

*"Words influence me a lot more than politics but I especially like allusive, indirect literary phrases + metaphors..."*

*I would like words to be to my photographs what the photographs are to the text in Andre Breton's 'Nadia.' He picks out the allusions and enigmatic details of some rather ordinary unmysterious snapshots and elaborates them into a story. I'd like my photographs to condense experience.*

*I use nudes partly in an ironic sense like classical painting nudes. I want my pictures to have a certain timeless, personal but allegorical quality like they do in say [Ingres history paintings, but I like the rough edge that photography gives a nude. I like watching the immediacy of a photograph struggle with 'timeless imagery' the way it does in say a pictorialist photograph."*

—Francesca Woodman, 1979

Francesca Woodman (1958–1981) was a photographer whose pathbreaking body of work ranged from intimately-scaled black and white prints, to artist's books combining photography with found materials, to monumental diazotype installations. She re-positioned the female body in relationship to space, architecture and art history through her use of allegory, metaphor and implied narrative. Woodman's photographs pushed the boundaries of the medium's unique possibilities and questioned its capacity for representation.

Woodman was born in Denver, Colorado to artists Betty Woodman and George Woodman. She grew up within a dynamic artistic and academic milieu centered around the University of Colorado, Boulder, where her parents both taught, as well as Tuscany, Italy, where her family spent much time during her childhood. Her immersion in Italian culture began at a young age: she attended second grade at a public school in Florence and her family bought a farmhouse in Antella, just outside the city, when she was 10 years old. In addition to spending most summers there, she traveled throughout Italy and Europe with her family exploring museums and architectural sites, including three trips to the Acropolis in Athens. Her early interest photography and literature prompted her to attend boarding school—first at Abbot Academy and then Phillips Academy, both in Andover, Massachusetts—where she met her influential teacher and mentor, photographer Wendy Snyder MacNeil, who encouraged her pursuits as an artist. Woodman returned to Boulder to finish high school, graduating a year early in 1975.

Woodman studied photography at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence from 1975–78. Having long considered herself an artist, Woodman quickly moved out of the student dorms and into her own rundown live-work studio at Pilgrim Mills, giving her more space and freedom to work. She began to incorporate her passion for Victorian literature and her knowledge of art history into her photographs. She cast herself and her friends in carefully planned compositions, using props and poses metaphorically. Across individual and serial imagery, her photographs suggested narratives and explored the body in relationship to space.

Beginning in the fall of 1977, Woodman spent a year living and working in Rome as part of RISD's European Honors Program. Her fluency in Italian and familiarity with the culture allowed her to move through the city with ease and meet young Italian artists whose interests overlapped with her own. On a walk to school at the Palazzo Cenci, she came across the Libreria Maldoror, a counter-cultural bookshop focused on Dada, Surrealism, and the avant-garde. It was there that she expanded her curiosity about the art and literature of the period, particularly through André Breton, and began to collect the tattered found notebooks in which she placed her photographic images to create her artist's books. She befriended the owners of the shop—Cristiano Casseti and Paolo Missigoi—and artists in their circle including the painter Sabina Mirri, as well as others who had set up studios at the formerly abandoned Pastificio Cerere. Through these friendships, Woodman was able to participate in the artistic life of Rome beyond her role as a student. She had her first European solo show at the Maldoror in March of 1978 and was included in a group exhibition at the prestigious Galleria Ugo Ferranti that summer. The year spent in Rome had a profound impact on Woodman's approach to her photographs. She began to consciously explore Italian art history and architecture in her work, posing figures as angels and fragmented sculptures in spaces rich with iconography. Woodman returned to Providence in the fall of 1978 for her final semester, carrying these lessons with her. For her thesis exhibition,



Woodman made a series of large-scale photographs for the first time. Installed at the ceiling and baseboards of RISD's Woods-Gerry Gallery, these works made tangible her engagement with space.

Woodman moved to the East Village of New York City in the winter of 1979 and began to make her way as a professional artist. She created photographs which increasingly referenced classical art and architecture and continued to develop the artist's books she began in Rome. Early in 1980, she began to explore the diazotype process used for architectural blueprints, which allowed her to continue working on a large-scale with limited resources. She created two monumental diazotype collages of classical Greek temples, posing her friends as caryatids and assembling the entablature and pediment from fragments of tiles and fixtures photographed in their bathrooms. She presented one of these works in *Beyond Photography 80* at the Alternative Museum in New York that spring. During the summer of 1980, Woodman was a fellow MacDowell Colony in rural New Hampshire, where she considered the figure in relation to the landscape. Upon returning to New York, she resumed her work with diazotypes, joining associative images, both figurative and structural, into complex compositions. Late in 1980, she completed her artist's book, *Some Disordered Interior Geometries*. Synapse Press published the first edition in early 1981, just after her death.

Woodman's body of work has been widely exhibited and critically acclaimed in the years that followed. In 1985, art historian Ann Gabhart, with Rosalind Krauss and Abigail Solomon Godeau, organized the first solo museum exhibition of Woodman's work, which was presented at the Wellesley College Museum, Massachusetts and Hunter College Art Gallery, New York, among others, in 1986. This foundational exhibition began a robust museum interest in Woodman's work that continues in the present. Other notable solo museum exhibitions include Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, 1989; Shedhalle, Zurich, 1992, and the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris, 1998, both of which toured throughout Europe; and a major U.S. retrospective at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2011 and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York in 2012. *Francesca Woodman: On Being an Angel* was organized by the Moderna Museet, Stockholm in 2015 and travelled to several European cities. In 2024, Woodman's photographs were presented with those by Julia Margaret Cameron at the National Portrait Gallery, London in a two-person exhibition which paired the work of two of the most influential women in the history of photography through thematic dialogues. Woodman's work has been included in a multitude of group exhibitions throughout the United States, Europe, and Latin America.

*Francesca Woodman*, a comprehensive monograph by Chris Townsend was published by Phaidon Press in 2006. In 2023, MACK published all eight of Woodman's unique artist's books in one comprehensive volume and special limited edition, making them accessible to a wide audience for the first time.

Woodman's photographs are included in major museum collections internationally including the Art Institute of Chicago, which owns the largest institutional collection of the artist's lifetime works. Woodman's two monumental temples are in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York and the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Additional museum collections include Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Guggenheim Museum, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Getty Museum, Los Angeles; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Detroit Institute of Arts; Columbus Museum of Art; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Tate Gallery, London; Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris; National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh; and Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris; and Moderna Museet, Stockholm.