

# Transformations and Disappearances: The Presence of the Artist in the Work of Francesca Woodman

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The photos that Francesca Woodman created during her short life (1958-1981) are at once striking and subtle, often provocative but also playful. There is a constant character of exploration that defines her work. Among all of the themes and concepts Woodman plays with in the work, there are two shared traits that seem particularly pre-eminent: the dual themes of transformation and disappearance. These themes are often explored through images of her body's relationship with intensely textured interior spaces, the surfaces of which are deeply reminiscent of those so often photographed by her professor at the Rhode Island School of Design, Aaron Siskind. These traits are present throughout much of her work, specifically in the works she created of herself. This fact has caused many viewers to question the relationship between her often hauntingly styled photos and her eventual suicide that took place in New York in 1981. By investigating a small selection of Woodman's self-depictions, it is possible to re-contextualize the themes of transformation and disappearance as central to the development of feminist art of the 1970s, rather than exclusively indicative of Woodman's much-discussed psychological state.

Woodman was a prodigious maker of self-depictions. These images, which were created regularly throughout her career, give the viewer a multifaceted depiction of the figure Woodman seeks to portray. Created nearly exclusively in black and white and often

bearing evidence of the photographic process, these images are haunting in the simultaneous likeness and unlikeness they create of Woodman. Though Woodman is physically present within these works, the images break from the historical tradition of "self-portraiture" in a variety of ways. There is no visual claim that these images are depicting the artist as one may find in earlier prototypes where artists often portrayed themselves with the tools of their trade. For instance, in the self-portrait of seventeenth century Dutch painter Judith Leyster, the artist makes a concerted effort to depict herself in the role of an artist. Leyster leans back jauntily in her chair and holds out the instrument of her craft, her paintbrush. A canvas representing her productivity is seen in front of her as she engages the viewer with her gaze. This conceit is not relevant for Woodman who, working in the mid-twentieth century, would have seen the art-making process quite differently from her seventeenth century counterpart. Woodman, as a student, is said to have used herself as the model for her works mainly due to the convenience of the practice.<sup>1</sup> This theory suggests that the content of the works would have been identical had Woodman been able to easily procure models aside from herself. In this way, she projects onto herself and performs herself what she would have asked of other people, acting as an orchestrator of movement and performance.

The concept that Woodman was not interested in portraying herself personally in these images is supported by the basic definition of what an artist is that was instilled in Woodman at an early age by her parents. Woodman was born into a family of artists. Her mother Betty was a ceramist and her father George was a painter. Her parents were focused on their work and in a recent documentary, *The Woodmans*, directed by Scott Willis, they stressed the seriousness they conveyed to their children about their profession.<sup>2</sup> In that same documentary, the couple also points out that they always promoted the idea that artist intention should be removed from the art-making process. This is significant because Woodman would likely have absorbed that idea from a young age. Woodman's up-

1 Peggy Phelan, "Francesca Woodman's Photography: Death and the Image One More Time." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27.4 (2002): 979-1004

2 *The Woodmans*, Dir. C. Scott Lewis. Perf. George and Betty Woodman. Lorber Films, 2011

bringing in a home so dedicated, not only to the concept of making things, but also to being this type of artist, is important.

As a child, Woodman often visited museums in Italy, where her family had a home. While in the museums, her parents would give the artist and her brother sketchbooks and allow them free rein of the expansive collections.<sup>3</sup> Woodman recorded the images of women she saw in the collections of European museums, and in that way, began to form an understanding of how women were presented throughout the canon of art history. She began taking photos at the age of 13, commencing with an image of herself, with an amateur camera given to her by her father. Soon, her father noticed that her interest in photography had expanded greatly and she had developed a voracious appetite for creating images. In spite of this self-interest, Woodman's experiments are unrelated to her own personality as evidenced by the stylistic interpretation considered by many leading scholars. In *Bachelors*, her important collection of essays, Rosalind Krauss points to Woodman's works as answers to universal questions of how images are made.<sup>4</sup> In this way, then, Woodman's images must be understood as a diary of conceptual concerns rather than a collection of self-representations grounded in her emotional states or activities. This fact is evidenced further upon careful inspection of the visual structure of works throughout her production.

In Woodman's *House* series, completed during her undergraduate years at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence (1975-1979), the artist is seen transforming herself and disappearing into the environment. She is subsumed by the house, encompassed in it, and made a literal and structural element in the space. In *House #3* dating to 1976, Woodman is seen in the derelict parlor of a decrepit home in Providence (Fig. 1). The plaster walls of the room collapse onto a floor buckled by age and water infiltration. Woodman's scurrying movement is captured by a long exposure as she slides down the wall just beneath the bright light of a window. Woodman looks frightful and ghost-like. She moves away from the viewer in an apparent effort to escape and her body is seen turned

towards the viewer's right. Above her is the window, which, along with a window at left, provides the only illumination for the space. Perhaps she is not only escaping the viewer, but also ducking out of view of someone outside. In the foreground, there is something curious: on the plane of the floor, there is a clear photographic anomaly where it appears that a single rectangular space has been "dodged" in the printing process. Around this box is the halo of a photographic burn. The diagonal box creates an avenue by which the viewer is able to travel directly to Woodman's figure. This method of printing points in an interesting way to Woodman's process, which has been cited by at least one colleague as "sloppy."<sup>5</sup> Intentional or not, however, this anomaly provides more depth to the image and serves as a reminder to the viewer that this is, in fact, a product of the artistic process, rather than an illusion of reality.

In the fourth image of her *House* series, taken in the same location as the third, the artist begins literally to form a relationship with the physical space (Fig. 2). The room is now tilting. The right-hand side of the space rises up while the left slides away. The mantel, seen from a different angle in the third image, has now become detached from the hearth. Woodman positions her body behind the architectural fragment. Her legs splay out, one on either side of the mantel frame. Woodman shakes and spasms while her movements are captured by the magic of the long exposure. This reprisal of the act of movement also seen in the third image resembles a performance caught on film. The camera once again halts her movements and she is once more frozen in the dilapidated room that itself seems to jerk and sway to the rhythm of her body. The dark and threatening opening of the fireplace is counterbalanced by the light of the windows, but there is a tension between the two as the light brings one leg forward and the dark swallows up the other. Unlike the third image, the fourth does not allude so directly to the photographic process but, instead, takes advantage of the capacity for story-telling that the photograph offers. It is now clear in both works that Woodman is being taken over by the house. This take-

<sup>3</sup> Lewis, *The Woodmans*

<sup>4</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss. *Bachelors*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999

<sup>5</sup> Stephan Brigidi. Personal interview. 11 July 2012

over points to a fascinating trope in the larger context of feminist art production.

The theme of the woman in relation to the domestic space of the house is a rich metaphor, particularly when viewed through the lens of second-wave feminism. The noted scholar Linda Nochlin raises the issue that in most of the canon of art history, women were defined in the visual tradition, at least in part, by their “defining domestic and nurturing function.”<sup>6</sup> The concept of the woman’s relation to the home is explored in depth in Woodman’s *House* images in a way that strikes a different tone. This is unlike works such as the 1947 image *Woman House* by French sculptor Louise Bourgeois in which the female body appears to be trapped within the cage of the domestic space (Fig. 3). Woodman uses the medium of photography to portray the woman as a transformative figure who is negotiating her relationship with the domestic space. While Bourgeois’ woman is an inmate, Woodman’s is transitioning into becoming a part of the house. While the figure in *Woman House* appears to be stuck inside a house, the figure in Woodman’s imagery exercises the option of disappearing or transforming.

The fact that Woodman disappears into the background of a house is significant. Many authors have cited this element of Woodman’s imagery as important to what would, after her death, be particularly associated with the feminist interrogation of woman as domestic captive.<sup>7</sup> In the 1970s, at the height of the development of second-wave feminist theory, this theme becomes increasingly important. Woodman’s interest in the status of a woman within the domestic space at this same time is telling on several fronts: it evidences Woodman’s familiarity with feminist art and theory, and it enables the viewer to read the disappearance of the artist as a fact that is unrelated to her later suicide, a factor which scholars have tended to read back into her work. Woodman should be understood to be playing out the role of all women in her disappearance into the domestic space, which is differentiated from earlier works such as Bourgeois’ in her active struggle against it. This notion of disappear-

ance into other spaces continues to appear in her works, including similar projects created while she was a student.

In her *Space 2* series of 1977, another project from her years at RISD, Woodman is enveloped once more by the fabric of the house (Fig. 4). In a similarly ancient-looking room, Woodman’s body transforms yet again. She becomes a chameleon against the decaying wall. Her head is not visible in the picture plane, and her breasts and lower body are covered by the remnants of wallpaper that have detached from the wall in front of which she stands. Her stomach and feet are bare and visible, forming an interesting counterpart to her covered torso and legs. The image is striking for several reasons. It shows Woodman still, unlike the images of the artist in motion in the *House* series. Here, without struggle, Woodman literally begins to embody the architectural space by applying herself to its surface. While the previous images could be classed as transformations insofar as they display Woodman changing before the eyes of the viewer, this image presents the artist as a static element of the house. The sight of woman becoming object, particularly in regard to the bark-like wallpaper that covers her, calls to mind the ancient myth of Daphne, who, fleeing from Apollo, was transformed into a tree to escape his grasp. As Daphne takes on the identity of a tree in Greek myth, so Francesca takes on the identity of the house. This may be the first allusion to a classical story that Woodman will later reprise in a much more direct and literal way. Here, though, the viewer can see the foundations of this stylistic curiosity, which continues throughout her work. The series of images from *Space 2* continues with more exploration of transformation in a reprisal of the active performance from earlier works.

In another image from *Space 2* (Fig. 5), Woodman returns to a study of the transformation of the artist’s body by way of long exposure, a technique that is at once lively and anxiety-provoking, and that, by virtue of its many appearances in her production, Woodman clearly enjoyed. In this image, the artist shakes her head before the open lens of her camera. Her face disappears and her

6 Linda Nochlin. *Women, Art, and Power: And Other Essays*. New York: Harper & Row, 1988

7 M. Catherine De Zegher. *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art In, Of, And From the Feminine*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996



Figure 1: Francesca Woodman, *House #3*, 1976



Figure 2: Francesca Woodman, *House #4*, 1976

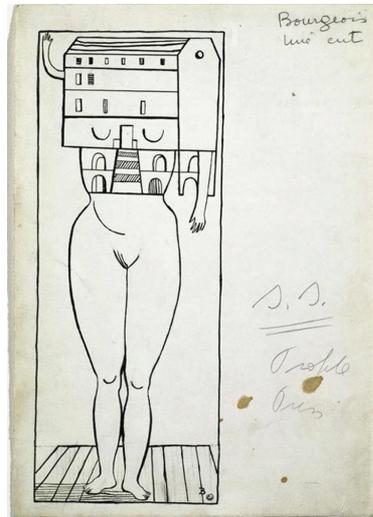


Figure 3: Louise Bourgeois, *Femme Maison*, 1947, Museum of Modern Art, New York



Figure 4: Francesca Woodman, "Untitled" from *Space 2* series, 1977



Figure 5: Francesca Woodman, "Untitled" from *Space 2* series, 1977

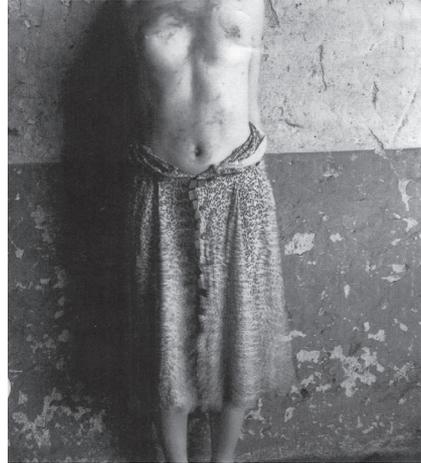


Figure 7: Francesca Woodman, "Untitled" from *Roma series*, 1977-78



Figure 6: Francesca Woodman, "Untitled" from *Space 2* series, 1977



Figure 8: Aaron Siskind, *Chicago*, 1948

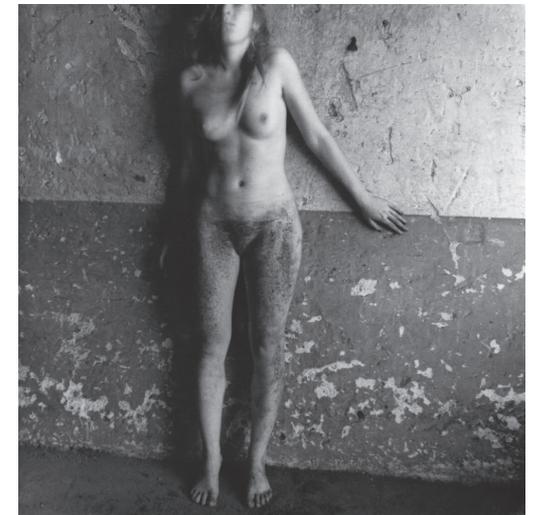


Figure 9: Francesca Woodman, "Untitled" from *Roma Series*, 1977-78



Figure 10: Francesca Woodman, *Untitled*, 1979



Figure 11: Francesca Woodman, Detail from *Daphne* series, 1980



Figure 12: Ana Mendieta, "Untitled" from *The Tree of Life* series, 1977



Figure 13: Francesca Woodman, *Caryatid*, 1980

head becomes an abstract mass on a clear, present, and sharply delineated body. In another, similar image from the series, Woodman lurches her body forward (Fig. 6). These works, like the early *House* images, are focused on showing movement, but now the artist is in a much more banal, non-threatening space which she commands. These movements, divorced from the imagery of the domestic space, do not share the contextual weight of the *House* images. They are simpler in their connotations and appear as studies of the way a body interacts with space. The absence of a clearly delineated head or face, while ripe for psychoanalysis, places the viewer's focus squarely on the body and its interaction with space. This stylistic approach brings this work directly in line with Woodman's central visual thesis: the relationship between female figure and built environment. In order to get a better grasp of these stylistic explorations, it is important that the viewer have a broader context of Woodman's life at this time.

Woodman traveled to Rome with the RISD European-Honors Program in 1977. Stephan Brigidi, now a respected American photographer and professor, was in Rome at the same time as Woodman. Brigidi had recently graduated with his Master of Fine Arts in Photography from RISD and, accompanying the RISD undergraduates during his Fulbright year, had sublet Woodman's apartment. Thus, his opinions and insights into Woodman's personality may be valuable, as he shared the space in which she lived and worked during her time in Rome. He notes that she frequently left her journal writings on loose paper all about the apartment and cites them as "erotic." These, he said, had a certain quality of freedom which he also sees in her photographs, and has been noted in her personality.<sup>8</sup> Brigidi also outlines the relationship of Francesca to her peers and professors, particularly Aaron Siskind, a well-known photographer and Woodman's teacher at RISD. Brigidi believes that Siskind did not take Woodman's work seriously. He admits that this may be due, in part, to Siskind's own personality, but it was apparent Siskind worried that Woodman was flighty and messy. This being

said, Brigidi also believes that, at least at the time he interacted with Woodman in the late 1970s, her work had not yet fully matured. Brigidi also points to the fact that the images presented of Woodman in her own body of work are not images of who she really was: "what we know through her photography is her persona".<sup>9</sup> This supports the idea that the images Woodman is creating of herself are not self-portraits in the literal sense. They depict different types or stylistic tropes that Woodman was interested in exploring but cannot really be said to tell us anything about her personal struggles.

While in Rome, Woodman created still more depictions of herself and reprised the concepts of chameleon-like disappearance and absorption by the physical world. In one image from her *Roma* series, Woodman presents herself once more against a bare wall (Fig. 7). She is the single focal point and lacks specific context. The image solely presents Woodman and the wall, which, as in her *House* images, appears to be in a poor state of repair. This worn textural quality is reminiscent of many of the surfaces her professor Siskind explored in his own work. In this image, she is nude from the waist up and once again, as in the image of Woodman beneath wallpaper, her head is missing. The viewer sees only a body, matching the wall behind Woodman in its two tones. Below her waist, she is covered by a delicately patterned dress, the top of which has been pulled away to expose her breasts. The skirt of the dress matches the lower half of the wall in its patterned implications and splits her in half at the waist. She does not completely disappear into the wall, but like a chameleon, changes only on the surface. Her skin becomes the skin of the wall in its matching tones and patterns. A deep shadow cast to the left of her body reveals that, although she matches the wall, she is not part of it. Perhaps, again, this is a domestic space. There is an uncertainty about the atmosphere, a removal of content which renders the piece as yet another stylistic exploration as she takes on the motif of which Siskind was so fond. In his work of 1948, *Chicago*, Siskind, too, explores the deeply textured surface of peeling paint on a wall (Fig. 8). Woodman adopts this pattern but inserts

<sup>8</sup> Brigidi, Personal interview

<sup>9</sup> Brigidi, Personal interview

the female body into a space that Siskind leaves vacant, depicting a transformative relationship between the woman and space.

In another image from this series, Woodman presents herself in a nearly identical situation. She is, once again, placed against what is apparently the same two-tone wall, but this time has removed her skirt and is totally nude (Fig. 9). The lower half of her body is decorated with a thin layer of what appears to be soil. While this verifies her intention of matching the two-tone quality of the wall, she now takes on the nature of the wall in another dimension. Not only does she match it in tone or quality, but also in material. As the wall is composed of organic clay and plaster, so, too, is Woodman covered in the organic element of soil. The pairing becomes elemental as well as visual. Woodman's body also grows in this second image. Her arm, absent from the earlier image, is now outstretched across the wall and her face is contained within the picture plane. Her identity is simultaneously revealed and rebuked. The viewer is now able to see her face and her nude body, but she takes on the image and the concept of the wall. While she has transformed into a wall of her own, she has, once again, not disappeared into the wall in front of which she stands and casts her shadow as evidence of her three-dimensional reality. With the added knowledge of Siskind's style, the images from her *Roma* series can be read in two very divergent ways. First, they may be considered as a playful homage to the work of a professor and mentor she admired. They may also, however, be understood as assertive challenges to an authority figure with whom she may have had disagreements. No matter the conclusion, it is clear that these images are examples of Woodman exploring formal concepts she was interested in and had seen in the work of her professor and not necessarily depictions of an internal struggle.

These transformations are not only literal. In some images, Woodman alludes to biological as well as visual and formal relationships. In one photograph from her time spent in New York prior to her death, Woodman again depicts herself against yet another decrepit wall (Fig. 10). The plaster once more recedes to reveal the hidden structures behind the surface. In this case, there is a unique herringbone pattern formed by the lathe that once supported the

now-absent plaster. This image is particularly rich and striking in its use of conceptual and visual pairings. Woodman stands at the far left of the square picture plane with her back to the viewer. She is clothed in a backless cover-up, the tone and texture of which replicate the character of the wall. In this image, she does not merge with the wall as she has before. She holds up to her bare back the spine of a fish. This layering suggests several ideas. First, it acts as a unique external x-ray of the body. The spine of the fish mimics her own spine and reveals her inner structure in the same way that the flaking plaster reveals the structure of the wall. In this way, she associates herself with the wall and with the fish. She recognizes herself as a biological being, like the fish, and alludes to the sameness of bodily structures. She then goes further and alludes to the association of humans with the built environment. Like humans, structures have skeletons, and also like humans, buildings will eventually decay and die. The image is not one of morbidity, but one of truth, much like historic images of saints contemplating the skull, in which the implicit concept was the cognizance of death and not the pursuit of it. Here, Woodman reaches a new level of thought: through evocation, she examines what it is to exist.

Woodman's continued dialogue with the idea of transformation and disappearance culminates in her later works that take on these issues in a historical context. While working at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, Woodman created a unique collection of small photographs that retell the story of Daphne in modern terms. One of these images depicts Woodman amongst nature where she covers her arms in birch bark (Fig. 11). Her arms sway, matching the motion of the trees in the background. The image of Woodman as a tree is evocative of the *Tree of Life* series of images created by noted feminist artist, Ana Mendieta, in 1976. In one of Mendieta's images (Fig. 12), the artist covers herself in mud to replicate the texture of the tree. She, like Woodman, performs a transformative act, associating herself with nature. Both Woodman and Mendieta explore woman's relationship with nature through the lens of ancient myth. Whether there is influence from one to the other is difficult to determine, and perhaps, moot — both artists are engaging feminist renovation and interrogation of the

stereotype of woman as nature.

Also in 1980, in New York, Woodman created a series of caryatid images (Fig. 13). In one of the large format photos, a blue diazotype, Woodman wears an elaborately structured and highly starched garment that mimics the aesthetic of both classical drapery and classical columniation. She reaches her arms up and, turning her elbows at 45-degree angles, obscures her face with her hands. Her forearms create a structural brace that supports the top of the picture frame. Here, Woodman has come full circle: once more playing with the idea of being and becoming a structural object, she is no longer absorbed by the domestic space. She has instead placed herself as an integral part of a classical structure and engaged in a classical allusion, which, unlike her Daphne reference, plays back into her earlier structural explorations in an intriguing way. This image represents the culmination of a series of self-depictions in which the viewer sees Woodman repeatedly yet does not see her at all. Here, perhaps, is the finest example of the themes which Woodman considered consistently. Woodman is indeed in the image, but the photo is actually of a column, not of a woman.

The fact that Woodman committed suicide at a young age naturally provokes a certain level of questioning about the reason she so often transforms and disappears in her work. Are these disappearances a precursor to her disappearance or a wish for transformation? While this can be posited, there is ample evidence that these themes have much currency in feminist art of the 1970s. Woodman explores the relationship of woman and domestic space that Bourgeois considered and takes up the role of woman as nature imaged by Mendieta. The visual transformation and disappearances created by Woodman may not be explorations of her own personal demons but of woman, literal and temporal, in space. Woodman can therefore be understood as a young artist interested in exploring the same concepts as her contemporaries and in studying the changing relationship of woman in relation to her time.

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