images convey such a sense of ghosting ambiguity, it is no wonder how many different views of the work have emerged. So many of these essays explore Woodman's biography to better understand her work, but are the two necessarily connected in any way?

Many of the essays on Woodman's oeuvre are biased because they lack a comprehensive reading of her career. While much of her work has come to light, the idea that more, as yet unknown, pieces of the work will be discovered has grown. These presumed unknown pieces manage to sustain a fascination among artists and critics with Woodman. This need to discover who Woodman was influences readings of her work, as demonstrated by the recent publication of "Francesca Woodman's Journal" by her father.⁷

Performance

Many of Woodman's photographs center on performance, alluding to Woodman's role as a character posing in front of the camera to create these beautifully eerily works. A comparison between a paradigmatic example of conceptual photography and Woodman's own work demonstrates the dramatic difference between her approach and those of her peers. While German artists Bernd and Hilla Becher were developing a catalogue of building types, using an architectural taxonomy and working in a repetitive, documentary, almost scientific fashion that was all about the historic character of photography and the medium of photography, Woodman went the other way, towards painting. Woodman's work

⁷ Woodman, Francesca, and George Woodman. *Francesca Woodman's Notebook*. (Milano: Silvana, 2011) 1-24.

instead turned to Pictorialism of photographic practices of the early twentieth century. Instead of the cold dry lens of the Bechers and so many other conceptual artists at this time, Woodman rendered her figures and forms in a painterly fashion. Rather than delineating her subject matter in hard crisp definition, Woodman preferred the play between definite and elusive forms. For example, flesh often dissolves and becomes indistinguishable from its surroundings.



Space2, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976

The elements that drew me to Woodman's work in the past were her unique way of looking at femininity in decaying spaces through her performances for the camera. Her work is primarily made within enclosed spaces like her studio or an abandoned house. The comparison of flesh to rotting interiors is enchanting as she performs her dances for the camera. In *Space2, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976*, Woodman has precariously placed a door diagonally across photo plane, juxtaposing the nature of the square negative. Her nude figure is crammed between the door and the floor with only the lower half of the back of her body showing. The room itself is in a state of decay as paint flakes from the ceiling and walls, making the space very textural. To further emphasize the difference between flesh and building, there is a slight blur in the camera of Woodman's figure. This is one of the fascinating elements of Woodman's work, her inability to be still. Each photo becomes a vignette in the active practice of her photographic career as she uses the camera to capture images that the human eye will never see. This photo shows her meticulous use of planning a work in motion for the camera. Most of her work looks inward with an experimental lens. Because of the experimental nature of many of her photographs, she often could not determine the end result until the end of the developing process. When taken initially, these images would have been an incomplete mystery, making the images much more powerful as she responds directly to her surrounding environment. The whimsical and precocious spontaneity of the work makes it unusual as she appears in a kind of dance in many of the images.

We can see the performative nature of Woodman's work in her sense of motion within many of her images, but it is most clearly demonstrated in her film installations. In her films, she explores this performance for the camera, giving the viewer a deeper insight into her practice. She had a set idea on what she wanted her photographs to be, and she wanted to use video in a similar way. In the six videos released to the SFMOMA by the Woodman estate, she explores the nature of the moving image. The films still maintain the retro feel of her black-and-white works and further prove that she was performing for the camera. The videos do not seem to show Woodman's exploration of the video as a medium as much as a way to vivify her photographs. This frees her photographs to be more realized in a grounded world. A performance is only a momentary, temporal happening, and the main thing left from Woodman's performances are her photographs. The films give another glimpse into the process behind these photographs as will be furthered explored later in this paper.

Critical Themes

Among the themes running throughout critical readings of Woodman's work are suicide and feminism. But should the viewer even look for death in her images? Tragically, in 1981, her exceptional creativity and genius was thwarted by a combination of events that eventually led her to commit suicide by throwing herself off the twentieth floor of her apartment in New York. Her abrupt end leaves many unanswered questions. One of these leading questions is was she at the pinnacle of

her work? Many have abscribed the word “genius”⁸ to her photographs, but she was still on the cusp between innocence and womanhood. However, that is the major interpretative problem with this body of work: that the gruesome drama of Woodman’s life, the details of her far too short existence, have come to completely dominate any discussion of the work.⁹

How to approach her work has always been, simply, frustrating. “Should her suicide go unmentioned, be a footnote, or be understood as a driving force in making sense of her art?” Bryan-Wilson rightfully states.¹⁰ The interest in her biography seems to overshadow the actual work. Her suicide remains so intriguing to the viewers that it changes and warps the meaning of the actual work. Each photo becomes a clue to the unconcluded mystery of her death. But does this diminish the work as the untrue meanings are interpreted by the masses? This can be argued either way, but it will remain a mystery. Her suicide has ever preserved her on the verge of womanhood, and no one will ever know if her work could have achieved nearly as much success if her life had continued. To Peggy Phelan, her suicide is Woodman’s “central achievement of her life and work” as Woodman’s work is “oscillating tension between the desire to live and the desire to die.”¹¹ Perhaps her death was the final installation site-specific work. Historians want to understand her process of self-representation and thus insert themselves into the work to make such assumptions about her death. Historians want to understand her process of

⁸ Townsend 36.

⁹ Larson, Laura, George Baker, Ann Daly, Nancy Davenport, and Margret Sandell. "Francesca Woodman Reconsidered: A Conversation with George Baker, Ann Daly, Nancy Davenport, Laura Larson, and Margaret Sundell." *Art Journal* 62.2 (2003): 52-67.

¹⁰ Bryan-Wilson 189.

¹¹ Peggy Phelan, “Francesca Woodman’s Photography: Death and the Image One More Time,” *Signs* 27, no. 4 (Summer 2002): 984.

self-representation and thus insert themselves into the work to make assumptions about her death. They have created a certain death mask that they have placed on her work by grounding it back to their own particular biases.

Another misunderstanding of her work is how she was quickly canonized as a feminist. It remains uncertain whether Woodman aligned herself with the feminist cause and whether she intentionally embraced the feminist mask that so many art historians have thrust upon her.¹² “The truth is, it (feminism) was a moot point, or rather a moot question,” says Woodman’s good friend Betsy Berne, “If anything, Francesca felt guilty that she wasn’t a ‘real’ feminist.”¹³ In addition, because she was such a compelling artist, who also happened to be a *woman*, after her death she was quickly inserted into the canon of great women artists, and in sense, became a martyr for the feminist cause. This has prevented us from seeing the work in its larger art historical context.

The first landmark exhibition of Woodman’s work began at Wellesley College in 1986. The catalogue *Francesca Woodman, photographic work* with essays by Rosalind Krauss and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, delivered a feminist reading of the work arguing that the photographs were essentially about a woman trapped in a house.¹⁴ This was an obvious argument to make because the bulk of the photographs chosen for the exhibition depicted the artist in an abandoned house in Rhode Island and so they lent themselves to a very literal reading; one where

¹² Woodman, Francesca, Ann Gabhart, Rosalind E. Krauss, and Abigail Solomon-Godeau. *Francesca Woodman: Photographic Work*. (Wellesley College Museum, April 9 - June 8, 1986, Hunter College Art Gallery, February 13 - March 14, 1986) 38.

¹³ Townsend 246-248.

¹⁴ Solomon-Godeau 47.

women are predictably trapped in the stereotypical role of mothers and homemakers. This reading was exaggerated even further by the provocative subject matter of some of the images. Woodman began taking nude photographs of herself when she was 14.¹⁵ In later years she started incorporating fetishized objects such as gloves, corsets, and rope. All of this only added to the crazy girl in the attic scenario.

When Woodman's work was put under the lens of scholarly exploration in the 1980's there was a surge of interest in the woman artist under the guise of Postmodernism, feminism, and canon formation.¹⁶ All of these still remain salient when examining her work today as women artist's art are still unfortunately influenced and affected by their gender.¹⁷ In Solomon-Godeau essay, she considers that feminist beliefs might not be applicable to Woodman because of her constant exploration of the female nude -that sometimes seems almost pornographic. Her images balance the line between pain and pleasure seamlessly as she explores the female form.

With feminism she has long be associated with the concept of the woman as a house and many of the pictures "shows an active longing and positive struggle to merge with the wall."¹⁸ This makes me think of the woman as a victim, a ghost trapped to the inevitable duties associated with running a home. While feminism "continues to be an urgent framework for engaging her art,"¹⁹ Woodman seems to

¹⁵ Keller 171.

¹⁶ Bryan-Wilson 192.

¹⁷ Berne, To tell the truth." 5. A friends discussion of Woodman's feminist standing.

¹⁸ Jui-Ch'I Liu, "Francesca Woodman Self-Images: Transforming Bodies in the Space of Femininity," in *Woman's Art Journal* 25, no 1 (Spring-Summer 2004): 26.

¹⁹ Bryan-Wilson 188.

break out of just this one way to examine her work. Feminism will continue to progress, collapse, and grow and will continue to change the view of Woodman's work.



Untitled, Providence, Rhode Island, 1978

Some Photographs and Films

Francesca Woodman's friend, Sloan Rankin, said that if Woodman had lived longer, she probably would have transitioned from photographer to filmmaker.²⁰ This statement demonstrates how Woodman's work could have evolved, at the same time raising awareness of the few films that the artist did make. Furthermore, it alludes to the importance of performance within Woodman's photographic stills. In her photographs, she was able to create blurry and painterly images, whereas many of her films are stagnant and grounded more in visual reality. But Woodman definitely tried to push the medium of film to create a sensually gothic imagery more reminiscent of the Pictorialism than the work of her 1970 contemporaries. Many of the photographs center on performance, alluding to Woodman's role as a character posing in front of the camera to artificially create a beautifully eerie scene. The performance instilled in these photos in silver gelatin is evident across the body of her work, the actual process of making the photograph being an important element beyond the actual physical photograph. But this performance is limited because a photograph cannot present all aspects of a performance the way a film production can.

The act of performance is evident in Woodman's inability to be still. Her use of a long shutter speed to create motion runs rampant throughout many themes in her oeuvre. Even in the still shots, one sees a tension that creates a need to move. I am unsure of the exact process that Woodman followed in making her self portraits, but in my personal experience, taking a self portrait often involves setting a timer

²⁰ Blessing 172.

attached to a release cable and then running back into the frame for the desired picture. So even in *Untitled, Rhode Island, 1978*—where Woodman sits still in a classical nude posture—one can assume a tension of movement. The only slight motion in the picture is her hand moving on her inner thigh. Since her hand is captured in movement through a longer exposure time, this subtle detail changes the meaning of the photograph as Woodman shyly looks away from the camera. This photograph could have been a classical nude except the slight hand motion on her inner thigh sexualizes the image. This minor detail could almost escape the viewer's notice, but if the scene had been captured on film, it would have been much more obvious to the onlooker. Often Woodman's corporeal flesh becomes indistinguishable from the surroundings. Flesh melts into flesh, as discussed above, as her hand visually blurs into the skin of her inner thigh.

What is really interesting about Woodman's photographs is not only how they contrasted and, in a sense, challenged contemporaneous photography but also how they connected to conventions of performance art from this period, which used the human form, the body, as a medium in itself.²¹ While Woodman's practice differed dramatically from conceptual photography of this period, her work did have much in common with performance art from the same period. Her

²¹ Bryan-Wilson 195.

photographs are undeniably about performance and process.



Untitled, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-78

One can see an unmistakable example of performance and process in *Untitled, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-78*, where three young women stand nude in a room, each holding an identical image of an androgynous dreary-eyed Woodman. The room surrounding them is a state of decay with paint flaking from the ceiling and walls and creating texture. The portrait in question, which masks the three women and also is taped to the wall, is undoubtedly Francesca Woodman. This photograph exhibits a sense of play as one woman leans towards the camera while the other two orient themselves towards the corner of the room, in which they are

situated. While two of the women are completely nude, one wears white socks and Mary Janes. Woodman has worn the same shoes in previous shoots, leading the viewer to believe that the woman is none other than the photographer herself. The whimsical and precocious spontaneity of the work makes it unusual as she appears in this comical stance, which incidentally runs through many of her other images. This image continues as a recurrent theme of meticulous staging and performance, in which a face or part of a face is obscured. Although the artist claimed that the many portraits of herself were not self-portraits, they had to be because Woodman was her own best model, knowing exactly what she wanted to create. The images may not have been about Woodman's inner being but her most successful images are of herself. She uses masking in many ways to create a concept of the non-self portrait as props, like the photographic mask, come into use frequently.

The idea of "wearing" a photograph of one's own face as a mask raises the question of how to separate not only an artist from her work but also the artist's "artist" persona from the actual person who is creating the work. This image directly challenges the ideas of being able to connect Woodman's work with her biography because she calls attention to her self-portraits as both a literal and metaphoric mask. The human face is a point of connection for any interaction with another human. So much can be expressed through facial expressions and the likes. By having this photographic mask, she still has a "face" with which the viewer can connect, but it is a disconcerting connection.

This photographic mask of the artist also appears in one of Woodman's short films. In the film, *Untitled*, 1978, Woodman sits in front of a window wearing a

cardigan and the photographic mask of herself. As the film progresses, the viewer hears a shutter click, and the film flashes on and off. In the next frame she is completely nude, only wearing the photographic mask of her face. This film gives an insight into Woodman's photographic practice, revealing the many poses she took to construct the film. There is also a photograph that dovetails with this performance in front of the same window. By seeing the film, the viewer knows that this image was not just an image but also a performance by Woodman, a performance in which she removes her clothes for the camera lens. The film and photographs treat the very nature of self-portraiture ironically and comically sense as the photographer hides behind her own face.

Woodman did not create many films, but although small in number, these productions inform her body of work. In another film, she walks in wearing a fur coat and boots. She removes the coat and shoes revealing her nude body. She paints her nude body white with paint in a room similar to the decaying walls and flaking paint of her photographs. After another shutter click, flour covers the floor with the coat and boots missing. She lies on her back in the flour and slowly rises. Simultaneously, she sees a perfect imprint of her body, walks out of the shot, and becomes excited saying, "Oh, it's such a wonderful shape...Oh, I'm really please!...I guess I should take a photo," in a high thin voice. Later on this same day, Woodman made a photograph of herself, nude, in a chair next to the flour imprint of her body. In the photograph, she seems grim, looking into the camera, but after seeing the film, the viewer knows she was content and excited about this performance and presumably the photograph. Seeing the film changes the meaning of this photograph,

inferring a different mood than that of the predominant sobering themes of melancholy that appear frequently in Woodman's work. This insight proves that her mood is not directly portrayed in the image and that information about her emotional state cannot be assumed by viewing her photographs.

These two films also demonstrate that Woodman was not working alone despite the fact that many of her images have a lonesome nature to them. In her untitled film, she obviously is talking to someone in the background. Furthermore, in the untitled film, in which she is wearing her own face-mask, someone is clearly working the camera to make it zoom in and out. Collaboration is not apparent in Woodman's work, but it is obvious in her films, informing the audience that Woodman did have others around her and was not just exploring these dark places alone.

In her film focuses on classical sculpture., the viewer also sees how Woodman uses what is around her to choreograph the photographs. Towards the end of her life, she began making massive diazotype prints for a colossal installation, *Temple Project*.²² She created this large collage of photographs to make a miniature coliseum. Larger than life pictures of Woodman stand in classical sculptural postures to make up the pillars that support the structure. In one of her films, she directly alludes to this piece. The camera shows someone turning pages of a book of classical sculpture stopping at a female sculptural nude in controposto. The camera zooms out to show a life size photograph of a female form being held up by Woodman. The film then cuts between the photo and the figure. The film ends with

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white liquid being splashed onto the her right shoulder and flowing down her body. This film provides background to the photograph, allowing the viewer to see the original images and get a direct insight into Woodman's photographic practice. The direct inspirations for her work become clear.

The few films that she left behind give the viewer a perspective into what was happening behind her photographs. Rather than reflecting her mental state, they were carefully orchestrated to fit within her aesthetics. Therefore, they are not reliable instruments for interpreting her biography. Instead they are time capsules that link the performance of the intimate communication between Woodman and her camera. The films inform the photographs almost seamlessly as each plays off of the other. While Woodman did not achieve the same effects in her films as she did in her photographs, I'm sure her films would have evolved if she had lived. The films provide a more humanizing aspect to her work and one that more closely connects her to the audience. In the films, she smiles, moves, and laughs, no longer a blurry angelic being but rather a young woman learning to express herself. Although her filmmaking may not have reached its zenith, it provides invaluable information about her creative process but not her biography.

I have no doubt that Woodman's work will continue to be examined and reinterpreted for many years to come. In the film *The Woodmans*,²³ Sloan Rakin states that the happiest part of Woodman's life was when she was making photographs. In light of this observation, searching for clues about Woodman's

²³ *The Woodmans*. Dir. C. S. Willis. Perf. Betty, George, Charlie, and Francesca Woodman. Lorber Films Release, 2010. Film.

suicide in her photographs is misguided as is the canonization of her as purely a feminist artist. She left behind only one hour of film and 800 photographic negatives. Rather than placing it in the shadow of the artist's tragic end or in a category with borders, these works should be celebrated for their own particular genius, their masterful use of dissimulation to create a world drawn from the peripheral life.

Afterword

Francesca Woodman's work has come to mean something more to me than I can sum up in words. It has inspired a drive and ambition in me that I had never imagined, and the work that I have created during the past year in an attempt to embody Woodman's work has challenged me in ways I had not expected. I am exhausted from the journey but happily fulfilled by the photographs I have made. Francesca has confirmed a belief in myself as an artist that has been ever present but not fully realized until now. I can finally say with confidence: I have been an artist, I am an artist, I will always be an artist.

-Charlie

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Image list

San Galgano 25, Watts, Silver Gelatin Print, 2012, 11 x 11 inches

Tired, Watts, Silver Gelatin Print, 2012, 11 x 11 inches

Dissimulation, Watts, Silver Gelatin Print, 2012, 11 x 14 inches

Fictitious Fixation, Watts, Silver Gelatin Print, 2012, 11 x 11 inches

Napping in La Specola, Watts, Silver Gelatin Print, 2012, 11 x 11 inches

Mother, son, Watts, Silver Gelatin Print, 2012, 11 x 11 inches

San Galgano 15, Watts, Silver Gelatin Print, 2012, 11 x 11 inches

Untitled, Woodman, Rome, Italy, 1979

Sister Flight, Watts, Silver Gelatin Print, 2012, 11 x 11 inches

Untitled 303, Watts, Silver Gelatin Print, 2012, 11 x 11 inches

Untitled, Woodman, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976

Untitled, Woodman, Providence, Rhode Island, 1978.

Space2, Woodman, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976

Untitled, Providence, Rhode Island, 1978

Untitled, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-78