

**NATIONAL GALLERY ON TOUR**

# **Nan Goldin: The ballad of sexual dependency**



# Kids on the run: the photography of Nan Goldin

Nearly four decades after *The ballad of sexual dependency* first exploded onto the international art scene, Nan Goldin is once again at the centre of contemporary culture. In her early seventies, amid major retrospectives, renewed critical attention and unprecedented institutional recognition, Goldin remains one of the most important photographers working today. *The ballad of sexual dependency* is the defining work of her life (in a career full of great work) and a defining artwork of the 1980s. It is also a hugely influential body of work, making a profound impact on so many photographers that she proceeded. Goldin took a genre of photography that was about intimacy and deep connection with her subjects to new heights and, in many ways, redefined it: *The ballad*, it has often been said, set the standard for this approach to photography by which all others must be judged.

Conceived and constructed to reveal an ultimate insider's perspective, *The ballad* offers an intimate, unredacted, messy, loving and deeply empathic portrayal of the lovers and friends who made up Goldin's queer, post-punk, edgy and alternative community. The people she photographed were her friends, her chosen family, her 'tribe', to use her word. Goldin's position has always been that there is no distinction between her life and her photography — as if her hand were a camera, the instant of photographing a moment of clarity and emotional connection. She used the camera to build relationships both romantic and platonic; her photographs were like a 'caress'. This valorisation of friendship in the work is still wondrous and radical, a rejection of the heteronormativity of the world she grew up in, with the mid-twentieth century orthodoxy of the nuclear family at its stultifying heart: at its core, *The ballad* is a searing indictment of such orthodoxy and its impact on people's lives, what happens when the wrong things are kept secret. It was the diary, she has said, that she let people read. Almost 40 years after its creation it still stands up as one of the most compelling and moving studies of a particular time and place — the images primarily revolving around the lives of the young people who ended up on the Bowery on the Lower East Side in the late 1970s and early 1980s — those kids, Goldin has remarked, on the run from America.

The camera played an important role in Goldin's life from an early age. The American photographer's story is a compelling and at times very moving one. Born into an intellectual Jewish family, she grew up in the suburbs of Boston. Her childhood was defined by the difficulties experienced by her oldest sibling, a beloved sister named Barbara. Chafing under the restrictions and expectations of how you behaved in 1950s America, Barbara was seen as uncontrollable. She was in and out of institutions through her teenage years and committed suicide when she was eighteen and Goldin eleven. Goldin's parents reacted with silence and denial in the face of the tragedy. Goldin left home and was in and out of foster homes, in complete breakdown, shut down. She arrived at Satya, a hippie community school at sixteen and found her first tribe, a chosen family, Suzanne Fletcher and David Armstrong and, with David, the drag queen community in Boston.

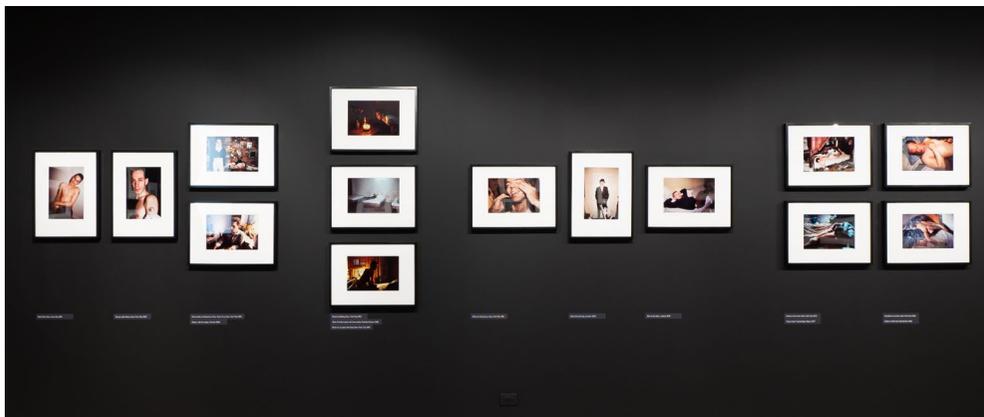


Installation view of *Nan Goldin: The ballad of sexual dependency* at Flinders University Museum of Art, February 2026. Photo: FUMA

Front: Nan Goldin, *Nan and Brian in bed, NYC, 1983*, National Gallery of Australia, Kamberri/Canberra, purchased 2021 in celebration of the National Gallery of Australia's 40th anniversary, 2022 © Nan Goldin

A teacher brought in Polaroid cameras for the kids to try, giving Goldin back her voice and the means by which she would negotiate her way in society for the rest of her life: building belonging and connection through photography. She would use the camera to document her life, as a way of remembering and so that no one could deny her truth. 'I don't ever want to lose the real memory of anyone again', Goldin has written.

After art school in Boston, Goldin arrived in New York in 1978 and became part of a vibrant group of young people all looking to make it — artists, photographers, actors, musicians, writers, filmmakers, many LGBTQIA+. Alongside David and Suzanne, they included Mark Morrisroe, Greer Lankton, Max diCorcia, Cookie Mueller and Sharon Niesp. They were 'bonded not by blood or place,' Goldin tells us, 'but by a similar morality, the need to love fully and for the moment, a disbelief in the future, a similar respect for honesty, a need to push limits, and a common history.' Goldin soon began showing the work she was making of this fun, druggy, party-going gang of friends and lovers as slideshows in the Underground clubs on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The story gradually took form, building to a narrative exploring the difficulties we face in relationships, especially between men and women — one that explodes in jealousy and violence. It captures the tricky balance between independence and interdependence, an investigation into how we repeat the patterns established by upbringing and society, and by our human nature, as much as we may try to break free. But conversely, it is also a story about how we have great capacity for love and care.



Installation view of *Nan Goldin: The ballad of sexual dependency* at Flinders University Museum of Art, February 2026. Photo: FUMA

The people in the photographs were the people in her life and they were the people in the audience. The slideshows shifted and changed as Goldin's friendship group over the years shifted and changed, building to somewhere around 700 images and taking around 45 minutes to unfold. Goldin would turn up to the venue with shopping bags of carousels full of slides and then proceed to click through the images with a tape player accompaniment, a killer soundtrack made up of music ranging from popular music, rock, blues, opera, and reggae, including the Velvet Underground, James Brown, Nina Simone, Screamin' Jay Hawkins, and Maria Callas (also early on, live music played by The Del-Byzanteens with Jim Jarmusch and Jamie Nares in their lineup) — a set-up that gave her immediate feedback on how the images were being received. The performances were a gift to the people in her community. It was her way of projecting back to them how Goldin saw them, as beautiful. 'My desire is to preserve the sense of people's lives,' she wrote by way of explanation, 'to endow them with the strength and beauty I see in them. I want the people in my pictures to stare back.'

Despite the seeming spontaneity of her images, their restlessness, the sense that we have just stumbled upon the scene depicted, Goldin's aesthetic is a sophisticated one. The snapshot, she has reflected, is so important because in our lives we use photography in this way to record and remember the people and moments we love. Goldin carefully edits and constructs her narrative to make a story about her life that is equally about a society that has shaped her. She is interested in allegory, informed by photographic and painting histories, the world of literature and most importantly, Goldin's greatest love, the language of cinema.

Her engagement with film is deep and sustained. As a teenager Goldin spent much of her time going to the cinema in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with David Armstrong, seeing two or more films a day. She admired and was influenced by a long list of directors: those working in the States, most notably the melodramas of Douglas Sirk, the rawness and emotional intensity of John Cassavetes, the experimental films of Andy Warhol and Jack Smith; avantgarde filmmakers from Europe — the intimacy and use of an ensemble cast in Rainer Werner Fassbinder, and also the visionary work of Michelangelo Antonioni, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Jacques Rivette, Luchino Visconti, Robert Bresson, to name but a few. Vivienne Dick and Bette Gordon, central figures in No Wave and feminist experimental cinema, were close friends. Goldin has spoken of the centrality of Dick's filmmaking to her project — the openness, the fragmentation and the visceral nature of Dick's work showed Goldin a way forward.

Goldin worked as stills photographer and appeared in Gordon's 1983 film *Variety*, written by the punk poet Kathy Acker; film stills from *Variety* as well as films by Dick are included in *The ballad*. Knowing that some images come from moving images emphasises the sense that all the photographs are fragments of an ongoing drama, moments extracted from longer, messier narratives. Goldin insists that lived experience, artistic production, collaborations and friendship are inseparable, and that images — whether moving or still — are part of the same emotional continuum, all part of a shared visual culture.

*The ballad* itself can certainly be interpreted as a film made up of stills. But unlike a film that is made and cut and released, Goldin was able to continuously engage with this body of work, to recreate it, to relive it every time that she performed it. Looking at the programs for the events in which Goldin showed *The ballad* in the early 1980s, we can see that Goldin was not the only one involved in slide presentations of her work, she was after all in the underground downtown art scene in which the boundaries between photography, film, performance, writing, club life and music were porous. The theatricality, the obsession and familiarity with film language combined with the work's compelling emotional arcs, meant that she was able to transform it into something that flew high and continues to connect and speak to new audiences and artists as new generations encounter the work.

In 1986, alongside her friend Suzanne Fletcher, curator and long-time supporter Marvin Heiferman and *Aperture* editor Mark Holborn, Goldin selected 126 images from the greater whole, a selection that took months. They were published as *The ballad of sexual dependency* by Aperture Foundation, one of the great photobooks by the great photobook publisher of the time — one that you will find on many photographer's bookshelves. Coming up to its 40th anniversary, the book has never been out of print. At the same time, an edition of ten of the 126 images was printed as Cibachrome prints, the quintessential printing process of the 80s. Rich and glossy and saturated with colour, as if lit from within, they are exquisite in their materiality. Different to the slideshow, yes, but a form that gives you time to engage, a space for reflection.

Image: Nan Goldin, *C.Z. and Max on the beach, Truro, Mass., 1976*, 1976, National Gallery of Australia, Kamberrri/Canberra, purchased 2021 in celebration of the National Gallery of Australia's 40th anniversary, 2022 © Nan Goldin



By the time the book and prints appeared, the community that Goldin was such an important part of was being decimated by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. *The ballad* is an important testament to the community when it was under attack, vilified and silenced, giving it dignity and visibility, increasingly in the major art institutions across America. After its breathy, spectacular debut at the Whitney Museum of American Art Biennial in 1986, it went beyond its grungy underworld beginning and never looked back. It was a community Goldin wanted her audience to see as complex and extraordinary — stars, as she has said, in the movie of her life, but also ordinary, hanging out, falling in and out of love, getting married, having children.

Goldin has always been a fearless fighter for what she believes in. She topped *ArtReview*'s Power 100 list in 2023, marking her as the most influential figure in the contemporary art world that year. Goldin's ascent to the number one spot reflects her profound influence as both an artist and activist. Goldin's activism — particularly her campaign against the Sackler family's role in the opioid crisis — has galvanised the art world, leading major institutions to reconsider their funding sources. Her dual impact in art and social justice underscores her significance in contemporary culture. No surprise either that Laura Poitras's profoundly moving portrayal of Goldin's life, practice and activism *All the Beauty and the Bloodshed* was awarded the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 2022, only the second time a documentary has won best film.

In 1994 the National Gallery purchased five larger 'museum' scale images from *The ballad* — quite early in the piece to be collecting Goldin — and these have been included in a number of exhibitions and displays over the decades. In October 2021 the National Gallery was very fortunate that Goldin, who had kept back the last set in the edition of the complete Cibachrome prints for herself — holding it close — made it available to us for acquisition. This exhibition is the first time that the full set of prints has been on display in Australia.

Goldin has said that she never wanted her work to be elitist. *The ballad* is a story that we cannot help but get drawn into and a testament, if ever there were one, to the powerful role photography plays in our lives. Goldin has spoken her truth, one that 'no one could rewrite or deny'.

**Anne O'Hehir**  
Curator, Photography, National Gallery of Australia



Installation view of *Nan Goldin: The ballad of sexual dependency* at Flinders University Museum of Art, February 2026. Photo: FUMA

All quotes: Nan Goldin, preface to *The ballad of sexual dependency*, Aperture Foundation, New York, 1986 or the afterword written for the 2012 reissue.

Please be advised that works of art in the exhibition depict explicit nudity, sexual acts, drug use, and the impacts of violence against women. Viewer discretion is advised under the age of 15.

This publication supports the exhibition  
***Nan Goldin: The ballad of sexual dependency***  
**16 February – 10 April 2026**  
**Flinders University Museum of Art**  
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*The ballad of sexual dependency* is a National Gallery Touring Exhibition presented as part of the Bowness Family Foundation Photography Touring Program.

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