

Conclusion

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This is the conclusion of my thesis “*Almost A Square: The Photographic Books of Francesca Woodman and Their Relationship to Surrealism*”, University of Essex, 2012.¹ This thesis investigates Francesca Woodman's work within the framework of surrealist ideas materialised, though not exclusively, in photography.

I argue in this thesis, sustained by my parallel and comparative investigations of André Breton's *Nadja* (1928, revised 1963) and Woodman's Books, that it is in her five found object Books that Woodman comes closest to demonstrating her deep comprehension of the activating position of images to words in *Nadja*, thereby contributing to the extension of first wave surrealist ethic into her own era.

The thesis includes what is to date the only full descriptive and interpretative analysis of all six of the photographic Books that Woodman made in her lifetime.

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In the rising wave of posthumous critical attention that Woodman's work has received in the last twenty five or so years, her Books have not received the amount of interest they merit. No systematic appraisal and analysis had been made of them until the present work. To provide such an appraisal has been the motivating force of my project and the analysis of these marvellous objects therefore forms its core. Rather than entering the analysis of the Books from a pre-designated theoretical standpoint, I have allowed any such standpoint, outside

¹ See <http://serlib0.essex.ac.uk:80/record=b1805431~S5>

of the framework of surrealism, to emerge from the primary description of the object.

Surrealism as a framework for Woodman has been the second motivator of the project. Apposite for my purpose has been first wave surrealist work of the interwar period from the decade or so between the publications of Breton's *Nadja* in 1928 and of his *l'Amour fou* in 1937. The reasons my choice of this period are twofold. First it is heralded by *Nadja*, a work that has been central to my project for reasons outlined below. Second this is surrealism's era of fantastic photographic experimentation. Woodman enacts a deep and profuse dialogue with the images produced in the era, with which she is highly conversant.

I first read of Woodman's desire to line up her project alongside *Nadja* in regard to the *relationship between words and her images* in Ann Gabhart's essay in the Wellesley College catalogue of 1986. This subject intrigued me and I began an investigation of it in my MA dissertation (2000). At that stage I had not read the extended statement Woodman made in a live interview in Milan with Roberta Valtorta. The statement, which had been conducted and was recorded in Italian, became a very exciting stepping stone for my research. A thorough comparative analysis of aspects of *Nadja* (selected photographic images with their captions) with selected annotated images of Woodman's lay ahead. My subsequent enquiry has been a complex and enriching procedure. The relationship between Woodman's Books and the first wave work is subtle, at times tangential, but nevertheless, as I have demonstrated, strong and tangible. The proof of

Woodman's accomplishment is embedded in the findings of this thesis, in the internal evidence from Woodman's work.

As the research developed and my knowledge of Woodman's Books, her wider corpus and first wave surrealist photography increased, the more connections were detected between her images and those of the first wave surrealist field.

The investigation of direct and indirect references to this source in Woodman's work is another element of proof of the extent of the artist's familiarity with the experimental images of surrealism's emergent era.

Woodman's own knowledge of and enthusiasm for the surrealist field is not restricted to her surrealist photographic images. Her conversance with Breton's concept of the marvellous is considerable. It is encased in her displayed command of all of the concept's three components; veiled erotic, fixed exploding and circumstantial magic. Perhaps the most continuous visual application of the marvellous in her images is in its circumstantial magic genre, where the exemplification of biomorphic resemblance, category crossing and visual punning is outstanding.

My early contention that most of Woodman's annotated images lie within the Books has had to be re-considered a little during the progress of the research in response to topical curatorial decisions about the cropping and cutting of her photographs for gallery display which now usually, happily, include her annotations. Their consolidation within the containment of the series in the Books

affords a more concise scrutiny however. Perhaps those images with annotations in Woodman's wider corpus could justifiably also have been compared with *Nadja*. However the interior corpus provided by the Books with their word/diagram templates as well as occurrent annotations by Woodman, was a superior format for the analysis.

There are three reasons for choosing the Books for this comparative function. First, as I have demonstrated, the Books constitute a composite Barthesian *Text*. In them the annotated images punctuate a sea of original handwriting, formulae or diagrams. This creates a fresh dynamic in addition to that already in operation between her annotations and image. Second, the Books' format is ideal for Woodman's multiple choreographies of images, in serialisations, repetitions and openings and closures of sequences in a temporal shifting. Third, within their format Woodman could try out and reflect on a procession of planned and experimental images. The Books therefore provide that *supremely precious article of exchange* that Breton had argued for the status of photography.²

I argue that *Nadja* exemplifies Barthes's *Text* too. Barthes's concept has particularly invigorated this comparative analysis part of my research. The complex and cryptic nature of *Nadja* placed next to the equivalent complexity of the Books is both tethered and given release by according them this appropriation.

Developments and repetitions occur between images placed within an individual Book, in another Book or in the extended corpus. These have been addressed as

² Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, 1972, 32; see Chapter 1, 34-35, note 3.

they occur. A fuller exploration of the subject of Woodman's self-referencing evolves into a separate enquiry in the last chapter of the thesis. A further separate enquiry contains a specific investigation of the artist's conversance with the rich surrealist image field. The challenge here, in dealing with the material untethered from my main argument's tenets, was to discipline it without a consequent restriction in its flow.

Entry into this rich and inspiring surrealist field has led to more ideas for comparisons than were possible to pin down in the project. These ideas are germinating: Woodman's visual responses to Raoul Ubac's *La Nebuleuse* and to Man Ray's *Moving Sculpture* are just two examples from a myriad of enticing future photographic connections to explore. The visual links between the page colours and mixed typographies of early surrealist journals and their precedents in Dada with Woodman's Books is another area of possible exploration too.

I very much hope that this project will stimulate further research activity on Woodman's Books. My hope too is that, with the co-operation of the Estate, a Book or group of Books might be published in the near future.