

## **The Flight from Touch: Woodman's *Portrait of a Reputation***

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In this paper I analyse Francesca Woodman's five mounted photographs tied together and titled *Portrait of a Reputation*.

The paper forms Chapter 7 of my thesis "*Almost A Square: The Photographic Books of Francesca Woodman and Their Relationship to Surrealism*", University of Essex, 2012.<sup>1</sup> 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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Consisting of five square, positive, photographic images, each printed with a substantial surround of white and each placed centrally on a plain horizontal, non-codex white page, this is the only one of Woodman photographic Books which does not use a found object old school book base, thus aligning it to a career period which pre-dates Woodman's discovery of these school books in Rome. I am in agreement with Chris Townsend's dating of *Portrait of a Reputation* as

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

*perhaps the earliest, its prints suggesting that the series was made in 1976-7....*<sup>2</sup>

This work is not therefore central to my project and seems initially to lack the complex layering of meanings present in the other five Books. *Portrait of a Reputation* is a hand-made Book which had not been published until its full page spread in Townsend's monograph in 2006. Its pages measure seven inches by eleven inches. In common with two other Books, *Dettati e Temi* and *Portraits Friends Equasions*, it contains no authorial annotations.

Its white foolscap sheets of thick cartridge paper are tied together at the top left with red raffia. As the pages are turned, therefore, each has a short horizontal dart of red in its corner. The strands of raffia loop and curl over the cover page (fig 140), which is plain like the others. Onto this page, Woodman has hand written the title of the Book *Portrait of a Reputation* about a third down from the top, in a conventional capitalisation.

Each positive print sits in a wide sea of white page. The page base is of a very similar dimension to that of the double page spread of the other five Books. It measures 7 inches by 11 inches. Here therefore we have an immediate square image on a rectangular format. The wide white border of each print is of the same tone of white as that of the base page which means it just about disappears to the eye.

What Townsend describes neatly as *a powerful allegory of the experience of being touched* is a compact series containing an abrasive violence within its tenets of

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<sup>2</sup> Townsend, *Francesca Woodman*, 2006, 51.

self composure and self erasure.<sup>3</sup> Harriet Riches is right to draw attention in her analysis of the Book, to Woodman being its exclusive model, thereby giving it a unique status amongst the six Books.<sup>4</sup> It consists of five images, out of which four are of Woodman. Its uniqueness is attained too through its unsettling content. Some other examples exist in a series form, as within the first-named section of her Book *Angels, Calendars* for example, in which Woodman portrays only herself as subject and model.

For the purpose of this analysis I shall intersperse some quotations from Woodman's journals, written in what she called *Steinwriting*, from periods both earlier and concurrent with *Portrait of a Reputation*.<sup>5</sup> These journals were described by her father George as written on *Old copy books, half-filled ledgers and school folios ruled to perfect the student's penmanship...*<sup>6</sup> Clearly her interest in this particular genre of found object had preceded her use of them as templates for her photographic Books. Francesca's close friend Sloan Rankin also refers to the artist's practice of journal writing:

*Francesca kept a journal. The journal was a previously used ledger with headings such as "Dulee W. Flint Motor Sales" written in careful flowing cursive. In great contrast, interspersed throughout, is the hurried vertical scratch of Francesca's thoughts and ideas. There is vague punctuation and yet considerable attention to train of thought. The journal always lay open in the studio or our apartment near an ink pot and, for an elegant aesthetic continuity, Francesca kept most entries in ink by way of nib and reservoir, just as the previous owner had.*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Townsend, *Francesca Woodman*, 2006, 236

<sup>4</sup> Riches, 'A Disappearing Act', 2004, 95.

<sup>5</sup> George Woodman, ed., 'Seething with ideas', 2006, 240: *These affectations of style she referred to as her Steinwriting. While remembering that no direct connection exists between the Book under discussion and the selected quotations, my hope is that words and images will invigorate each other.*

<sup>6</sup> George Woodman, ed., 'Seething with ideas', 2006, 240.

<sup>7</sup> Rankin, 'Francesca Woodman: Photographs', 2003, 5.

George Woodman talks about Gertrude Stein's influence on his daughter's journal writing in his introduction to the *Journal Extracts*, as quoted on p 156. Here he describes the word and image connections of the process:

*Frequently there are brief descriptions of photographs she planned to make, often with summary diagrams. Nearly all of these ideas became embodied in the photographs, which followed them closely.*<sup>8</sup>

As Woodman was just fifteen in 1973 we can forgive the affectation present in this extract from her journal:

*To catch up present shoelaces Cesca is about to go home which is tremendously exciting after a just-breath summer only I think bearable and treasured because I believe that it is the last of this sort*

*Oct 25*

*Maybe I like Thursdays the way I used to hate baths.*<sup>9</sup>

Comparisons, especially in the dissolution of syntax and the creative distribution and re-scattering of subject matter, can be made between these morsels from Woodman's journals and some extracts from Stein's *Tender Buttons* from 1914:

*A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing.*

*The change of color is likely and a difference a very little difference is prepared. Sugar is not a vegetable.*<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> George Woodman, ed., 'Seething with ideas', 2006, 240.

<sup>9</sup> George Woodman, ed., 'Journal extracts', 2006, 241.

<sup>10</sup> Stein, *Tender Buttons*, 1914. Online at <http://www.bartleby.com/140/1.html>, accessed 31/05/2010.

Stein's project in *Tender Buttons* has affinities with the experimental writing techniques evolved by André Breton and Philippe Soupault in 1919, drawn together as *The Magnetic Fields*, as discussed in Chapter 1. These affinities exist in result and not in intention. A serviceable definition of Stein's project is given in *Wikipedia*:

*...word clusters chosen for their prosody, juxtaposed for the purpose of subverting commonplace dictionary meanings which Stein believed had largely lost their expressive force and ability to communicate.*<sup>11</sup>

The first image of *Portrait of a Reputation* (fig 141) depicts Woodman shot in centre frame standing square on to the camera with one long gloved arm raised diagonally over her chest. Dressed in an assortment of vintage garb, in demure, *Mary Jane* character, she seems to confront her embarrassment for an audience to scrutinise.

*Here is Francesca dressed nicely and smug, hands folded. And then here are her hands.*<sup>12</sup>

Her rarely photographed face is flushed (perhaps with rouge), a little puffy and emitting a look of resignation. So why does this pose bring a soldier in line for a uniform and arms inspection to mind, when her outfit, a crochet cardigan over a plain vintage dress, is such an antithesis of that? Her arm with an un-gloved hand, held straight down her side in some way resonates a rifle held steady at a soldier's side during an inspection. The tops of two more gloves, spare tropes, are taped to

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<sup>11</sup> Online at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tender\\_buttons:\\_objects,\\_food,\\_rooms](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tender_buttons:_objects,_food,_rooms), accessed 31/03/2008.

<sup>12</sup> George Woodman, ed., 'Journal extracts', 2006, 245. This excerpt from Notebook #6 is undated but I would place it at 1975-1976, or later possibly contemporary therefore with the Book.

the studio wall in line with her un-gloved hand of flesh (in half shot). It is notable that the hand we view fully and clearly is the gloved one.

The popular surrealist trope and Freudian fetish of the glove had been explored in a series of etchings made just before Freud's work was known, by Max Klinger. The series had been exhibited in New York in 1974 and could very well have been seen by and have influenced Woodman.<sup>13</sup> Riches has explored this possibility lucidly in her illuminating paper 'A Disappearing Act: Francesca Woodman's *Portrait of a Reputation*'.

She strongly argues too that Woodman demonstrates her knowledge of Man Ray's *Veiled Erotic* series of Meret Oppenheim in the studio of Louis Marcoussis throughout this Book. Riches suggests that Woodman extends the allegory constructed by Man Ray between the female figure (particularly that figure's hand) and the paper surface before the appearance on it of the printed image. This intriguing analysis adds fuel to my argument about the depth of the artist's knowledge of surrealist practice.

She extends her discussion of Woodman's use of the glove into the only analysis I have found to date of a superb Roman Café series of photographs by Woodman,

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<sup>13</sup> Max Klinger, *Ein Handschuh* ('A Glove'), a series of ten etchings first published in 1881. The whole series had been exhibited at New York's Carus Gallery in 1974 and had directly influenced Woodman's contemporary Duane Michals to make his own narrative sequence (*The Pleasures of the Glove*) in a photographic response to Klinger's cycle (Riches, 'A Disappearing Act', 2004, 102).

which Riches views as another full response to Klinger's etchings *Ein Handschuh* (from 1881, and reprinted in 1977).<sup>14, 15</sup>

*Photography is too connected with life. I take pictures of reality as filtered through my mind. All these are too instinguish [sic] connected.*<sup>16</sup>

In the second image of this short Book (fig 142) Woodman photographs herself with a naked torso. Operating as 'shock' after the first image's quality of the demure, the folds of her rolled down skirt reveal her navel symbolising a third smaller eye than the 'eyes' of her nipples (or mouth, in reference to her *Flesh*, which in turn references Magritte's painting from 1934, *The Rape*).<sup>17, 18</sup> Between her breasts is held the same gloved arm and hand as that of fig 1, but this time the hand is stretched a little more tautly Her other arm, bent behind her back, is printed in a deep tone.

An erasure of her neck and lower face constructs a fissure of identity which pushes her torso into a stark separation. Almost-erased through deep tone her hair and face merge to become one soft-edged blob: an *informe*. In a technical judder which bifurcates physical form in a formulation of Barthes's *that has been* with a possible 'that will be', two thirds of Woodman's face is reinstated in a clear image hovering above the print's edge. Read (over-romantically perhaps) as a sun rising

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<sup>14</sup> See Bonito Oliva, *Francesca Woodman* (Palazzo delle Esposizioni catalogue), 2000, 98-103. This is a different sequence (or at least differently ordered) from that reproduced in Riches, 'A Disappearing Act', 2004, 103-106.

<sup>15</sup> Riches, 'A Disappearing Act', 2004, 102. Klinger's etching series had also influenced Breton and other surrealists, of course, as well as Gérard de Nerval's earlier (1850) story *La Main enchantée*.

<sup>16</sup> George Woodman, ed., 'Journal extracts', 2006, 243. Excerpt from Notebook # III, August-December.

<sup>17</sup> See Bonito Oliva, *Francesca Woodman* (Palazzo delle Esposizioni catalogue), 2000, 52.

<sup>18</sup> For an in-depth analysis of these and other connections, see Suleiman, 'Dialogue and Double Allegiance', 1998, 128-154.

above a horizon, it has resonances too of Lewis Carroll's Cheshire cat: beyond the frame, in the liminal sphere, that mysterious *other*.<sup>19, 20</sup> Here, this after-image is a meaningful manipulation of the printing process and could contain the symbolic consequence of a psychic split between spirit and physical body.

The power of the glove as a trope and Woodman's conversance with its potency and its sex appeal, in its multi-finger-sheathing, *vaginal connotations of the glove's interior* and its present-object reminder of an absence that is the fetish, is well documented and analysed by many surrealist and post-Freudian scholars.<sup>21</sup>

The pervasive impact of the glove in *Nadja*, famously photographed as a fossilised fetish in bronze and as a wistful trace and dynamic emblem of desire, in a recorded *real* episode in the text, would naturally have ricocheted to Woodman.<sup>22, 23</sup>

*I'm sitting in a chair sewing  
the camera sees me sewing then looks up at my face I look up talk  
about women mediocrity myself whatever very sweetly camera out  
to full frame then back to my sewing I raise my hands which I  
have carefully sewed together with black thread.*<sup>24</sup>

The third image of the Book (fig 143), shows Woodman in an apparent gesture of surrender, perhaps before a dramatised weapon-wielding stranger, the

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<sup>19</sup> As in *Space*; see Bonito Oliva, *Francesca Woodman* (Palazzo delle Esposizioni catalogue), 2000, 72, for example.

<sup>20</sup> As in the *Angel* series, see Chandès, *Francesca Woodman* (Fondation Cartier exhibition catalogue), 1998, 101, for example.

<sup>21</sup> Riches, 'A Disappearing Act', 2004, 101.

<sup>22</sup> Breton, *Nadja*, 1999, 57.

<sup>23</sup> Breton, *Nadja*, 1999, 55-56: *I don't know what there can have been, at that moment, so terribly, so marvellously decisive for me in the thought of that glove leaving that hand forever.*

<sup>24</sup> George Woodman, ed., 'Journal extracts', 2006, 245. Excerpt from Notebook #6 (undated).



symbolisation of a male sexual predator, perhaps, or of the affront of an external influence that interferes with her controlled existence. Her face is in clear focus here and in its direct confrontation of the camera it contrasts strongly to the doubling of the face in the previous image (fig 142), yet repeats the direct gaze of fig 141. Here the black-gloved arm that was held in a diagonal across her chest in the first two images is transferred into its indexical trace. A deliberately clumsy outline of it has been painted onto her torso. This creates a sense of speed of action, a sequence reminiscent of the *polyphoto* sheet pages common in the 1950s. And of a flick book, the pages of which, when turned fast, create apparent movement from the still and closely developed images.

Two first wave surrealist precursors shared Woodman's involvement with identity slippage and self imaging, Hans Bellmer and Claude Cahun:

*All dreams return again to the only remaining instinct, to escape from the outline of the self.*<sup>25</sup>

*Where shall I put the silvering? On this side or the other; in front of or behind the pane? In front. I imprison myself. I blind myself. What does it matter to me, Passer-by, to offer you a mirror in which you recognise yourself, even if it's a deforming mirror and signed by me... .*<sup>26</sup>

Woodman cringes and shrinks in the fourth image of the Book (fig 144). In a repeat of the three-quarter figure of fig 141, here she is completely nude and yet her nudity is sabotaged by the untidy marks of the fictive absent intruder. In

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<sup>25</sup> Hans Bellmer, quoted by Hal Foster, 'Violation and Veiling in Surrealist Photography: Woman As Fetish, As Shattered Object, As Phallus', in Jennifer Mundy, ed., *Surrealism: Desire Unbound* (exhibition catalogue, Tate Modern, London, 2001-2002), London, Tate Publishing, 2001, 208.

<sup>26</sup> Claude Cahun, quoted by Dawn Ades, 'Surrealism, Male-Female', in Mundy, ed., *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, 2001, 188.

perfect control of this visualisation of a desire-become-nightmare, she is the actor of all roles. The fusion of her subjective and objective positions is, in this Book's sequence, highly uncomfortable. Present in this image is a symbolisation of her own desire and the dichotomy between her desire-to-be-desired and her antipathy to it, which is here and throughout her practice, simultaneously displayed and withheld.

The untidy marks in black paint or ink link this series to Woodman's *Splater Paint* series, made in Rome in 1978 and as Riches argues, to Man Ray's *Veiled Erotic* series. Woodman conceivably identifies with Oppenheim's dual role as actor and model in the series and interacts herself, with Oppenheim, in a symbolisation of the print making process which conflates the female figure with paper.<sup>27, 28</sup> So Woodman's knowledge of the *Veiled Erotic* series here becomes a palpable thread. She makes the top black mark, a black hand-claw, both cover and obliterate her left breast and 'seize' it. Extraordinarily, the typography of this mark exactly echoes the mark Oppenheim would have made forty years earlier had Oppenheim's inked arm and hand been printed out into an image. The lower ink/paint mark obscuring her pubis collapses the identity of a hand. The deep tone of both marks accentuates the artist's shrinking pose by bringing the marks closer to our eye. Woodman shrinks, is coy, timid, embarrassed; yet finally reconciled.

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<sup>27</sup> Riches, 'A Disappearing Act', 2004, 97-99.

<sup>28</sup> As David Lomas posits in 'The Omnipotence of Desire: Surrealism, Psychoanalysis and Hysteria', in Mundy, ed., *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, 2001, 224, *Oppenheim was to argue in later life that each human being had both male and female elements, and ... [believed] that gender was a potentially fluid, unstable category.*' – an identity slippage to which Woodman would have responded.

*I think when I get home I should take pictures of objects: purse, hand, etc “clues to a lost woman”, also objects with flesh. Touch up highlights on objects or flesh with vaseline...*<sup>29</sup>

These two marks re-form in the last image of the Book (fig 145), as two small, fainter hand prints, traces which recede in space. The artist's physical presence is annihilated in disappearance. Only the prints of touch remain. Her hand prints emanate innocence after the torment of experience which preceded this image and we cannot, perhaps, look at them after *Sensation* in 1997, without remembering Marcus Harvey's portrait of Myra Hindley, made from children's hand prints.<sup>30</sup> And Woodman's hand-prints make a delicate and poignant end to a gripping tale. At this point Woodman has retired offstage, vanished into another sphere. The intensity of this emotional enactment is too much for her. The four images in which her rouged face is (very unusually) visible, create an alarming honesty and provide an openness to her own and her audience's scrutiny (and mock disapproval) which necessitate in this series the final and habitual *Disappearing Act*.<sup>31</sup>

Embedded in *Portrait of a Reputation* is the combination of a visual exposure of an extreme vulnerability coupled with a powerful and subtle control of that exposure throughout technical prowess and wide knowledge. In *Portrait of a Reputation* the expression of vulnerability is raw and poignant. I justify quoting

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<sup>29</sup> George Woodman, ed., 'Journal extracts', 2006, 241. Excerpt from Notebook # 1 (1973).

<sup>30</sup> This was an exhibition at London's Royal Academy curated by Norman Rosenthal. The Hindley portrait caused a reaction strong enough for public physical assault and it eventually had to be withdrawn from display in the exhibition.

<sup>31</sup> Riches, 'A Disappearing Act', 2004, her title phrase.

Woodman's *Poem about 14 hands high* here in full, as it provides a vital key to understanding this complex artist.<sup>32</sup>

***Poem about 14 hands high***

*I am apprehensive. It is like when i  
played the piano. first I learned to  
read music and then at one point i  
no longer needed to translate the notes:  
they went directly to my hands. After a  
while I stopped playing and when i  
started again I found I could not  
play: I could not play by  
instinct and I had forgotten how  
to read music.*

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<sup>32</sup> Heller, *Incommunicado*, 2003, 100.