Vanishing acts

by Jeanne Schinto

Francesca Woodman, by Francesca Woodman, edited by Hervé Chandès. Zurich, Switzerland and New York: Scalo, 1998, 160 pp., $39.95 hardcover.

THE TWO TEENAGED GIRLS in the photograph are bare-breasted. Leaning shoulder to shoulder and hip to hip against the side of a clapboard house in Boulder, Colorado, they have opened their dresses, and we can guess that they are smiling because they know how provocative they look. The same height, with their hair fixed the same way, too—parted down the middle and casually pinned up in a recognizable style of the early 1970s—they could be twins, or at least sisters. They are only friends. One of the girls has her eyes shut, as in many an amateur's bungled snapshot. The other, gazing straight into the camera's lens, is Francesca Woodman, who also made the photograph.

Francesca Woodman presents more than a hundred of Woodman's early black and white images and several of her diazotype blueprints. It's startlingly good work. But if you know anything about Woodman you know that these early ones are all we've got. After graduation from high school in Boulder and from the Rhode Island School of Design, Woodman moved to New York, where one winter day she committed suicide by leaping from the window of her loft in the East Village. She was 22.

The commentaries in *Francesca Woodman* make mention of this grim fact, as of course they must. Her dates (1958-1981) raise the question, Why so young? The consequence of answering it, however, is to bring wider attention not only to Woodman's life and work but also to the circumstances of her death. Accordingly, many who see this book—or who visit the traveling exhibition it is meant to accompany, in France, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Great Britain—will find it hard to avoid looking for foreshadowings of Woodman's denouement. But trying to understand her psychological makeup through her photographs, even if it could be achieved, would be to miss the larger significance of her art.

Woodman spent her first two years of high school in Andover, Massachusetts, at the private all-girls Abbott Academy (which merged with Phillips Academy in the late 1970s). There she met an influential teacher, Wendy MacNeil Schneider, who later taught her at RISD, too. It is Schneider who is credited with recognizing that Woodman wasn't just another kid with a camera and who suggested that Woodman emphasize ideas over technique.

Woodman's art often seems to spring from mind-playfulness. During a stay at the MacDowell Colony, in the woods of New Hampshire, she made a series of photographs in which she blends herself with the beautiful white birches by wearing arm bands of their peeled bark. Less obvious and more poignant is a photo from the same series in which she simply holds a small sawed-off piece of birch by her side in such a way that it echoes the inside of her forearm: two kinds of limbs. Even the speckled dress she is wearing conveys the mystical theme of union.

Her frequent visual puns, suggestive of the surrealists, are sometimes macabre. A photograph from her Providence years, for example, shows a white face-mold, reminiscent of a hollow-eyed death mask, covering the crotch of an anonymous female nude. (Although it's undoubtedly Woodman, the head is cropped.) In Boulder, she found a gravestone with a hole in it, and made a picture of someone in the process of passing through it—leap-frog style—on all fours. The body is blurred, evanescent, ghostlike; only the stone is solid.

Those determined to psychoanalyze Woodman—to predict her early death retrospectively—will note all the windows she uses as props in her work. I find it much more interesting—and much more constructive—to observe that she was fascinated by transparency, perhaps because she was challenged by the technical difficulty of photographing clear objects. In one of my favorite series, *From Space Squared,* she photographed an old museum exhibition case, with herself crouched inside it, her hands and breasts pressed up against its sides. For other artists this exploration might have devolved into an attempt to portray a clichéd woman-on-display or woman-in-a-cage. For Woodman it seems to have been a fruitful exploration of the differences between flesh and glass.

LIKE MANY YOUNG ARTISTS, Woodman was drawn to exploring her own identity. In a photograph she made during her RISD years, two nude women stand against a wall, holding dour head shots of Woodman against their own faces. Off to one side is a third woman wearing only white knee socks and those Chinese black-cloth slippers that look like Mary Janes. She, too, is using one of the sad-sack head shots as a mask. Is this third member of the trio Woodman? (In several other pictures she is wearing those same shoes.) It doesn't matter if it is or isn't. The body really could be any young female's, after all. And perhaps that is Woodman's point. Considering their tilted torsos and lifted shoulders, I find it easy to imagine the three of them giggling behind those masks, sharing the joke, and Woodman saying that this time she meant nothing serious at all by this tableau.

Woodman once said she was her own favorite model for convenience's sake. ("I'm always available.") But she appears to have used images of herself so often for another reason as well. She was obviously fascinated by the idea of being both spectator and spectacle. Her art-school chum Sloan Rankin claims that it was actually she who shot some of the pictures in Woodman's series *Charlie the Model.* This occurred, Rankin writes in an affecting commentary, after Woodman decided to join the naked, laughing man with the Buddha belly in front of the camera, where they frolicked, hamming it up, with mirrors and other props, like a couple of children.

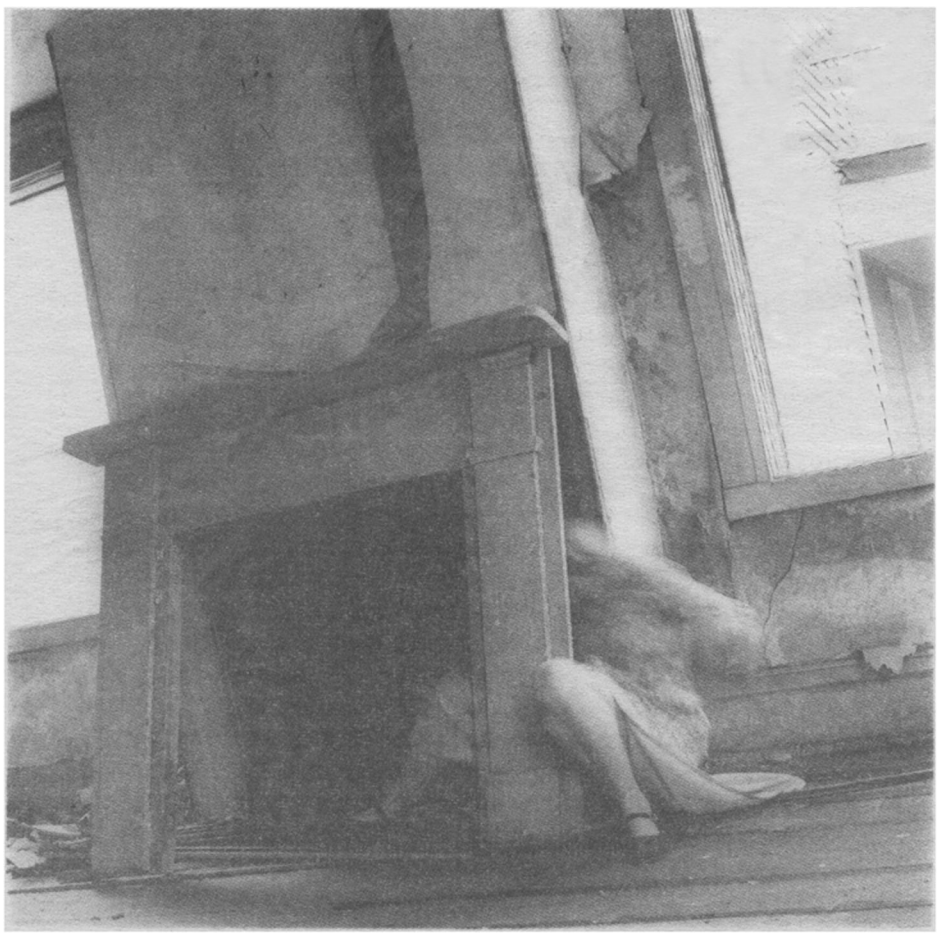
And yet it wasn't all simple-minded fun. Charlie, a long-time RISD studio model, had been drawn in charcoal on paper by students in art classes for years. Woodman was fascinated by the idea of trying to capture another kind of image of Charlie for once. "As she was drawn to the tactile qualities of objects," Rankin writes, "she also was determined to somehow power the gestures and unusual features of people she encountered."

"There is the paper and then there is the person" is Woodman's caption.

One critic has suggested that Woodman might have developed into a filmmaker had she lived, given her interest in series and staged tableaux. I would point out her interest in movement: the gesturing hand, the floating fragment of diaphanous material, the girl (again, Woodman herself) seeming to disappear behind the fireplace mantle that is separating from the wall in *House #4.*

Francesca Woodman, *Untitled*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-1978. From *Francesca Woodman*.

For an entirely different reason, Rankin says she "never had the impression that photography was really the medium best suited" for Woodman's talents. "Most photographers prefer a dust-free neatness," she writes, "but it seemed to me that Francesca was most at home in dust. (She also had a special fondness for mold.)"



Francesca Woodman, *House #4*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-1976. From *Francesca Woodman*.

Reading Rankin's words, I suddenly realized that the dilapidated buildings Woodman favored for her shoots probably didn't look dilapidated to her. And where else might she have felt so free to drape herself in peeling pieces of wallpaper, making virtual clothes of them? Or to splatter plaster (and, again, herself) with dripping paint, like an Action painter? Or to expose a little more of some crumbling wall in order to draw our attention to the similarities between lath design and the fish scale she is holding against her own similarly striated backbone?

Though the arrangement of *Francesca Woodman* is largely chronological, works from that terminal New York winter do not end it. Instead, the New York period comes earlier, and the last couple of images, showing pairs of women again, are from a sunny summer day in Stanhope, Washington, in 1979. That's appropriate, I think, since this first, big, well-designed hardcover book to display Woodman's art is not meant to be a finale. Not at all. Woodman left behind over four hundred more prints and several thousand negatives as well as a journal in which she jotted down ideas, often sketched them out, and wrote her own commentaries about the photographs she took. If we're lucky, we'll be seeing future books of and about her work in years to come, without witnessing at the same time the unnecessary and distracting creation of yet another tragic icon.

Commodity futures

by Carole Anne Taylor

The Traffic in Women: Human Realities of the International Sex Trade, by Siriporn Skrobanek, Nataya Boonpakdee and Chutima Jantateero. London, UK: Zed Books, 1997, 119 pp., $55.00 hardcover, $17.50 paper.

Night Market: Sexual Cultures and the Thai Economic Miracle, by Ryan Bishop and Lillian S. Robinson. New York: Routledge, 1998, 271 pp., $75.00 hardcover, $17.99 paper.

IN 1911, SHORTLY AFTER THE WOBBLIES began to organize prostitutes, Emma Goldman's *The Traffic in Women* enraged suffragists—appalled by a *white* slave trade—when she dared to assert the vote's irrelevance to the primary identity of prostitutes as exploited workers, whether in thrall to one man ("wife") or to many men. Now, few would contest Goldman's prescience about the vote's lack of effect on the gap between rich and poor, but her contention that prostitutes are workers still has a radical edge in a sustained, often tendentious debate: about where to locate first causes, about "pro-sex" or "anti-sex" strategies to confront deception and exploitation, and about the role of first-world feminists in analyzing or theorizing about the condition of women from third-world countries (or what Angela Miles calls the "two-thirds world").

My personal involvement with this debate began in 1986, when a Hong Kong brokered flight landed my family in Bangkok for several days after a Fulbright year in China. Like many tourists, we hunted for bargains and simultaneously became voyeurs at the street-front brothels where often terribly young bodies with placard-numbers stared bleakly back. The direct eye contact with faces and numbers haunted me; it had some inchoate connection to a marital fight about money, replete with all the usual issues involving control and sex. The marriage took a couple more years to unravel, but some watershed had been passed. And in the effulgence of retrospective confusion, I signed up as a "foster-parent" with Parenthood International (now Childreach) requesting a child living in the rural poverty of Chiang Mai as some presumable link between myself and at least one child who would not become a prostitute.

That "adoptive" gesture has seemed more and more coopted over the following twelve years of strained pro forma correspondence between me and my "foster-child," primarily through language dictated to a mediating voice difficult to distinguish from the family-development enthusiasms of the organization's own deterministic description ("poor soil makes poor farmers"). Although there have been many books about the sex industry in Thailand, the two under review here—related in difference—strengthen the argument for the primacy of more complex international dialogue and for activisms supporting sex workers yet acknowledging their own solutions as partial. The second book also helps me understand why I have felt the embarrassment of self-convicted tokenism without quite understanding the cultural logic that took me from tourist bargains to child prostitutes to an organization that panders to the "limitless compassion" of sponsors at ease with imperial descriptions of the world.

THE PRODUCT OF A three-year study funded by both the Foundation for Women, an NGO in Thailand, and the Netherlands Foreign Ministry (through a grant to the Women's Autonomy Center of Leiden University), *The Traffic in Women* takes as part of its project a role in framing policy for governmental and non-governmental organizations, national and international, and in encouraging the autonomy of Thai women trying to stop local traffic from their villages. Its authors hope that developing an appropriate "research methodology" will link the right local women's voices with the policy-makers, that (in a future passive, alas) "by giving a voice to their suffering and to their stories of coercive journeyings, more awareness will be spread, and concrete actions will be taken across national boundaries to put an end to the human tragedies that occur." Consistent with that hope, the lead author, Siriporn Skrobanek, herself a Thai woman long active in criticizing governmental involvement in the sex industry, writes a preface as a representative of the Foundation for Women (but does not indicate the precise role of two coauthor-researchers, Nataya Boonpakdee and Chutima Jantateero).

The Traffic in Women provides valuable information about the mechanics, practices and routes of a trade dealing in women brought from provinces in northern and northeastern Thailand to work in the sex industry in Bangkok and Pattaya, or to migrate from there, usually as bonded labor, to the red-light districts of overseas cities. Fragments from interviews with sex workers document how the debt exacted from migrant sex workers increases dramatically at each stage along a route, how the discipline of agents and traffickers may become increasingly severe and how those who have been exploited by trafficking may themselves become agents in it.

The salutary action phase of this action research involves such projects as working with mothers trying to bring daughters home from Japan, setting up a migrant women's network, and recruiting sex workers who might have become agents for work educating villagers instead. The authors admit that such activism may or may not address the conditions on which migration feeds, as when the presence of women returning with wealth gained from prostitution aids agents who deliberately blur the distinction between prostitution and trafficking (making "choice" a problematic conception). The interview-fragments certainly support the decriminalization of sex work, but, overall, the book tends to supplement its careful description with somewhat truistic conclusions—"At present the level of cooperation between agencies within countries and between countries is inadequate," or "Governments whose women are trafficked have no wish for adverse publicity, and this may make them hesitate to uncover the extent of the trade."

The Traffic in Women adds Thai voices to the many others that make it increasingly difficult *not* to support sex workers' rights, but it offers few new recommendations for systemic transformation, despite reference to problems inseparable from