

Francesca Woodman and Julia Margaret Cameron: Portraits to Dream In

**Curated by Magdalene Keaney
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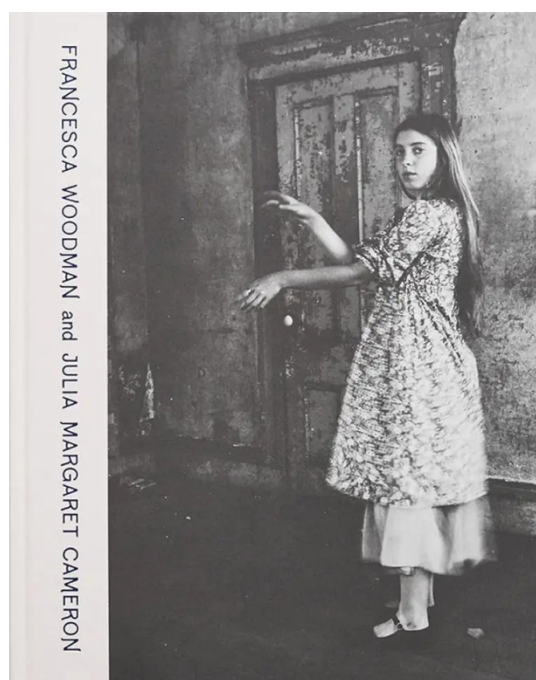
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THE EXHIBITION *Francesca Woodman and Julia Margaret Cameron: Portraits to Dream In*, which opened in March 2024 at the National Portrait Gallery in London, staged an unexpected dialogue between two artists seemingly unlikely to be brought together, separated as they are by a century and distinguished by geography: Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879), a British photographer primarily dedicated to pictorialist portraiture, and Francesca Woodman (1958-1981), an American photographer whose highly experimental and self-referential work was abruptly cut short by her suicide at the age of 22. Bringing together more than 160 photographic works, the exhibition takes dreams as material for reflection. At first glance, we might assume that the two artists shared nothing more than the technical medium that united them. However, Magdalene Keaney's curatorial approach demonstrates that there is an aesthetic and conceptual affinity between them, revealed as if they were ghosts within each other's compositions, both in the theatricality of the poses and in what might be considered a dissolution of boundaries between the visible and the invisible. Time separated them by a century, but dreams brought them closer, as if through a mirror.

Cameron was 48 when she was given a camera. She dedicated her compositions to mesmerizing portraits of the Victorian elite of the time, including Charles Darwin, members of her family, as well as works influenced by literary or biblical themes. Her portraits stood out as unprecedented in her era, and she is now recognised as one of the most admired Victorian photographers. She often sought inspiration for her photographs from other art forms, such as painting and literature, as well as from philosophy. In this way, she became one of the foremost figures of Pictorialism, shaped by the influences of Romanticism, the Pre-Raphaelite movement, and Impressionism. The Pictorialist movement gained prestige in the nineteenth century by asserting photography as a form of artistic expression as valid and noble as painting, with artists such as Oscar Gustave Rejlander and Alfred Stieglitz. The proximity of photography to painting, and the resulting rivalry between the two, encouraged a style of photography that mirrored the concerns and characteristics of painting. Through photomontages, manipulation of negatives, meticulous composition of the photographed scene, and exploration of photography as a medium, the resulting images were consciously heirs to the pictorial gaze. Their motifs and themes unfolded as mythological readings through a mystical lens, reflecting a profound interest in the relationship between humans and nature.

In a tireless effort to explore what photographic technique could offer, Cameron had no interest in demonstrating unquestionable technical rigour or in establishing a commercial imprint on her practice, a feature that drew criticism at the time. Instead, she enlisted friends, family members and household staff to participate in her compositions and stagings, with the aim of capturing moments of innocence, piety or passion, bringing them closer to modern incarnations of classical, religious and literary figures. For instance, a maid might embody a Madonna, her husband Merlin, her neighbour's daughter the infant Jesus, or, donning swan wings, Cupid or an angel (Daniel 2004). The performativity inherent in this theatrical dimension of her compositions is clearly evident in her images.

Cameron aspired to merge the real with the ideal in a single image, also imparting something intimate to contemporary notions of beauty and poetry, even if this meant foregoing the technical rigour regarded as exceptional by the standards of her time. There was, therefore, a certain disregard for the polished finish that, for instance, Oscar Gustave Rejlander meticulously constructed in his compositions, rendering the work of focusing, composition, and posing purely formal. Such choices underscore Cameron's extraordinary ability to infuse her images with a potent ethereal quality, a trait that set her work apart from commercial portrait studios. Over the course of her twelve-year career, she created a gallery of vivid and spectral portraits, establishing herself as a seminal figure in the history of photography and leaving behind more than 900 photographs.

The reception of Francesca Woodman's work has been profoundly shaped by her suicide in 1981, and it has consequently often been interpreted through the lens of death, which has, in effect, become an ontological condition of her *oeuvre*. Her work is therefore surrounded by the aura of the "interrupted artist", lacking a fully constituted career, which underscores the experimental, intimate, and investigative character of her practice. The autobiographical dimension of her images, particularly her self-portraits, further highlights the most intimate and mysterious aspects of her revelation. These images are marked by a collapse between subject and object, photographer and image, anticipating what may be considered one of the defining features of her work: the dissolution of boundaries. The issue of liminality is explored in relation to interior/exterior boundaries, with figures that are hidden, dissolved, or partially or wholly excluded from the composition. This is all accentuated by her audacious compositional endeavours and, above all, by Woodman's meticulous engagement with photography as a medium. Her use of long exposure enables a tension between space and time, presence and absence, challenging the notion that photography merely fixes the present moment. We thus witness her attempts to respond to questions that preoccupied her, such as Figure/Ground, Depth, and Light. Confronting these issues and persisting with them through the medium of images constitutes a form of thinking through them, a mode of working with them. It is therefore crucial to emphasise the procedural nature of her practice, rather than solely considering it after the tragic end of her life. Performativity emerges as a central aspect in accessing a deeper dimension of her work. Instances of this performativity can be observed in her choice to work in series, in the theatricality and staging of her images, through the selection of architectural spaces with specific features, and in the deliberate arrangement of objects. The tactile, sensual, and theatrical qualities of her work are further reinforced by the constant exploratory use of the body, her own and others', addressing themes such as sexuality, the representation of the feminine, and subjectivity. The scenographic dimension is particularly enhanced by the presence of geometric structuring and tensions: the geometry of space and time, vertiginous and oblique angles, and the very format of her images, as she used a medium-format camera.

While it is obviously impossible to prove that Woodman was familiar with Cameron's work, this remarkable exhibition revealed a striking correlation between the two artists across time. The exhibition was organised around thematic threads common to both artists: Angels, Mythology, Nature and Femininity, Men, Muses, and

Doubling. This juxtaposition of motifs is exemplified, for instance, in the shared fascination with the figure of the angel, or in the striking complementarity between a polka dot pattern on a dress by Woodman and the wallpaper forming the backdrop of Cameron's photograph entitled *Sadness* (1864). At times, the dialogue occurs through geometry, in the tensions of the invisible vectors that structure both artists' images, whether through the position of the hands, the direction of the gaze, or the posture of the body. Overall, the exhibition proposes a timeless choreography that brings together what initially seems distant.

The juxtaposition of their images did not only highlight what they had in common in terms of themes and motifs. Although Magdalene Keaney, curator of the exhibition, establishes a connection between Woodman and Cameron through their relatively brief careers and posthumous recognition¹, we witness the meeting of two artists who began their careers at opposite ends of the spectrum. Cameron, a self-taught practitioner, took up photography at a comparatively late age (48 years old); Woodman, by contrast, trained at art school and began photographing early, with the self-portrait that opens the exhibition having been taken when she was just thirteen. While Woodman is celebrated for her self-portraits, Cameron gained renown for her portraits of others.

The exhibition also revealed what set them apart as artists working in different eras, each drawing on different resources within the same medium. Cameron's camera apparatus consisted of a large wooden box, employing glass negatives, the wet-collodion process, and producing her images as albumen prints. Woodman received her first camera from her father in early adolescence. She worked with a medium-format camera, certainly more modern, discreet, and portable, printing her photographs in silver gelatin.

An approach to exhibition that focuses solely on formal aspects might seem superficial, yet the connections between the two artists run even deeper than what visually places them in dialogue, particularly when we consider the interweaving of their influences. Although the exhibition concentrated largely on these more evident links, both Cameron and Woodman explored the possibilities that photographic technique offered in their respective eras. Photography was not merely an image but an experiential and performative medium. Techniques such as selective focus or long exposure allowed something beyond the immediately visible to materialise in their images, creating the impression that the compositions were surrounded by a ghostly aura, hovering between the threshold of the mysterious and the beautiful.

It is also pertinent to emphasise the influence of art history and literature on both artists. As noted earlier, Cameron was strongly influenced by the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Her images bear the mark of painters such as John Everett Millais and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and of a certain medievalism, particularly in compositions depicting religious, literary, poetic, or mythological themes. Her portraits are distinguished by the intimacy and psychological intensity they convey, achieved through close-ups, deliberate blurring (simulating a misty glimpse), and dramatic lighting. In all of this, pictorialism can be linked to an intention to add a signature

¹ It is important to note that Woodman's reputation was carefully managed after her death by her parents, who were also artists: Betty Woodman and George Woodman.

to the production of images, reflecting the “subjectivity of the photographer” (Mendonça 2019, 69, my translation), much as a painter would do in the creation of their works.

It is therefore essential to underscore the influence of the Surrealist movement on Woodman’s work. Surrealism, alongside other *avant-garde* movements that emerged after the First World War, such as Russian Constructivism and the German Bauhaus, appeared in Paris during the “Roaring Twenties”. In this context, the drive for liberation and new visions gave rise to a fresh mindset. Photography was no longer regarded purely as a documentary or mechanistic practice, but became a form of subjectivity, an inward-looking gaze. This inward gaze was closely connected to psychoanalytic studies, encompassing hypnotic states, the unconscious, dreams, and delirium, fostering an increasingly experimental approach to technique. The Surrealists engaged directly with images, challenging conventional logic and elevating techniques such as photomontage, collage, and manipulation of photographic negatives, expanding both the scale and the effects of the compositions they produced. In this sense, their approach appeared to contradict and even provoke the prevailing photographic orthodoxy, which had been centred on faithful representation of reality. Surrealist photography is instinctive, hallucinatory, and deliberately *uncanny*. Freud studied this sense of strangeness, which he termed the *Unheimliche*, linking it more directly to the absurd and the unconscious realm of dreams. The guiding principle was to disobey all rules. Photography thus became the preferred medium of the Surrealists, with leading figures such as Man Ray, Claude Cahun, and Hans Bellmer. Susan Sontag’s book *On Photography* (1977) suggests that the photographic stance is inherently surrealist insofar as it generates new realities.

André Breton, author of the *Surrealist Manifesto* (1924), wrote *Nadja* in 1928, a literary work exploring the relationship between a narrator and a protagonist, who is simultaneously an object of desire. Addressing themes such as madness, desire, and impossibility, the story features a pair of gloves, which symbolise precisely the impossibility and inevitability of imagining the object of desire. This narrative directly influenced Woodman’s work, who, mindful of the symbolic significance of gloves, explored the relationship between object and subject through this motif across several compositions. By holding them or staging them as objects, the gesture of revealing and concealing constantly enters into dialogue within the various series she produced around this theme. Skillfully employing her own body (in an exploration of the feminine and the erotic), she both guided the viewer’s gaze through the positioning of the gloves and concealed parts of her body. The glove is symbolically the object of the dreamer’s desire, the catalyst of madness. The visual narrative focuses on approaches to this state of trance, pursuit, and continuous obsession, similar to those described by Breton in *Nadja*.

The visual explorations based on narratives by Cameron and Woodman weave countless interpretations and possibilities of intention into their works. The exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery dedicated a section to the theme “Mythologies”, demonstrating how visual correspondences emerge between each artist’s interpretation, while embracing the inherently exploratory nature of this process. Dreams, by their very nature, are open to a variety of interpretations, a premise that underpins the presentation of this theme.

Referring once more to the iconography of gloves, another notable series by Woodman can be considered. During one of her stays in New Hampshire, the artist donned dresses with distinctive patterns, closely resembling the textures of a tree trunk, and enveloped her arms in birch bark, creating a visual fusion with her own skin. The reference here is unmistakable: the myth of Apollo and Daphne. In *Metamorphoses*, Ovid dedicates an excerpt from Book 1 to recounting this myth. He narrates that Cupid fires two arrows: one of gold, which incites love, and one of lead, which repels it. Apollo, the Greco-Roman god of the Sun, is pierced by the arrow of love, compelling him to fall for the nymph Daphne. Meanwhile, Daphne is struck by the arrow of repulsion and immediately flees into the forest. Failing to evade him, she implores her father, Peneus, to let her “remain a virgin” (Ovid 2004, 49) and he transforms her into a laurel tree, allowing her to escape Apollo’s impassioned desire.

Her prayer was scarcely finished when she feels
a torpor take possession of her limbs —
her supple trunk is girdled with a thin
layer of fine bark over her smooth skin;
her hair turns into foliage, her arms
grow into branches, sluggish roots adhere
to feet that were so recently so swift,
her head becomes the summit of a tree;
all that remains of her is a warm glow. (Ovid 2004, 51)

Interpreted by Woodman and Cameron, the myth of Apollo and Daphne serves as a significant point of reference for both artists. Through this allegory, they articulate some of their most profound concerns and desires, such as the metamorphosis of the body, the significance of change, and a particular aesthetic of loss. Surrealist in her approach, Woodman employs the motif of gloves to mask herself, to become an object of desire in the manner of Daphne, and to transcend the boundaries of reality. Cameron, who acknowledges this association directly in the title she bestows upon the image, situates the myth within a realm of dream and imbues it with a distinct pathos through her composition, taking a portrait of Mary Pinnock, who is depicted as Daphne with laurel leaves on her chest and a fading gaze.

What stands out from this association is the dreamlike sensibility shared by the two artists across the century that separates them, evident both in the technical sophistication and the atmospheric quality of their images. The exhibition, which opened in London (and later in Valencia), revealed an innovative and unexpected dialogue between two artists who defy temporal boundaries, not falling into the mere formal connection that might otherwise link them. This exhibition presents us with something timeless, making possible an encounter between two artists that would otherwise seem impossible. The meeting of the two is, in fact, an open door to the possibility of dreams. The place of dreams is therefore always possible, timeless — it’s a place *beyond* existence.

For further information and access to images from the exhibition, please visit the website: <https://woodmanfoundation.org/>.

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