

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women Podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Anne O'Hehir, Curator of Photography in International Art at the National Gallery of Australia, where she has curated the exhibition, *Nan Goldin: the Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. That sounds like a really interesting title. Can you tell us more about the show?

AO: So it's Nan Goldin's, probably the defining work of her life, and it's an amazing life, so it's a great work from the late '70s and early 1980s. And she's in New York hanging out with all the cool people, taking lots of drugs, having lots of fun, being young, hanging out in share houses, going to clubs, all that sort of thing, which she doesn't try to glorify it, it's just what she was doing. And I think it's interesting that her and all of her mates have a very interesting relationship to mainstream American culture, like a lot of punky sort of people at the time. And they do see themselves very much as heirs to more European culture. So say, Weimar Germany, between the wars, 1920s, when there's sexual fluidity, everything goes, things are really changing, women having a fantastic time, all that sort of thing. And so when she looks to a title for the piece, and I think Kurt Weill was really big in the 1930s, there were quite a lot of recordings coming out, Lotte Lenya. And so she goes back to Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht's 1928 opera, musical piece, Dreigroschenoper, Threepenny Opera, and looks to one of the great songs from that opera. It's a fantastic piece called The Ballad of Sexual Dependency. So immediately, she's sort of signaling where she's at. It's going to be a story about sexual freedom and sexual entrapment. And I think it's interesting that she goes back to Europe for inspiration, which everybody would have sort of got what that title was about at the time.

So it's an extraordinary suite of, in this iteration, it's 126 Cibachrome photographs that came out at the same time as a book of the series, which had had a really interesting early life being developed over about six or seven years before the book came out, of Nan Goldin and all of her friends. She talks about this piece as being the diary that she lets you read. She also writes a lot of diaries. She's somebody who has a great need for many reasons to document her life, but this is the visual diary that she opens up to everybody to see. So already you know that it's going to be an intimate sort of portrayal of her life. It's just her hanging out with all of her mates. It has a very strong narrative that we can talk about, but one of the great things about it, so it started off as a sort of performance. It started off as a slideshow that she would show in all the sort of cool clubs in the East Village. So she's just going, she starts about 1am and she's just showing this group of images that starts to sort of get themed. It has really great music. It's a fantastic music scene. Lots of her friends are really into music. So they start suggesting great sort of tracks that can go along with each sort of section of the slideshow. It's changing all the time. It's interesting Nan sort of says, she would have been a filmmaker, so she loves film. She adores film. She spends all of her sort of formative years watching film. So in a sense, the ballad is like sort of, stills from a film, a film that doesn't exist. But so it has a very strong sort of film sort of narrative. But what the slideshow gives her, that film doesn't give her, is an endless ability to tweak the images. And every single time she creates it, it's sort of created over and over again. You make a film, you cut it, you release it, and then it's gone. Whereas with these with this sort of images, which is very close to her, because it's her own life and her own way of working out her place in the world and her friendships and so on, and the relationships is that every single time she shows it, it changes.

And the people in the audience are also the people in the photographs. So her great friend Suzanne Fletcher might have lots of images coming up and Suzanne will be shouting out, "oh, I love that one, Nan," or "I don't like that one of me, I look horrible in that." And then it's very collaborative in the way that she works. And I think it's true, so, if somebody didn't like the image, she'd take it out. She says, "I just wanted these people to see themselves as beautiful as I see them." It's a very important sort of strategy and intent behind the work. These people who are often on the edge of society for lots of different reasons, who have had very often very traumatic sort of pasts. And so this notion of, she sort of said, when she started out, "I wanted to get all my friends to be on the cover of Vogue. "These people who were never going to be on the cover of Vogue in 1970s America, but that was sort of the intent. So it has a very loving and empathic sort of background, which I think is completely true. Nan's very clever in the way she talks about this work. But I think it's an authentic sort of way that she works with this material.

AT: And obviously the whole project is very deeply personal for her. And I just wanted to read something that, her sister Barbara committed suicide when Nan Goldin was 11. And in relation to the Ballad, she wrote that "I saw the role that her sexuality and its repression played in her destruction. Because of the times, the early '60s, women who were angry and sexual were frightening, outside the range of acceptable behavior, beyond control. By the time she was 18, she saw that her only way to get out was to lie down on the tracks of the commuter train outside of Washington DC. It was an act of immense will."

So clearly she's dealing with some very, very heavy topics.

AO: Absolutely. Nan sort of talks about the fact that she thinks the wrong things get hidden. It's interesting, this is a body of work that's almost 40 years old now. And it has that great, you look at the photographs and you can almost smell the cigarettes coming off the carpets and there's phones and there's tape recorders and it looks really '80s. People sort of say, oh, we've got to look so '80s and stuff. And particularly with a particular age, it sort of reminds them of that youth, that often misspent youth. But then the themes in it, in what she's talking to, unfortunately, has as much resonance today as it ever has.

So she's born into this quite wonderful, intellectual, sort of secular Jewish family in 1953. And her parents are quite liberal, but her father's gone to Harvard, they're living in Boston. It's interesting. I just recently read the most recent bio of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, who were in Boston in the late '50s. And they talk about just how it's a university town. The hypocrisy of the '50s, the fear of the '50s and '60s. I think that Cold War sort of thing permeates everything. And she says, talks again in that forward to the book, that quote comes from that, her dad had gone to Harvard, they were very proud of that fact. And her mother was always sort of saying "what would the neighbors think?" And there's an incredible image, about the 30 images of the book is of Nan's parents looking away from each other, sitting very stiff, sort of thing. But you can see the elegance in her mother, beautifully dressed, but the anxiety, her hands are very tightly clasped. You can see this almost rolling out of this sort of anxiety. So if they did what they thought was right at the time, a most normal response to mental illness in the 1950s, people that you can't control, just put Barbara into an institution. She was in and out of institutions the whole time. And after she died, in total trauma and grief, Nan caught her parents sort of saying to each

other, "let's just tell the other children," there was two other brothers as well, "that it was an accident," and that just intent to keep them from that, the reality of what had happened. But also Nan felt that thing of hiding, of pressing down, of suppressing things you didn't talk about, the things that weren't nice to talk about. And it has an extraordinary effect on her. She leaves home, into foster care. And she talks later, in the wonderful documentary that's just come out, extraordinary, *Beauty and the Bloodshed*, about the fact that she feels that probably that Barbara was queer, had that sort of relationships with women, with girls and boys and so on. And that was part of the problem. So, it's interesting, nearly every show, major show that Nan's had her whole life is dedicated to Barbara, the documentary is devoted to Barbara. And I think in some ways, Nan sort of devotes herself to living, in a sense, the life that Barbara couldn't live. And she says that she starts to forget the memory of Barbara. She's only 11 when she dies. And in a sense, her photography does come out of that.

Sometimes you talk about people's lives and you're like, "well let's just talk about the art." It's an interesting thing between biography and creativity, how the two sort of meld together. But I think with what Nan goes through in this experience, it's such an important part of her life, that she's going to document her life, she says, "so no one can deny the reality of my story. No one can say it didn't happen." So the work, I think for that reason, has an insane intensity. She has to make art. She's always got that camera. She's always documenting, often she can't remember because she's a little bit stoned. So she knows the next morning she can get up and, look and see what happened the night before, a little bit like that. But there's also, she uses this sort of documentary mode in a very clever way, because it's not just a straight documentation of her life at all in many ways. But she uses that thing about photo. She says she uses the snapshot aesthetic, this sort of slightly clumsy look. She sort of says, "you can tell if somebody else took the photo." She not precious about the camera. She'll give it to friends to take photographs, because she's also in the Ballad. She says, "you can tell it's not my photograph because they'll be in focus." So she sort of uses these hilarious things, because she went to art school, she could photograph as well as anyone. But she uses this sort of snapshot thing, because she says, "the snapshot comes from a place of love." We take our own photographs and our own lives of the things that we love, the things we care about, the things we find important, the things we want to document to remember them, the births, the deaths, all that sort of stuff. And she knows that's why people love photo. I think she's not that interested in a lot of the photography that was big when she was starting out, the sort of black and white stuff by men who are obsessed with the print and with what camera they were using and all that sort of stuff. And she wants to get way away from that. She wants you to engage with this work in the way that you engage with photo in your life. Still that thing that people run out of the burning house, clutching the family albums under their arm. So for her, it's like a family album in a sense, but it's not her blood family. It's that sort of queer thing. It's the community and the friends that she finds, a very common sort of thing in queer culture that it's your chosen family that is what's going to save you. And Nan is very clear about that. She talks a lot about the fact that, she says "the one shrink I went to that was any use to me said that the reason why I survived was because by the time I was four, my friends were more important than my family." And she makes these extraordinarily important friendships. She also says, "friendship is more important to me than my lovers. That's why they never last, or my career or my art."

The photography is very important, but it's wrapped up with this notion about friendship and community and what's important is that. And I think that's still a very radical thing to say, even today when we're still meant to grow up and, fall in love, do that sort of heteronormative thing or, even the queer world, you're still meant to have that, that love object is meant to be the most important thing in a way still, isn't it? That's still the sort of dream, the story that we're sold. For Nan, it's the friends who are going to be important. And one of her best friends, Suzanne Fletcher, who she meets even before she picks up the camera, at this community school she goes to, appears like 11 times about the first 15 or 16 images. And so she's signaling, "this is what's going to be important. This is a story about relationships, but it's also a story about friendships."

AT: So she left home when she was only like 13 or 14. So quite young, and ended up at a commune in Massachusetts.

AO: Yeah. An alt school, so they can't chuck her out of that one. So they keep her. She never goes to any classes. Sounds quite fun.

AT: And she starts dating older men, which I didn't dig too deeply into this, but to me, grown men dating a teenage girl is always going to feel predatory.

AO: Yeah, totally creepy.

AT: Yeah. And so in addition to the fact that my understanding is she herself identifies as bisexual, I do wonder if immersing herself in like gay and trans communities just felt safer.

AO: When she sort of tells it, it's completely bound up with the death of Barbara, isn't it. Like Barbara dies and then while they're in mourning, some old guy assaults her, so it's all bound up with that trauma and so on. It's an interesting question, I guess I think I see it as an extraordinarily, importantly queer body of work, this notion of chosen family and friendships and so on, that's more important than relationships. And, you know, she does find a theme for the Ballad. It's the heart of this sort of middle section, which is about men's abuse of women. After her boyfriend, who you've met earlier in the Ballad, a guy called Brian, who sort of this James Dean, ex-marine sort of guy, it's called Sweet Black Call, this sort of section of the very heart of the Ballad. And she sort of sets him up, she always looks at everybody with this lens of desire, her friends and her partner. And it becomes a very code, that's sort of the sexual dependency of the title, this relationship with Brian, where they sort of don't want to be together anymore, but they're sort of addicted to each other. And she talks about that thing of the addiction of love, the addiction of falling in love is very strong for us, we love it. But it's also problematic. So she sets this thing up and then one of maybe perhaps the most triggering and extreme photographs, really in a way, there's lots of sex, but I don't even care much anymore. But this image of Nan a month after being battered by Brian, he sort of flies into a jealous rage, she's sort of sleeping around with girls and so on. And he abuses her, he bashes her up and he goes for the eyes because she's a photographer, and you see this image a month after she's been abused by

Brian, it's a really shocking image. And it's also an extraordinary image.

The first time you see Nan in the *Ballad*, she's sitting on Brian's lap, the first image in the book, after the title page image. And she's got lipstick on, she's got the pearls on, and she's sitting on, they loved vintage frocks, all that sort of thing, going to the op shops, getting all the sort of vintage frocks. And then when she gets Suzanne to photograph her, Suzanne who's got her into the hospital to save the eye as well, like friends will save you. She again puts lippy (lipstick) on the pearls, the frock, and she stares straight back into that camera lens. And it's an extraordinary image of courage and of, "I'm not going to be kept down. I'm not going to hide this." You get abused in this society and you're meant to hide it, you're meant to put the dark glasses on, you're meant to not talk about it. And Nan's like, "no, that's not what's going to happen here, because that's why it happens, because we don't talk about this stuff, we hide it, we keep it down." She's never that critical of people per se, Brian probably, but it's about these sort of broader societal pressures, the way that we're meant to be in society, the things we're meant to talk about, the things we're not meant to talk about, and that's the focus of her anger and rage in many ways.

And then interestingly, you go through the section and then you get to a section, the very next section is women together, women in bed, just hanging out in the back of cars, she has a very good back of car shot, looking after each other. So you go straight from that to this notion of care and love and empathy and support that women can give each other. It's a simple sort of strategy, but it's very, very powerful as you work your way through this body of work, which just, it just sucks you in whether you like it or not. Nan's a masterful, masterful storyteller, and she really sucks you into this story, making exquisitely beautiful photographs. Apart from anything else, apart from all the bio and what it's about and stuff, she has an eye and a half to take the most astoundingly complex and yet simple photographs using all these sort of weird strategies of the flash and snapshot and so on, to really change the way that photography was.

Photography is one way before Nan, it's another way after her. People say she opened that can, worms, with that diaristic, personal photography from which no one's ever quite been able to put the lid back on. And the influence on photo, like, the minute people saw those photos, just like this is something else. It's an extraordinary body of work.

AT: It's always fascinating when you find someone who has really rejected the concept of what is and is not art, or what is high art versus low art, and as you said, her style was very candid, slice of life. She said that her photos come out of relationships, not observation, and these are the kind of snapshots that previously would not have been in a gallery. And as you said, she attended the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, so she clearly knows what she's doing, it's not like she simply didn't know the proper techniques. She knew them and she rejected them and said, "this is also art, this also belongs in a gallery, this also belongs in front of people."

AO: I guess for Nan, it's all that matters. She's a fantastic talker about art, and what it means in our lives, and photo, and so on, and the idea of being like a photojournalist, fly in, fly out, photograph things that don't really concern you. She's just like, why would you do that? Because there's millions of ways of taking photographs and so on, but for Nan, whose work is sort of a

form of therapy, I guess, it's her way of engaging with the world. One of her really close friends, who's not in the *Ballad* all that much, she gets her own series, as does her other really close friend, David Armstrong, who was in that drag scene in Boston, where she gets into that community there. Cookie, she sort of meets up in Provincetown, and she's been in John Waters's film. She's a super, super cool performer, sort of semi-famous, I guess, certainly famous in the East Village scene, and Nan says, "I was outside of Cookie and photography, let me in." So she does sort of use photography to make connections.

And she's quite shy, so you can use the camera to stay back from things. It means you can be there, but not really get involved, whereas Nan does also reject that sort of thing. She's looked at people like Diane Arbus, who use the camera in that way, wanted to connect, but there's still a cold sort of eye. Nan wants the eye to be warm, for it to be about relationships in a really real way. It's interesting, there's lots of people that she would have known in that East Village scene in the Bowery, Debbie Harry, Madonna gets to New York the same year she does, Robert Maplethorpe and Patti Smith are about two blocks over, the great punk poet Kathy Acker, who she works with on films and so on. And they're not in the *Ballad*, because they're not really friends, they're people she knows. The people in the *Ballad* are the people that she loves, that's how you get into the *Ballad*. It's interesting, you don't get into the *Ballad* by being a celebrity, you get into the *Ballad* by being close to Nan.

But the thing with Cookie, I think is really beautiful and it's interesting, in the Cookie Mueller portfolio, which is an extraordinary thing that she makes after Cookie dies in the late '80s. This is also of course a series about the impact of AIDS on this community in the mid-'80s. But after Cookie dies, Nan makes a series about Cookie and she's laughing and so on, and I guess this body, this 126 images have come down probably from thousands of images that Nan would have taken, just, she's always had that camera with her, that thing about being close friends with photography, you get up probably midday after a rough night, and there's Nan with a camera, and you're like, oh god. But there is that thing too, like people often look a bit ragged in her photographs, and then, Cookie in this, it's quite somber, there's a somber sort of note that runs through a lot of these images. You don't see people laughing, Suzanne seems to be in tears most of the time, and in the documentary you see Suzanne laughing, and I'm like, "oh, I didn't realize Suzanne could laugh." But of course they had a lot of fun, they could laugh, but they're not the images that are chosen. Nan's taken it down from thousands and thousands of images to the 700 of the slideshow, and then from the 700 of the slideshow to the 126 for this book, so over a period of about four or five, six years. So these are the images that have worked. She's slowly showing people a slideshow, and then people start to get bored and go to the loo or go out to take more drugs or something, and she's like, "oh, that bit's not working," so that bit goes out. So, the images that have been left in this 126 are like the concentration. She's boiled and boiled and boiled these images down till it's the really astounding images that are left, and they're so exquisitely beautiful - gosh, that girl.

She's got a lot of friends - Vivienne Dick, Betty Gordon are the sort of independent filmmakers at the time, everyone's really across Laura Mulvey's work on the male gaze and so on, is huge at the time, it's sort of through the '70s and '80s. So she's reversing that male gaze, she's looking back at everybody else with desire, the women and the men, but there's lots of images of beautiful men lying about on beds and looking sexy, and she's just done that theme, just that

clever thing of just reversing that. And I think it's interesting too, in the earlier photography, it was about intimacy, it was about, you know, Edward Weston photographing Charis Wilson or Stieglitz photographing Georgia O'Keeffe or, that whole history of woman as nudes, the one who's photographed by men, and Nan's just done that cute thing of just reversing that, and just looking back at the men in the way that she's been looked at, just to muck it up. And the gaze all the way through the series is really very interesting as well. She plays with that thing, that male gaze of people peering, so she knows that photo is peevy and she just sort of plays with it, has fun with it, just says, "well, you've been looking at us and now we're going to look at you." It's not maybe the complete answer to the male gaze, but it is a very cute way of starting to address those things.

She's not interested in hierarchy in any way, she's interested in connecting with people. She's about community and friendships, and she's done all that amazing activism stuff recently too, that's even another whole podcast, about her taking down the Sacklers. Extraordinary, I mean, just a woman who's committed to looking after community really, and in a very insanely brave way. When this work came out, she did an amazing exhibition of art about AIDS in the late '80s, the first person to curate a public show, called *Witnesses: Against our Vanishing*, and she does it with David Wojnarowicz, and there's these really insanely critical essays in it about the Reagan administration's relationship to not caring for people with AIDS, wanting just to disappear, and she's like, "against our vanishing, we're here, and we care for each other, we're not going away, and you can't just ignore this, you can't just hope that these beautiful people go into the hospitals and just die." Even the young man who designs the book, *The Ballet of Sexual Dependency*, is dead the next year, 1987 at the age of 32 from AIDS. So many people in this book died from AIDS. I read somewhere that, you know, in New York alone, in 1986, over two and a half thousand people alone die of it, so this book comes out, I think that's the reason why Nan wants this book to go out into the world, you've got kids in it, people's kids getting married, falling in love, falling out of love love, partying, playing games, playing board games, going out, staying in. Again, it's a simple idea, but she's just at this time when this community is being insanely vilified, and "gays kill babies" headlines, and so on, and, people just want them to go away. It's just a humanist idea, she's just saying "these people are just like you, and they're no different, they just live their lives in the way that they live them." So it's such an extraordinarily important thing to be saying at that time, and when she starts to take on the Sacklers again. I think I love the fact, you could see the *Ballad* as being a bit sort of peevy, bit voyeuristic-y, taking advantage of her friends and so on, but I think in the context of a whole life devoted to looking after people in her community, you see it in that light. So when she starts to take on the Sacklers, and the implicit thing with the opioids, she sort of says to friends, "do you think this could wreck my career?" And they're like, "yes, it could." The Sacklers are a very important, revered family, and give all their money to the arts. And to take them on was a really brave thing, and she did it anyway, because she felt it was the right thing to do. I have great admiration for Nan Goldin as an artist, but also as a person, extraordinary.

AT: And so for anyone who's not familiar with what we're talking about, the Sackler family owned Purdue Pharma, which declared bankruptcy in 2019, and Purdue's very aggressive marketing of opioid medications has largely been credited as, if not completely causing the opioid epidemic,

then significantly contributing to it, and moreover, that the people in charge did know, they knew it was addictive, they knew that the uses they were pushing it for were not necessarily indicated, and they did it anyway. And for the context in the art world, they donated a lot of money, so these people are billionaires, and a lot of their money has gone to things like the Sackler wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum had removed the Sackler name from its galleries in 2022. I actually personally interned at the Sackler Gallery at the Smithsonian, and so when we're talking about an artist specifically taking on the Sacklers, and again, this was very personal for her, because as you mentioned, she was seeing her friends dying not just of AIDS, but also from drug use. And she reportedly got sober after someone asked her, "how can you be killing yourself when your friends around you are dying?"

AO: It's interesting of the documentary, she goes to see the journalist who writes in the New Yorker, you know, he sort of starts with the family that builds an empire of pain. And she sort of says, "I'm going to take the Sacklers down." And it's really cutie, he sort of says, she was this little Jewish lady, like she's 70 now, or she was in her 60s. Because they've got like five stories, of lawyers, fancy, fancy, fancy, lawyers. People have been trying to sue them for years, and so on, and he was like, "oh, you know, good luck with that, dear." And she did. That moment in the documentary, when they go back in, and the Sackler name's being chiseled off that great big wing at the Met, and they just chiseled the Sackler name off, and they go back in, it's an incredibly moving moment, because she sort of says, "this is the one place they're being kept to account." All those lawyers, you get get away with a lot. But extraordinary, I do find that whole thing, she loses one community, and then she builds another one, you can see how much love and support there is in that community, but she's now still busy, work, she'll never stop, I don't think.

AT: And so she created the campaign, Prescription Addiction Intervention Now, or PAIN, and I think she definitely would have seen a through line between society and government ignoring the AIDS crisis, and then subsequently ignoring the opioid crisis.

AO: Absolutely, absolutely, I think, you're absolutely right, it's those society things that people aren't honest about. I think it's that sort of that injustice and dishonesty, and the roots of a lot of, in societies that really, really gets in Nan's craw, that people putting greed and money and power over human relationships is something that she feels very, very deeply about. So I think that thing with community and looking after each other goes through her life. So I say the queer sort of thing really does go all the way through her life. She keeps working on the Ballad, right through till just a couple of years ago, and she keep on working on it, and she couldn't let it go, and it's quite moving. She says how she photographed, she says "so I thought I'd photograph all these people to keep them close to me, and now, when I look at the Ballad, every time I see it, I just see how many people I've lost." This thing, it's very important to her. In fact, the 126 Cibachromes acquired by the gallery was actually Nan's set of the 10, she does an edition of 10 of these 126 prints of the whole of the ballad. We also bought early on this larger set with about four or five of them from the set as well, so amazing. We did support Nan very early on, before she'd become the superstar that she is now. But she released that very last set of images to us



to acquire, so we actually have Nan's set that she kept so close to her all those years. And she still has a copy of this live show, which again, maybe because of the way she performed the slideshow, I think she probably has a slightly closer relationship to it, but now it's sort of been codified. And she's continued to make beautiful work.

She was in the Venice Biennale just a couple of years ago with a film compilation. As I said, film is one of her great, great, great, great loves, and she's made one of those compilation films of found footage of favorite films called *Sirens*, and she put together. And she's got a major retrospective of the slide shows that's, I think, in Amsterdam at the moment that started at Stockholm that's traveling around Europe at the moment, so she's not stopped at all. It's quite moving too, she couldn't photograph people for a while, and she lost her very close friend, David Armstrong as well, in about 2014. Her close friend, Greer Lankton, who's in the *Ballad*, opens the *Ballad* in the opening image, died in '96 of drug overdose. Cookie and her husband, Vittorio, both died, like so many people have died. So I think she kept the *Ballad* very, very close, because it was like a family album. It's exactly what it was, it means an awful lot to her still.

AT: I do really appreciate her commitment to not only showing the dark side of things that people don't want to talk about, but also showing the joy that, when we sideline entire groups of people, you are missing out on these incredible, beautiful experiences and people that otherwise could be a part of your life. You are hurting yourself by not allowing yourself to accept people for who they are. And I would say that she certainly saw that with her own family, where because her parents couldn't accept her sister, their whole family lost her, and she seems to have extrapolated that obviously beyond just that one person. And even from her very first show in 1973, she's photographing the gay and trans community and showing, say the joy of drag queens, where she says, "my desire was to show them as a third gender, as another sexual option, a gender option, and to show them with a lot of respect and love to kind of glorify them, because I really admire people who can recreate themselves and manifest their fantasies publicly."

AO: That's a really beautiful thing to say. I wish I'd said that. That's really beautiful, that notion. I hadn't really thought about it, you're absolutely 100% right. I think it's courage and so on that she really admires people that, that sort of Buddhist thing almost, that all we have to be is our authentic self, and sometimes it took a lot of courage to do that. Those kids that she knew in Boston in the late '60s and '70s, so she meets all the drag queens through her friend David Armstrong, who's part of the crowd. But they couldn't walk down the street during the day without being bashed up, and yet despite that, and, sometimes you have to conform, sometimes you just have to live your life however you can sometimes, there's no doubt about that. But, for those kids to have that courage to maybe stay home during the day so they wouldn't get bashed up every day, but then to get dressed up and go out, and there is such joy. And she sort of says, "I don't mean it to be glorifying this lifestyle." Nan finally got off the drugs, she didn't think it was the most fantastic way to live your life. She's not trying to, she's sort of been criticized for getting the sort of heroine chic thing going. And she's not that, she's sort of, saying it was lots of fun, but not maybe in the end a very sustainable way of living. But, that sort of joint non-judgmental thing, and it's interesting in that scene, they sort of often talk about the fact that they really care

whether you were straight whether you're queer or whether you're anything. In a way, you just had to be yourself and, and fun in a way. There's no doubt looking at the *Ballad*, she does, you might not try to glorify it, but they do really look like they're very, very beautiful people having a lot of fun and because they've got that community, they've got that great life of creativity. They're all, acting or making art or doing their thing, making poetry, making films. And you get that flavor, definitely. It's interesting, you don't know much about the people in this, there's a lot of people just documenting the scene at the time, great music scene, everything, But that's not what Nan's really doing. It's an incredible color palette, it's an incredible eye that goes right through the *Ballad*, but it's almost like in the creation of the mood, and it's interesting as she sort of goes on beyond the *Ballad*, that the work does get more and more sort of ethereal, more beautiful, romantic. I think Nan at her heart is deeply romantic, a person who looks at all sorts of art, who's really into painting and film and all sorts of arts, and it all comes into her photography, this incredible eye, which you get from looking at other art and from just endlessly taking photographs and then being a really strict editor of your own work. But that intense engagement with just making art, with just doing your craft, just photographing, photographing, photographing, but it is quite moving. And in the time she just can't photograph people, and then she goes to doing more landscapes, and then just, in this very beautiful way, just looks up into the sky and takes photographs of skies and so on. But the work continues to evolve in ways that, in fact when the people leave, you see, because you get so drawn into Cookie and the fabulous people who are in the, with her wonderful, gorgeous friends, Greer and Vivienne, and they're also sexy and glamorous. She sort of talks about the fact that she wants these friends to be, that they're the stars of her own life, and she wants them to be the stars of this story, that glamorous. She spent her whole teenage years hanging out with David going and seeing all those big divas in Hollywood film, the Billy Davis and Joan Crawford and Marilyn Monroes, so that glamour sort of thing does, does leak very much into the *Ballad*. I mean, I couldn't even choose a favorite image, but there's an incredibly beautiful image of French crystal in the motor mobile, and they're just such insane, sexy images.

They're very, very sexy, there's no doubt about that. That's a lot of its appeal, is just taking people you love and making them look very sexy as part of photo. And it's about desire, and it's about, it's amazing the world as a vehicle for pornography and all sorts of things that we use it for, and that's part of photo. Trying to say it's all very arty and intellectual and stuff, well, it is as well, but it's also not the way that we often relate to it, and what I've got being stuck above my desk of pretty people. This is part of photo, I think, and I guess that's that thing with Nan, just not wanting to bullshit too much about what photo is about, or what your interest in photo's about, or what that our lives are about, they're made up of all those things, and, falling in and out of love and, desiring people too. She says it's problematic, but it's one of the great joys in life, we're addicted to it, that's part of the story of the *Ballad* is that we are addicted to being in love and the highs of what happens, the intensity of that comes sometimes at a cost. It's interesting, that great image at the very heart of the *Ballad*, Nan getting Suzanne to take a photo of herself after she's been assaulted, like a month later. And she says, "I took that photo as a reminder never to go back," because she knew that she was addicted to Brian in some ways, and that was a reminder of what that relationship ended.

AT: If there was one defining word about her photography, I would think it would be intimate, because, she clearly, it was very important to her that she had the trust of her community, she said, "for me, it is not a detachment to take a picture, it is a way of touching somebody, it's a caress, I think that you can actually give people access to their own soul."

AO: Yeah, it's absolutely. She says, "don't take photographs, don't be an artist if you don't need to be," and the reason that she is a photographer, is an artist is to build these connections with friends. It is like a caress, and I think she looked at people like Larry Clark, his Tulsa series was the one sort of thing she says she looks back to, in black and white. But it's about Larry hanging out with all his friends in Tulsa, after his trauma of Vietnam, going back to this sort of young group of people who had nowhere to go, in 60s and '70s America. And she looks back to that, and otherwise, she says, "I'd make it up." I mean, she is looking at lots of stuff, but, she's not like a lot of photographers like that. She's really into, all of her interests are very photographic, and yet her interests sort of go way beyond photography as well. She's not in any way interested in it in a technical way, she's only really interested in the way that it communicates something to the people who are looking at the photographs. That's where she's at, that's creating this extraordinary mood that does, really beautifully, extraordinary way that she puts the Ballad together. It's in themes, and it sort of builds momentum until you get to this devastating, turn that page, you see a horror, a picture of of Brian glowering into the lens, and then the next image is Nan, who had been assaulted by him, incredibly clever way that she builds.

One of my favorite sort of segues is she goes through the brothels, and she's just started to talk about the fact that she did some sex work during that time to make money. She worked in bars, really important bars. She worked in this incredibly important bar, a bar in Times Square called Tin Pan Alley, where a woman called Maggie Smith only employed women behind the bar, and a lot of them were sex workers. She's like, "be a sex worker, it's completely fine, but if you do want to get out of that life, I'll give you a job in the bar." So incredible place for women, where Nan says she got politicized by Maggie in a way, like she was just taking photographs, and in a way just intuitively taking photographs of her life. And she says it was Maggie who said, "oh, it's interesting stuff here happening, Nan, in the photographs about relationships and about women in society and so on." But you go straight from that sort of scenes of brothels in the Ballad to people getting married, it's fantastic. Maybe Nan's comment somewhat, you could say the role that marriage can play in society, or has traditionally played in societies, it's quite funny. And then of course, I love it's not too open term, and this is a time when all of her friends are starting to get sick and dying. A friend of, I think an ex-boyfriend of David Armstrong's, the first person in their community in '82. So by '86 there's been lots of funerals, lots of looking after people, lots of care, but the Ballad does end maybe in the only place it could end, in '86 into sort of images of cemeteries and empty beds, and the very last image is a sort of graffiti image of skeletons. So it's interesting later she goes on and she makes very explicit portfolios of some friends of hers. A couple in France, one of them dies from AIDS, and you see him emaciated in the bed and all that sort of stuff, and you see Cookie dying in the Cookie portfolio, and you see her after she's here in the coffin. So she goes there, she does do it more specifically, but in the Ballad, interestingly, it's not the major, she's got this theme of relationships that's sort of like she's kept it tight. You don't have to know them, you don't have to know those stories to love the

Ballad. I don't know all those people, I don't know all the in-stories, but you know the in-story's there, you can sort of tell. This is a great moment where Cookie Mueller, who's been going out with a woman called Sharon Niesp for years, they break up, and Cookie goes off to Italy to get away, and she comes back with a guy called Vittorio Scarpati. She comes back with this artist guy, who then she gets married to, and you can just sort of hear the community like friends going like, "sorry?"

In many ways, I think it is a gift to her community in the first instance, and then it goes way beyond that, to be one of the most important, series of contemporary photography, but then it starts in this very sort of intimate and particular place. So these people who trust her not to betray them. I think it's that great theme that they understand that Nan won't dishonor them in any way, and because of that trust and same trust that everybody has, that they go all in. They'll let Nan into their bedrooms when they're having sex, when they're on the loo, and when they're shooting up, and when they're rough after a big night out partying. There's that trust that's at the heart of this body of work, which I don't know that there's any other body of work that maybe because of Nan, it's become such a commonplace thing, where we think about photo. A wonderful work by Paul Knight, his wonderful relationship over the last number of years is on in Melbourne at the moment, and maybe it's possible because of Nan and photographers like Nan to really have changed that, changed the way we think that photos can be in museums.

AT: Nan Goldin: the Ballad of Sexual Dependency, will travel to the Art Gallery of Ballarat for the International Festival of Photography from 2 March 2024 to June 2024. Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast, and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.