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FANTASTIC TALES: THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF NAN GOLDBIN

"We all tell stories which are versions of history—memorized, encapsulated, repeatable, and safe. Stories can be rewritten, memory can't. If each picture is a story, then the accumulation of these pictures comes closer to the experience of memory, a story without end." —Nan Goldin

UNIVERSITY PARK, PA— Over the last thirty years, Nan Goldin has attained international fame as a photographer who, building on the tradition of Robert Frank and Diane Arbus, has documented the lives of outsiders. But in Goldin’s case, the outsiders are her bohemian friends, whom she depicts with poignant and sometimes brutal honesty.

The Palmer Museum of Art will exhibit Fantastic Tales: The Photography of Nan Goldin to provide fresh insight into this countercultural and often-controversial artist. Gerry and David Pincus are loaning a selection of photographs from their private collection for the exhibition jointly organized by the Palmer Museum of Art at The Pennsylvania State University and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia. The exhibition will travel to the Academy after its presentation at the Palmer through December 4, 2005.

Throughout her career, Goldin has recorded life as it presents itself, sometimes beautifully sweet and sometimes uncomfortably raw. Most often, Goldin has made the candid portrait of marginal Americans in the tradition of Robert Frank and Diane Arbus, but from the perspective of an insider. Her images are highly autobiographical—she is often an active participant in the bohemian worlds she documents. As such, her subjects, often her friends, exude a natural, if at times grotesque appeal. She has tenderly recorded women looking in mirrors, girls in bathrooms and barrooms, drag queens, people making love, and the culture of addiction.

In the past year, Goldin’s work has been featured prominently in two important exhibitions surveying very different aspects of the art world of the last few decades: SlideShow, organized by the Baltimore Museum of Art, a groundbreaking examination of the use of slide projection as a vital and viable art form in the late 1960s and 1970s, and East Village USA, a sprawling look at a substratum of the 1980s art scene, staged by the New Museum of Contemporary Art. Goldin is one of only two artists (the other is Jack Smith) to be included in both exhibitions, and the company she kept at these notable institutions—Helen Levitt, Dennis Oppenheim, and Robert Smithson on the one hand, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, and Jeff Koons on the other—suggests her significant and complicated presence in late twentieth-century art.
Fantastic Tales: The Photography of Nan Goldin confirms what collectors, curators, and critics have long known, namely that the scope of Goldin’s work extends well beyond the East Village slide performance that launched her career. Although visitors to the exhibition and readers of this catalogue may recognize certain characters from The Ballad, a new “cast” of performers in a broad range of locations has emerged. What has remained consistent in the artist’s career is the meticulous attention to the formal possibilities of the photographic medium, which translates to resplendent color, provocative and revealing compositions, and, despite often difficult subject matter, elegantly expressive works of art. Viewers will likely agree with Goldin, who has noted that while the people and locales in her pictures are particular and specific, the concerns addressed throughout her work are universal.

CATALOGUE
An 80-page catalogue, co-published with Tate Modern Publishing in London, Fantastic Tales will feature 44 color illustrations, affordably priced at $24.95 in cloth, available online at www.psupress.org. Essays by Jonathan Weinberg with Joyce Henri Robinson will accompany the exhibition. Weinberg’s essay for this catalogue considers a number of Goldin’s now classic photographs as well as her more recent, almost Baroque forays into landscape. In contrast to most-earlier writers on Goldin’s work, who have emphasized its documentary character, Weinberg addresses the ways in which Goldin’s photographs might be said to constitute “fantastic tales.” Weinberg considers the narrative construction of Goldin’s work from a double perspective—personal as well as critical—that complicates even as it enriches his interpretations.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS
Jonathan Weinberg’s many publications include Speaking for Vice (1993); Ambition and Love in Modern American Art (2001); and Male Desire: The Homoerotic in American Art (2005). He is co-editor of The Social and the Real, forthcoming from Penn State Press. His paintings are in the Metropolitan Museum of Art as well as other collections.

Joyce Henri Robinson is Curator at the Palmer Museum of Art and Affiliate Associate Professor in the History of Art Department, The Pennsylvania State University. Her numerous publications include An Endless Panorama of Beauty (2003) and Wos Up Man, forthcoming from Penn State Press.

EXHIBITION INFORMATION
Fantastic Tales will be on view at the Palmer Museum of Art from August 30 through December 4, 2005. The Palmer Museum of Art is located on the Penn State University Park campus. Museum hours are 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday and noon to 4 p.m. on Sunday. Admission is free. For more information about the exhibition, visit http://www.psu.edu/dept/palermuseum/exhibitions.html or contact Robin Seymour at 814-863-9182 or qz1@psu.edu.

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