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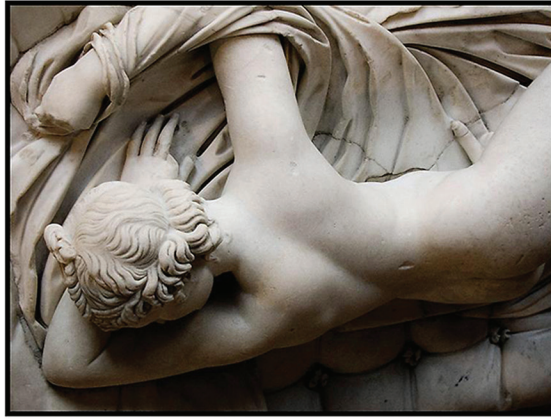
On Nan Goldin's Scopophilia



Brisk, spirited classical music pours through Nan Goldin's Scopophilia at Matthew Marks gallery. It's reverberations are loud as you enter the gallery and, at first, off-putting: the gilded sound meets you suddenly and without warning. Then as you grow used to it and make your way through the generous three-section space, the noise disintegrates as if it is made of powder: it becomes less concentrated but you can still hear it throughout the gallery and it flavors your engagement with Goldin's photographs.

The word Scopophilia is derived from the Greek notion of gaining pleasure from looking at something. The show combines works from Goldin's personal archive (some of the 400 plus images are quickly recognizable while others have been kept from the public eye until now) with her latest body of work: a series of photographs of paintings and sculptures, taken at and commissioned by the Louvre Museum. Goldin and her camera were bestowed with the formidable assignment of having free-rein in the Louvre for a chain of Tuesdays, when the museum is closed to the public. After breaking through her initial and very understandable apprehension, Goldin was able to treat the human bodies in the Louvre just as she has the human bodies within her own past and work. And so she established very personal, immediate, sensual, and often obsessive relationships with some of the solitary and coupled figures in the Louvre. The commissioned project aptly parallels Goldin's mistrust and disinterest in the contemporary art market: the opportunity to photograph images in the Louvre is a petri-dish for the growth of Goldin's desire to capture what she conceives of as the much-needed return to the more classical fundamentals of artistic expression.

Upon entering Matthew Marks you become aware of the juxtaposition between classical works and their position in and absence from the new(er) art space, but this is more subtle than one may imagine. The physical space of Matthew Marks gallery obviously looks and feels nothing like the Louvre. I can remember becoming physically exhausted almost as soon as I walked into The Louvre, I felt an overwhelming need to surrender to the museum's thick, majestic grandness. Matthew Marks, in comparison, feels ventilated and many shades lighter. One of the rooms in Matthew Marks is yellow and cylindrical, reminding me of the very fact that I was in fact in Chelsea. The works in this yellow room, stacks of Goldin's more "formal" portraits that have been paired with- by color, aura, and subject's age and gender- cropped images of portraits from the Louvre felt dignified and courtly.



Young Hermaphrodite Sleeping, Le Louvre. 2010

By displaying the Louvre images alongside her older snapshots, Goldin is able to demonstrate the indistinguishable and very humanistic qualities of all of the subjects. She eradicates the conflict and contrast between old and new, different mediums (paint vs. photography), and opposing techniques (formality vs. nonchalance). What you are left to focus on, then, is the trembling feeling of longing. The historical relevance of a highbrow painting becomes trumped by the paleness of the light that pours across a girl's face as her ostensible boyfriend swathes her with the bedsheets and his weight. The Listerine-like rushes of water that ram against flashes of skin—be it the marble skin of sculptures or the skin of one of Goldin's paramours—takes attention away from the polarity (of opulence) between a waterfall image from the Louvre and a photograph taken in a shower.

In both sets of photographs, the depicted subjects and relationships feel stirringly familiar and wildly cherished. Goldin's conceptual emphasis is on the innate need for closeness to other people, and so she uses early morning sunlight, loosely-made beds, bathtubs filled with rushing, milky water and sleep-cloaked eyes to show the very delicate nature of real intimacy. Goldin documents the same subjects repeatedly, going about their days: wearing persimmon-colored lipstick and a sweater in leathery diner booths, stepping out of the shower, lying naked on a couch with unbrushed hair, and blowing out the candles on a lumbering, satiny birthday cake. As you see more and more images of Goldin's sure-eyed and typically willowy framed past partners, you begin to feel as though they are your own. Her subjects are undoubtedly alluring from the first glance, but they become more attractive as they gain familiarity. Goldin disentangles nudity and pornography, so that her portrayals are affectionate rather than voyeuristic. Even the most seemingly erotic images— a photograph of a woman's arched back, thrust shoulder blades, and bronzed thighs as they peak out from a nylon skirt and then dissipate into leather thigh-high boots on top of a rumpled Bowery Hotel duvet— feel tender and loving rather than explicit.

Goldin's images and the feelings they evoke— belonging, and adoration—are stirred together and planted inside of you as you are put in the dark of the slideshow room. This is where the gusts of music have been coming from and the walls of the packed room are lined with people that have clearly made themselves comfortable enough to watch the twenty-five-minute presentation several times. The room feels a bit like a planetarium, in that you are in awe of and learning from something that you have to experience alone. You cannot talk and you cannot see the people around you—a similar experience to what Goldin described as her longing, solitude, and silence filled Tuesdays in the Louvre. The slideshow, the medium that Goldin first used to share her photographs in the early 1970's, begins and ends with lavish, golden images of eyes and hands. Then, in this blanketing darkness, you see more of the vulnerable and fleshly images of Goldin's romantic past. Her photographs of couples and past girlfriends are never overly-sentimental or trite: they are blurred, warm, flawed embraces. The images are not of lips kissing so much as lips sucking and removing something poisonous out from their partners. These photographs are punctuated with and heightened by more of Goldin's images from The Louvre.

By merging the two sets of images, Goldin reminds you of the concreteness, the near-corporality, of your own personal history. The bodies and moments that have been captured, celebrated, and locked within the Louvre's renowned walls are woven from the very same needs, longings, and humanistic truths as our own existences.

Scopophilia by Nan Goldin is on exhibit at the Matthew Marks Gallery, 523 w. 24th Street NY, NY until December 23rd.

Top Image: Swan-like Embrace, Paris 2010

Malmed, Alexandra. "On Nan Goldin's Scopophilia," *Dossier (online)*. 24 November 2011.