

Weekends were made for this: a review of Nan Goldin's, *Weekend Plans*.

PREFACE:

As a naïve 20 year old on the brink of confronting my sexuality, I stumbled upon *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. From the outset it arrested my curiosity and catapulted me into its world of hedonism and eroticism with its assaulting images. Uncensored portraits of couples fucking; men and women masturbating; unselfconscious portraits of naked women (not sexualised fictions created by men, but *real* women as seen by a woman) and ultimately for me, portraits of same sex couples embracing openly and unapologetically. This brief encounter became a twenty year love affair with Nan Goldin's work. In time, my understanding of it has evolved but the role that it played in helping me come to terms with my sexuality is undeniable.

INTRODUCTION:

In June 2017, IMMA played host to two companion exhibitions, *Weekend Plans* by Nan Goldin and *93% STARDUST* by Vivienne Dick. Goldin and Dick have been long-term friends and both played integral roles within the "No Wave" art movement of New York in the 70s and 80s. Dick, an avant-garde filmmaker, originally hails from Donegal. She and Goldin became friends whilst living in New York and

frequently appeared within each other's work. Dick's documentary style films echo Goldin's self-reflexive, diaristic portraiture, both supporting a strong feminist ethos.

Weekend Plans focuses on three main elements of Goldin's oeuvre; firstly a retrospective look at *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*; secondly a display of Goldin's recent painting work; and thirdly, to tie in with Dick's exhibition, a review of her work produced in Ireland and around Dick.



Fig. 1: *Weekend Plans*, Installation View, IMMA, Dublin, 2017

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FIRST IMPRESSIONS:

I was immediately enraptured by the faint atmospheric melodies of the slideshow as they carried through the gallery air. The navy walls of the entrance corridor generated a sombre mood, reminiscent of that of Goldin's work.

The first image to greet me was the all too familiar, *Nan and Brian in bed, New York, 1983*. It's golden tones contrasted sharply against the darkened wall, coupled with its dibond mount, it appeared to almost glow, a far cry from the sun bleached cover of my book. At this scale, the portrait of Brian hanging on the wall within the photograph, became more evident. His outward stare was fixating, transforming him from the subject of the gaze to the gazer, I found this confrontational.

The cold blue hues of the self-portrait, *Nan after being battered, 1984*, are disrupted by her rouge red lipstick mirroring her bloodshot eye. Colour has always featured strongly in Goldin's work but it has rarely been more powerfully played upon than in this opening sequence. Once again the scale of the work forced me to be drawn in. My eyes met Nan's, challenging me to own her experience. This unsettling imposition is lost in the book as it becomes too easy to turn the page; an escape not offered here in the gallery.

The gap in the hanging between these two images and the next, allowed me a moment's breath before confronting me with Goldin's self-portrait in a

semi-seductive pose wearing a dominatrix outfit. I guiltily found myself questioning the circumstances of her beating in the previous image, as she almost appeared to insinuate her own culpability. All of a sudden I became acutely aware of the invigilator sitting behind me, advising a family that, "some images may not be suitable for younger audiences".

SLIDESHOW:

One of the features of the exhibition that I had most looked forward to was the slideshow. Before its publication in 1985, Goldin used to put on slideshows of *The Ballad* in bars around New York. The images were carefully curated to a soundtrack compiled by Goldin. The songs formed a narration for the work, reflecting the images but more importantly, dictating the tone in which they should be appreciated.

As the volume of the music intensified, the closer I got to the projection room, so too did my excitement. I began to imagine myself entering a dingy New York bar in the mid 80s, the only things missing were drugs, alcohol and a cloud of cigarette smoke but the images provided these in abundance. The slideshow ran for a hefty 45 minutes. At first, the repetition of similar images felt overwhelming, given how condensed they were for publication. I sensed this was off-putting to other viewers as visitors entered and left quickly. Once I settled, time evaporated and the repetition proved rewarding, allowing me to draw comparisons within the images as

chapters evolved to the musical narration. It eventually became so consuming that I left feeling as though I were occupying some strange hybrid space between 80s New York and 2017 Dublin.

PAINTINGS:

Goldin's paintings, created within the past two years, are even darker than her photography. Their surreal nature is in stark contrast to her documentary photography, however their small size creates an intimacy that reads in a similar diaristic fashion. My initial reaction was rather negative, even one of repulsion; I felt that they were angry and violent. However in hindsight, I found myself questioning how closely they related to her photography. I concluded that they could be read as a direct response to her self-professed rationale for photography, as a means of remembering due to her sister's violent suicide (Goldin, 1986); where photography failed her, she appears to have found a new form of remembering, through painting.



Fig. 2: Vivienne at her mother's grave, Killybegs, Ireland, 1979

©Nan Goldin

IRELAND:

True to her portraiture, the most striking feature of Goldin's Irish landscapes is her characteristic use of light and colour. Luminescent cloud linings, lush green hillsides and the shimmering blues and greys of the wild Atlantic, served as an introduction to the third section of the exhibition; Ireland and Vivienne Dick.

Goldin's catalogue surrounding Dick is both extensive and intimate. Through her images I felt there was a real and rare insight into the artist, her family and even into

her upbringing. I could feel Dick's vulnerability in mourning the loss of her mother and through her own experiences of motherhood. I found Goldin's candid honesty refreshing and I left feeling as though I'd somehow shared in these friends' lives. A familiar sense that I have always had after looking at Goldin's work. I was relieved to experience it once again after seeing the images in full-scale for the first time.

Bibliography

Goldin, N. (1986) *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. New York: Aperture Foundation, Inc.

Image References

Fig. 1: *Weekend Plans*, Instillation View, IMMA, Dublin, 2017, Photograph by Denis Mortell. Available at:

<https://immablog.org/2017/10/11/gallery-voices-the-underbelly-of-new-york/>

(Accessed on 21st December 2017)

Fig. 2: Vivienne at her mother's grave, Killybegs, Ireland, 1979, Photograph by Nan Goldin. Available at:

<https://darrencampion.com/2017/08/23/nan-goldin-weekend-plans/#jp-carousel-719>

(Accessed on 21st December 2017)