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Exposing the Body, Baring the Soul

By KEN JOHNSON

[Francesca Woodman](#), the photographer who took her own life at 22 in 1981, is as close to a true saint as the putatively secular world of contemporary art can claim. The dreamy, formally playful and disarmingly erotic pictures Woodman made — mostly of herself partly unclothed or naked — project a self surrendering unreservedly to the spirit of art. When viewing the approximately 120 pieces in “Francesca Woodman,” a survey of her career at the Guggenheim Museum, it is hard to shake off the admittedly absurd notion that she was too purely an artist for this muddy world.

She was not the most original photographer of her time. Lots of other artists were toying with photography in nondocumentary ways — [Duane Michals](#) and William Wegman, for example — and many were using their own bodies as subject matter in photographs, including [Ana Mendieta](#) and Bruce Nauman. In the second half of the 1970s, Cindy Sherman was beginning to produce the photographs of herself in stereotypical guises that would make her a major star.

But Woodman’s borderline kitschy style, a heated mix of Victorian gothic, Surrealism and [19th-century spirit photography](#), was a throwback. Her admiration for the neo-Pictorialism of the fashion photographer [Deborah Turbeville](#) shows in the many lushly shadowed and textured scenes Woodman shot in an abandoned house in Providence, R.I., where her own figure often blurs into a ghostly, dematerialized form. The small, squarish format of most of her prints enhances the look of antiquity.

She was beautiful (though not superhumanly so) and used her own physique for seductive effect. But it would be wrong to write her off as just a pretty girl capitalizing on her own physical charm. Woodman had a couple of less tangible things going for her: terrific charisma — she could have been an actress — and really urgent issues to grapple with.

From first to last, her photographs play out a high-low struggle between innocence and experience, the spiritual and the carnal and the angelic and the demonic. She could be

comical, as in an image from 1976 in which she sits on a low bench, wearing nothing but white knee socks and black Chinese slippers and sniffs a blossom of a tall, potted lily, a symbol of Christian purity. (Many pictures in the show were made in response to class assignments at the Rhode Island School of Design, where she was enrolled from 1975-78, but there is nothing studentlike about them.)

Mostly the mood tends to melodrama and tragedy. In one photograph from a series called "Space2" she appears behind a glass vitrine that displays a big, scary animal skull. She looks lost in ecstatic reverie, like a figure in a Baroque painting, while the image of terror and death fills the foreground.

In a vertiginous picture called "On Being an Angel," her glowing, overexposed shoulders and chest and the lower half of her open-mouthed face are framed upside down in the lower half of the image; she seems to be turning into light and starting to soar. Beyond, across the empty room, a folded-up black umbrella leans ominously against a wall.

The many images in which she appears to merge into walls or is caught in blurry motion also suggest an urge to dematerialize into pure spirit. In lots of others, though, parts of her body are encrusted with dirt or slathered by paint and other liquids. She oscillates between the heavenly and the earthly.

Men appear infrequently in Woodman's imagery, but an unusually large and corpulent specimen cavorts like a satyr in a series called "Charlie the Model." In one picture he kneels naked next to a mirror while Woodman stands, also nude, behind him. She is blurred, as if she were violently recoiling from him. Among her most disturbing pictures, these convey a terrible anxiety about unbridled male sensuality, as if it might drag her down to hellish depths.

Woodman came by the religiosity in her work honestly, but not in the obvious way. Her mother, the ceramicist Betty Woodman, is Jewish; her father, the painter George Woodman, of Protestant heritage; but the real family religion was art. This was painfully revealed in "[The Woodmans](#)," the documentary film released last year. But you need not have seen the movie to get that art was a morally as well as spiritually demanding calling for Francesca, one that she pursued with all the idealism and self-doubt of a hopelessly romantic teenager. An image she made during a year abroad in Rome is emblematic. Wearing a short dress, she — or possibly a model — hangs by her fingers from the edge of a door frame like Jesus crucified.

When Woodman killed herself, hardly anyone beyond her family, friends, classmates and teachers knew about the phenomenal body of work she had produced. About a year later, Ann Gabhart, the director of the Wellesley Art Museum (now the Davis Museum at Wellesley College) saw some of her prints hanging in the family home in Boulder, Colo., and she was able to see more in New York some time after that. Struck by what she saw as the relevance of Woodman's art to the lives of the young women at Wellesley College, Ms. Gabhart resolved to organize an exhibition and enlisted the influential critics Abigail Solomon-Godeau and Rosalind Krauss to write catalog essays. Opening in 1986, the show was a kind of resurrection for Woodman. A cult was born.

In an exceptionally informative catalog essay for the present exhibition (organized by Corey Keller, a curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, where it opened last November), the art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson surveys the critical and art historical literature that has proliferated around Woodman's oeuvre. Writers have parsed it from every possible angle, from feminist to formalist. Now it is hard to separate her work from that swollen discourse and from Woodman's easy-to-mythologize brief life. And there is the commercial dimension too: the estate is represented by the prestigious, high-end [Marian Goodman Gallery](#).

But it is worth trying to see what Woodman did on her own terms. You might think of it as a girl's visual equivalent of "Catcher in the Rye." It may be sentimental, overwrought, precious and narcissistic, but for all that, it remains a poignant record of adolescent joy, fear, ambition and angst. It was not only her body that she exposed — she bared her soul too, and that is a rare and beautiful thing.

"Francesca Woodman" runs through June 13 at the Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, at 89th Street; (212) 423-3500, guggenheim.org.