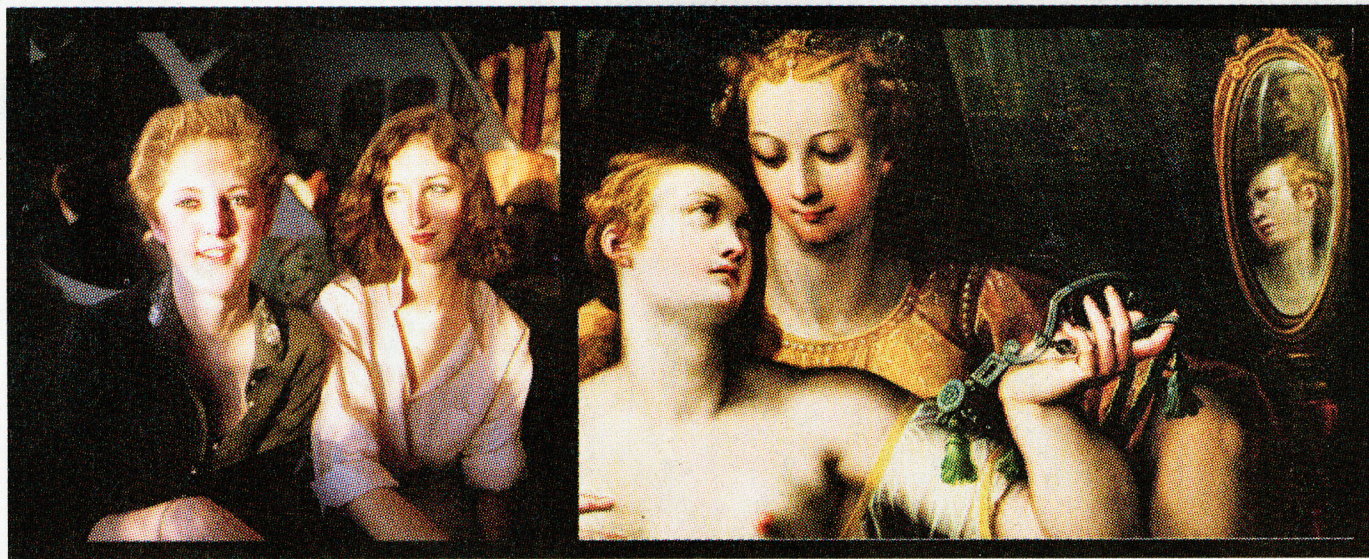


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A Voyeur Makes Herself at Home in the Louvre



NAN GOLDIN, COURTESY OF MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

Nan Goldin: Scopophilia A photo is juxtaposed with a 16th-century van der Straet at Matthew Marks Gallery.

It's a rare artist who gets to wander barefoot through the Louvre during its off hours, photographing anything she likes, as Nan Goldin did last year. It's a rarer one who can see her own life and art reflected in those palatial galleries, as Ms. Goldin clearly has.

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We know this because those photographs became part of a haunting but uneven installation, "Scopophilia," that had its premiere at the Louvre last winter and is now at the Matthew Marks Gallery in Chelsea. It takes the form of a 25-minute slide show, juxtaposing images from decades of Ms. Goldin's oeuvre with her recent shots of artworks in the Louvre.

Also on view are photographs that draw similar parallels: between, say, the pair of allegorical figures in Jan van der Straet's 16th-century painting "Vanity, Modesty and Death" and Ms. Goldin's

shot of two sisters, or between the saucy youth in a Bronzino portrait and the full-lipped young subject of Ms. Goldin's "Jack, Paris" (2010).

With undeniable hubris Ms. Goldin brings the urgent, unbearable intimacy of her best work, "The Ballad of Sexual Dependency," to bear on the Louvre. Again and again her camera settles on sculptures and paintings of figures in desperate clinches, as in an 1855 canvas by Ary Scheffer showing Paolo and Francesca in hell, and sexually ambiguous characters like the sleeping hermaphrodite in a Roman marble.

Your first impression is that Ms. Goldin can make even the stuffiest academic exercises look punkish and sexy. But after spending some time in the show you may find that her own work looks cloistered and salonlike.

"Scopophilia" means "love of looking," though

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it usually has sexual connotations. Ms. Goldin seems to use the term as shorthand for a kind of Pygmalion complex. As she explains in the news release: "Desire awoken by images is the project's true starting point. It is about the idea of taking a picture of a sculpture or a painting in an attempt to bring it to life."

In a voice-over to the slide installation she summarizes that myth as images flash by: a marble statue from the Louvre, of Pygmalion kneeling before his Galatea, followed by Ms. Goldin's shots of a lissome, dark-haired beauty, — a former lover of Ms. Goldin's — in various states of undress.

Over a dirgelike classical soundtrack (composed by Alain Mahé for piano, cello and voice) she murmurs about other mythological figures: Narcissus (the handsome boy who pined for his own image), Tiresias (the seer who experienced a sex change), and Cupid and Psyche (lovers too gorgeous for their own good.). All have their equivalents in Ms. Goldin's preening, coupling, gender-bending portrait subjects (generally her friends, family members or intimates).

Many of the photographs in the slide show also appear as prints in the gallery. But here Ms. Goldin tones down the myth, responding to more specific features of the works.

One arrangement centers on Courbet's "Origin of the World," as seen in Ms. Goldin's sequential photographs. Her version turns a famously pornographic painting of a vulva into an extended burlesque, zooming in on peripheral details before pulling back to reveal the whole picture.

Another installation takes the form of a portrait gallery, with curved, mustard-yellow walls. Here the men and women in paintings by Rembrandt, Dürer and others meet their Goldin doppelgängers.

Rembrandt's son Titus and Ms. Goldin's "Simon," for instance, share a cleft chin and alert manner, and a pouty brunette named Amanda is a dead ringer for the orphan girl in a Delacroix.

In another artist's hands such a room might seem preposterously self-indulgent. But Ms. Goldin pulls it off, just barely, because her desire to preserve the lives and memories of those close to her is so palpable. It almost seems as if she is trying to protect her subjects by appointing each one of them a guardian angel from within the Louvre.

Less interesting are the grids of images that explore specific visual themes: long, flowing tresses, veils and odalisques, to name a few. They look like the pages called up by Internet searches, though limited to just two sources (Ms. Goldin and the Louvre).

These works point to another problem with "Scopophilia": the deadly combination of art about art and a format, the slide show, that already has overtones of Art History 101. Works like "The Ballad of Sexual Dependency" succeed in part because they play against that didactic type.

Ms. Goldin perhaps might have told us less about art we already know (hers and others') and more about her all-access experience in the museum. In the slide installation she drops a couple of tantalizing hints. At one point you can hear a snippet of her talking to someone, or herself, in the galleries: "The one with the hair — oh my God, oh my God, oh my God, who is she?" And later she speaks of her special chemistry with the art: "Between them and me: telepathic exchanges, divination."

"Nan Goldin: Scopophilia" is on view through Dec. 23 at the Matthew Marks Gallery, 522 West 22nd Street, Chelsea; (212) 243-0200, matthewmarks.com.