Art of Our Time
Selections from the Ulrich Museum of Art
Wichita State University

Patricia McDonnell and Emily Stamey

With contributions by
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Photo-essay by Larry Schwarm

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Nan Goldin, who describes her photography as a visual diary, established her reputation with *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1979–86), an oft-reworked serial portrait of the artist and those nearest and dearest to her. In this pulsating record of intimacy and estrangement, good times and bad, no image is more powerful than one of the photographer herself, revealing evidence of physical abuse inflicted by her boyfriend. Another disturbing photograph captures Goldin’s wary face in a tableau that includes her batterer, who sits calmly smoking on the edge of a bed.

*Ballad* was first formulated as a slide show comprising hundreds of snapshotlike images, accompanied by a musical soundtrack whose compass ranged from the Velvet Underground to Maria Callas. The work appeared in an eight-hundred-image, forty-five-minute-long prerecorded version at the Whitney Biennial in 1985 and, a year later, was published in book form.1

Goldin was familiar with Larry Clark’s images of a drug underground in his book *Tulsa* (1971) and with Diane Arbus’s photographs of nudists, freak-show performers, and other individuals rendered grotesque when Arbus recorded them. But *Ballad* revealed the downtown New York scene in its raw ascendancy and caught the attention of the art world not only for its shock value but also for its artistry.

*Picnic on the Esplanade, Boston*, which is included in the published version of *The Ballad*, is an early, rather atypical Goldin image. It recalls a famous Henri Cartier-Bresson photograph from 1938 of a family picnic by the Marne River. There is an Arbus-like twist, however. Far from being what it might appear at first glance—a sweet birthday gathering of some girl friends—a second look raises a not-so-simple question: Just how many of those enjoying the cake are female? Here, Goldin’s snapshot style, every bit as artful as the Frenchman’s, differs considerably from the more formal approach of Arbus. Moreover, whereas Arbus was an outsider, Goldin, as she herself has written, is a member of the group.2 Although her camera bag and cigarettes are the only evidence of her presence, she is clearly within a circle of friends.

Goldin made the picture in Boston several years before her move to New York in 1978. Her post-*Ballad* photographs are in part a record of loss, including the ravages of AIDS, drugs, and other misfortunes: two people shown here did not survive. In the book version of *The Ballad, Picnic on the Esplanade* appears toward the end, as a reminder of the happiness Goldin found with that spirited group. “I used to think I’d never lose anyone as long as I photographed them enough,” she has said.3 But in the context of *The Ballad*, this image indicates a different, if equally melancholy idea, the one suggested by Marcel Proust’s observation that “the only true paradise is a paradise that we have lost.”4

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2. She noted, “I’m not crashing; this is my party.” *Ibid.*, 6.
About the Contributors

Toby Kamps is senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. He has organized exhibitions on the work of Vanessa Beecroft, Ellsworth Kelly, and Claes Oldenburg as well as such themed exhibitions as Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art (2000), Lateral Thinking: The Art of the 1990s (2001), and The Old, Weird America (2008).

Patricia McDonnell is director of the Ulrich Museum of Art. Her scholarly focus is upon European and American modernism, and she is a leading specialist on the painter Marsden Hartley. Her publications include Marsden Hartley: American Modern (1997), On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art (2002), and Painting Berlin Stories (2003).

Laura Moriarty is the author of three novels and the recipient of several literary awards. Before becoming a full-time writer, she was a social worker. Moriarty lives in Lawrence, Kansas, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Kansas.

Antonya Nelson has written three novels and published six short-story collections. She contributes often to the New Yorker and the New York Times Book Review. Nelson holds the Callen Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her award-winning novel, Living to Tell (2000), takes place in her hometown of Wichita, and her forthcoming novel, Bound, is set there as well.

Timothy R. Rodgers is director of the Scottsdale (Arizona) Museum of Contemporary Art. Formerly chief curator at the New Museum of Art, Santa Fe, he is involved in a range of writing and curatorial projects. His scholarly concentration is on American early modernism.

Robert Silberman is an associate professor of art history at the University of Minnesota’s Twin Cities campus. His chief scholarly interests have been photography, film, and contemporary art. Silberman collaborated with former New York Times photography critic Vicki Goldberg on the companion volume for the 1999 PBS series American Photography: A Century of Images.

Larry Schwarn is a professor of art at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas, and a nationally regarded photographer whose work has been shown at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. His 2003 book, On Fire: Larry Schwarn, won the Honickman Book Award and Prize.


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