

# Francesca Woodman

## *On Being an Angel*

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Throughout her career, the young American photographer Francesca Woodman revisited the theme of angels. In *On Being an Angel* (1976), she is seen bending backward as light falls on her white body. A black umbrella is in the distance. The following year she made a new version – an image with a darker mood in which she shows her face. Woodman developed the angel motif during a visit to Rome, where she photographed herself in a large, abandoned building. In these images, she is wearing a white petticoat, but her chest is bare. White pieces of cloth in the background are like wings. She called these photographs *From Angel series* (1977) and *From a series on Angels* (1977). There are also a number of pictures simply called *Angels* (1977–78), and among them is one where again she is bending backward, but this time in front of a graffitied wall. These angels are but a few examples of Francesca Woodman’s practice of staging her body and her face. In the few intense years before her far too premature passing, she created a collection of fascinating photographs. Her body of work has been the subject of many in-depth studies and large exhibitions, and her photography has inspired generations of artists and photographers around the world.

Francesca Woodman was born into a family of artists in Denver, Colorado, on April 3, 1958. Her mother, Betty, was a sculptor, her father, George, a painter and photographer, and her brother, Charlie, was a video artist. The family often traveled to Italy and lived in Florence for a year between 1965 and 1966. Then they returned home to Boulder, Colorado, and Francesca continued her schooling. In 1968 her parents bought a farmhouse outside of Florence in Antella, and there they would spend their summers. Italy and its language, culture, and art history were frequent sources of inspiration for Francesca Woodman.

Woodman started taking pictures as a teenager and had attended a few art courses before she moved to Providence to study at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in 1975. The college is among the oldest art schools in the United States, and the well-known photographer Aaron Siskind was one of her teachers. While at college, she lived in her studio in an industrial

area where many of her pictures from that time were created. Between 1977 and 1978 Francesca Woodman spent a year in Rome as part of the school's honors program. In the fall of 1978, she earned her BFA and exhibited the series *Swan Song* (1978) at the graduate show in RISD's Woods-Gerry Gallery.

Months later, in January 1979, Woodman moved to New York, where she lived at various addresses while looking for work. She spent the summer together with her boyfriend, Benjamin Moore, in Stanwood, Washington. Over the course of the next year, she exhibited her work at a number of smaller galleries and experimented with new techniques such as large-format diazotypes, and color images. She was a fellow at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, in the summer of 1980. There, she worked on a series of images exploring the relationship between nature and her body, among other projects. In early 1981, her artist's book *Some Disordered Interior Geometries* was published by Synapse Press in Philadelphia. This was one of seven notebooks (including photographs that were glued in) that she worked with from 1976 onwards. Francesca Woodman took her own life on January 19, 1981.

Francesca Woodman's work is usually split into five periods: the early works, her years at RISD, in Italy, at the MacDowell Colony, and finally her time in New York from 1979 until her death. Analysis of her work is often linked to her biography and chronology. During her active years, Woodman produced thousands of images. Around eight hundred photographs are preserved by The Estate of Francesca Woodman in New York. She scrawled words, short sentences, or quotations on many of her prints, and these jottings have since given those pieces their titles. Woodman sometimes wrote letters on her photographs and mailed them to family and friends. Collections of her letters have been published, and along with her notes these inform most of what we know about her processes and ideas. In addition to her parents, close friends, former classmates, and teachers, people who met or lived with her have been important sources of information. Because she gave away or sent off many of her photographs, it's difficult to know exactly how many of Francesca Woodman's vintage prints have been preserved. Significant collections of her photographs can be found at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, Tate Modern in London, and the Sammlung Verbund in Vienna, for example.

This exhibition is comprised of one hundred and two photographs and one video by Francesca Woodman, and selections from most of her thematic groups and series are represented. She often obscured her subject by placing her models behind furniture and other interior design elements

or by blurring the image. Her themes are intimate – a feeling that is heightened by the small format of many of her images. Woodman often worked in unusual environments, such as derelict buildings, and she liked to make use of mirrors and glass, which creates a surreal and sometimes claustrophobic mood. In *Space<sup>2</sup>* (1976), she used a large glass vitrine, the kind you find in museums; inside it, a seated person presses her body against the glass. In another version, Woodman has placed the skeleton of an animal in the case, and her face appears behind it. This theme is further developed in *From Space<sup>2</sup>* (1976), which shows her covered by the wallpaper in the room.

The notion of transformation also emerges in one of Woodman's strongest and eeriest series, *House*, from 1976, in which she gradually disappears into the walls, the torn wallpaper, the open fireplace, and other interior elements. And in the *Polka Dots* series (1976) the model, Francesca Woodman, becomes a part of the wall or the house. In a self-portrait from 1976, she squats in the corner of her studio. She wears a wrinkled dress (or perhaps it's a silk robe) and meets our gaze. Light spills through the large windows. This slightly overexposed picture is beautiful and mysterious. It's as if she could vanish from the room, out of the picture, at any given second. This idea of transformation is expanded upon in a work from the summer of 1980 – her arms are covered in bark, and she is becoming part of the tree and of nature. There is an allusion here to Daphne: a nymph in Greek mythology who was transformed into a laurel tree to escape Apollo's amorous pursuit of her. In this and other images from the MacDowell Colony, Woodman experimented with a technique that involved placing several negatives on the photographic paper at once, like a contact sheet, thereby creating a sort of collage.

Francesca Woodman's consistent use of the female form as a starting point for her photographs – as a surface on which we can project our gazes and desires – has inspired feminist interpretations and attempts to locate her in that tradition. One of the most important critical contributions was made by the art historian and feminist Abigail Solomon-Godeau. Her text was published in Woodman's first exhibition catalog, from 1986. In a later study from 2014, Solomon-Godeau develops and comments on her first encounter with Woodman's photographs, but in the earlier text, she had already addressed the themes that would go on to be revisited by many other writers. Solomon-Godeau asserts that we can't know if Woodman had knowledge of or any relationship to contemporary feminist theories, but her preoccupation with the body, the dichotomy of subject–object, and female iconography encourage a feminist reading. Among a number of

insightful observations and analyses, she points out that Woodman's seemingly traditional nudes (with reference to art history) often include a detail that disrupts the composition and forces us to consider them more deeply. One example is *Untitled* (1979–80). A naked woman is lying across a Victorian sofa. On closer inspection, we see that she is wearing several garter belts. The extra stockings adorn the wall behind the sofa, inviting various interpretations. On the point of multiple meanings and complexity in Woodman's work, Solomon-Godeau references one photograph from *Three kinds of melon in four kinds of light series* (1976), and she provides one possible reading of it. Woodman has photographed a woman sitting at a table. The picture is cropped so we can only see her bare breasts and two halves of a melon on the table. The woman is holding a postcard featuring a painting of a melon in front of one of her breasts. Of course, comparing breasts to melons is a conventional metaphor. The graphic representation, the drawing, appears in several of Woodman's compositions and could be an expression of the patriarchal order in which women are carriers of meaning, rather than creators of meaning. This photograph is the last in a series of four. The woman in the picture was Woodman's neighbor in Providence, and we can tell that she is pregnant, which suggests that this in fact could be what Woodman is referring to in the title.

In *Charlie the Model* (1976–77), Francesca Woodman enlisted Charlie, who had worked for many years as a model at RISD. This series is one of the few that features a male figure. Charlie was photographed sitting or standing in a corner of the studio and with various objects: a piece of paper, a mirror, and a glass bowl. Eventually, the artist herself appears in the composition and they play in front of the camera. Finally, Charlie sits on the floor with a plate of glass pressed against his body, and everything takes a slightly unexpected turn when we read what Woodman wrote on the photograph that Charlie had a heart attack. The mirror and the plate of glass are motifs that also appear in several other series.

In Woodman's active years in the late 1970s and early 1980s, photography was in a period of transition. Many photographers who had worked with classic black-and-white photography were experimenting with other forms and were pushing the documentary tradition toward more subjective and surrealist projects. The United States paved the way in this development, and when many curators, gallerists, editors, and critics started working more professionally with photography, it was institutionalized. This shift in the field eventually spread to Europe. Major photographic exhibitions were held at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, featuring artists such as

Diane Arbus, Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander, and William Eggleston, all of whom were influential to many younger photographers and to the articulation of the medium's aesthetic potential. *New Topographics. Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* (1975) was another significant exhibition. It was held at the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House in Rochester and one of the featured artists was Lewis Baltz. Other notable photographers in the new American wave were personalities as diverse as Ralph Gibson, Kenneth Josephson, Robert Mapplethorpe, Duane Michals, Melissa Shook, Arthur Tress, and Jerry Uelsmann. But it was also then, from 1977 forward, that Cindy Sherman started working on her break-out series *Untitled Film Stills*. Sherman is an artist of the post-modern generation, and it is not known if Woodman had been aware of the so-called Pictures Generation. Duane Michals was one of the photographers who we know interested Woodman. Michals stood for a more conceptual approach to the creation of images, investigating the intangibles of human existence in his picture-stories. His photographs often feature hand-written, poetic texts with dictums on death, dreams, homosexuality, and the cosmos.

Francesca Woodman used this approach in three pictures from her university days in Providence, for instance. Continuing the house series, one image shows her squatting, turned toward a wall, and covered with wallpaper. On the picture are the words: "Then at one point I did not need to translate the notes; they went directly to my hands." Woodman had played the piano during her childhood. Music, or rather practicing playing music, is a theme that returns in a 1977 image of a woman wearing a loose black dress, likely the artist herself. The image is cropped at the neck. She holds a fruit knife in her right hand. The low neckline exposes one breast, bleeding photographs in the form of strips of contact sheets. At the bottom, Woodman has written "I could no longer play I could not play by instinct." In another portrait, she poses with her hand under her breast, as if to present it, and there it says: "And I had forgotten how to read music." In an essay from 1998, her friend Sloan Rankin states that the quotation is taken from a longer poem that Woodman had written in their first year of college. In seven stanzas, she describes her worry about and her experiences of playing. Writing and drawing seem to have been a way for her to work things through and to remember, testing ideas and notions before embarking on photographic projects.

Woodman's aesthetic world clearly references Surrealism, and this aspect has been addressed in many readings of her work. There are similar-

ities in style to surrealist photography, such as Woodman's frequent use of mirrors, doubles, shadows, gloves, hands, swans, fish, eels, masks, and sexual symbols. Photographers such as Hans Bellmer, Claude Cahun, and Man Ray spring to mind. During her residency in Rome, Woodman connected with the owners of the Libreria Maldoror – a bookshop specialized in historical avant-garde and surrealist literature, as well as a meeting place for artists, which she'd visit on her way from her apartment in Rome to the school in the Palazzo Cenci. There, she found old notebooks from the 1930s, anonymous postcards and other items that she would later use in her work. She read André Breton's 1928 novel, *Nadja*, and other surrealist texts. They also had a gallery in the basement for smaller exhibitions, and Woodman exhibited her photographs there in March 1978. During this period she also worked on the angel series, a collection of still lifes featuring birds, and *Self-deceit* (1978): a series of seven photographs showing an interplay between a mirror and her naked body in which they become one with each other and the room's stark walls and floors.

There's a kind of movement in many of Francesca Woodman's photographs. She often worked with series, and blurriness was one way of creating a sense of time and motion in still images. In *Untitled* (1977–78), she is shown mid-jump; it's as if she's lifting herself up from the floor by her hair. Her many angel images also suggest movement and the ability to fly. It's only a small leap from these images to actual moving pictures, and while at RISD, Woodman also attended lectures at the fairly new video course at the school. *Selected Video Works* (1976–78), edited in 2004 and published by The Estate of Francesca Woodman, is a collection of six short videos. In the 2011 catalog, Jennifer Blessing conducts a deep analysis of these works and writes about how seeing the first video in particular is like watching one of Woodman's photographs come to life. In this film, Francesca Woodman stands in the nude behind a large sheet of paper and slowly writes her name on it. Again, she uses her body and lets it occupy the room and the frame through the camera. Seeing her move and hearing her voice is an incredibly emotional experience – as viewers, this piece offers us a proximity to her process that is different to what can be sensed through her still images. A number of themes in these videos overlap with those explored in her photographs: sculptures and bodies, corners of rooms, traces and silhouettes, along with masks on or off of the artist's face.

When Francesca Woodman moved to New York, she had several short-term jobs as a secretary, a photographer's assistant, and a model.

She needed to find a way to support herself and tried fashion photography. One of her role models was the American fashion photographer Deborah Turbeville, who is renowned for her intimate and romantic style. Among these works are some of Woodman's rare color photographs – a series of eight that shifts from mint green to pale pink to cream and orange. Through her job as an assistant, Woodman met several models she would later use in her own explorations of the genre. Her images, however, were never published in fashion magazines. There are other studies from this time in which she used models, clothing, jewelry, and mirrors, elements that recall props in her fashion photography, but which are more at home in her artistic projects. This fascinating overlap between Woodman's commercial and creative projects shows how her ideas for images moved across her practice.

In the spring of 1980 Francesca Woodman started working on *Blueprint for a Temple*. It could be said that she was recreating the facade of a Greek temple using models draped in tunics similar to caryatids. The series began with a collection of details from bathrooms in New York, reminiscent of classical motifs. From having worked on a smaller scale, she had now moved on to truly large formats, some several meters in size. These pictures are often categorized as blueprints, referring to a method of reproduction most frequently used for architectural plans. This is a contact print process on photosensitive paper; white lines on a blue background distinguish the finished product. (Other types of paper produced different background colors.) The technique Woodman used was diazotypy: a dry photographic process on paper coated with diazonium compounds, which are sensitive to blue and UV light and developed by ammonia vapour. Woodman experimented with this technique. She created the largest of these images by hanging a long sheet of photosensitive diazo paper on the wall of a dark-room. A photographic slide was projected onto the paper from a slide projector, often for hours. The paper was then developed in a diazo processor at a company that made commercial reproductions of architectural plans. The result was a set of magnificent works in blue, purple, and sepia tones. In the long and narrow *Zig Zag Study* (1980), Woodman brought together several motifs, such as feet, legs, arms, and plants, piecing them together to create a zigzag pattern. Formal aspects take prominence in several of these works. *Head on Rug* (1980), a brown-toned image in three parts, shows a woman lying in the center of an oriental rug. In the right-hand field, a white lily has been placed next to the floral rug, creating an interplay between perspective and the planes of the image.

The first major retrospective of Francesca Woodman's work was produced in 1986 by Ann Gabhart in collaboration with Rosalind Krauss for the Wellesley College Museum. It then toured a number of museums at American universities. Her first European exhibition was held in 1992 by Shedhalle in Zurich and the Westfälischer Kunstverein in Münster and was shown in the spring of 1993 at The Finnish Museum of Photography, in the Cable Factory in Helsinki. On its way there, it stopped for two months at Kulturhuset in Stockholm. The critic Lars O Ericsson wrote in *Dagens Nyheter* that the exhibition may have been the most important one to see in the capital at the time. To date, at least fifty separate exhibitions of Woodman's photography have been held in Europe and the United States.

Francesca Woodman's youth is mentioned in nearly every text about her, and in the retelling of nearly every memory. How could so young a person create such strong and complex images? She is described as unusually talented and as a prodigy. Those who met her testify to her as a young woman who was always working and looking for subjects and material for her photographs. She often found clever and witty solutions to her images. Though a large part of her oeuvre is comprised of work from her time at college in Providence, we are engaging with extremely mature artistry. To examine Francesca Woodman's aesthetic oeuvre is a challenge and an adventure. Her images reference history and the history of photography, but they also reflect their time while unlocking new interpretations. She is deeply personal, and so her themes become universal. All of this is what *On Being an Angel* is about.