

The Other Side

by Nan Goldin (Scalo/DAP, 1993)

REVIEWED BY LIZ KOTZ

Taking its title from the name of a Boston drag bar where the artist hung out in the early 1970s, *The Other Side* pays homage to Nan Goldin's ongoing love affair with drag queens, transvestites, and transsexuals. Goldin is best known

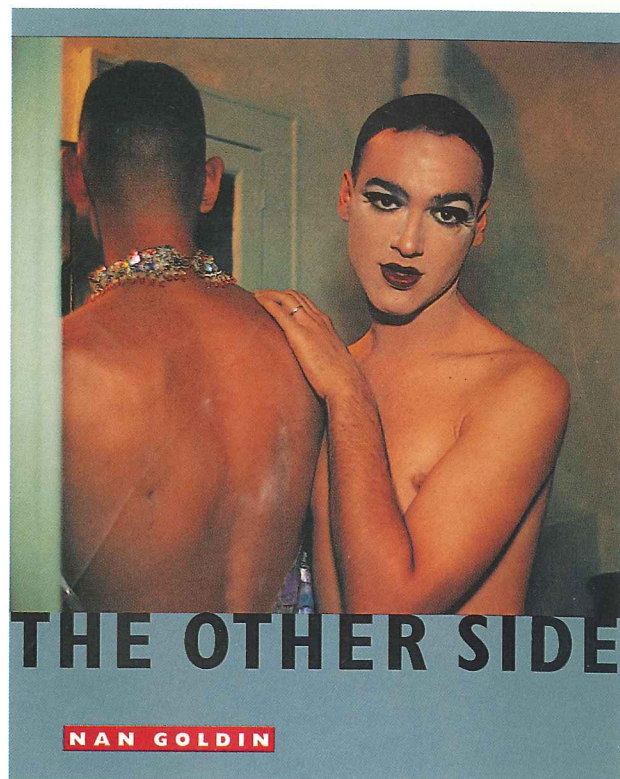
Other Side documents Goldin's found "family" and her own journeys beyond conventional gender, bringing together images shot over 20 years. As a photographer, Goldin has always seemed posed half-way between Larry Clark and Robert Frank: this book brings out her Diane Arbus lineage, as she glamorizes the freakish and the uncanny.

The early photographs are very telling. The book starts with black and white photos of friends and roommates in Boston in the early 1970s.

One gets the sense that as a young woman Goldin found in the queens who frequented *The Other Side* a kind of permission for her own fantasies, her own desires for a sexuality and femininity beyond conventional heterosexuality. Slightly amateurish, some of the shots are quite beautiful, from the oddly documentary *Crystal with Friend, Boston, 1973* to the urbane elegance of *Ivy in the Boston Garden, Boston, 1973*. Goldin is playing at being Brassai or a fashion photographer: she wants to make her friends look glamorous, beautiful, greater than the slightly seedy world of wrong-side-of-the-tracks Boston. We are not surprised when she jumps to New York City, 1983; this, after all, is the Goldin we know better, hanging out in the nightclubs and tenements of the Lower East Side.

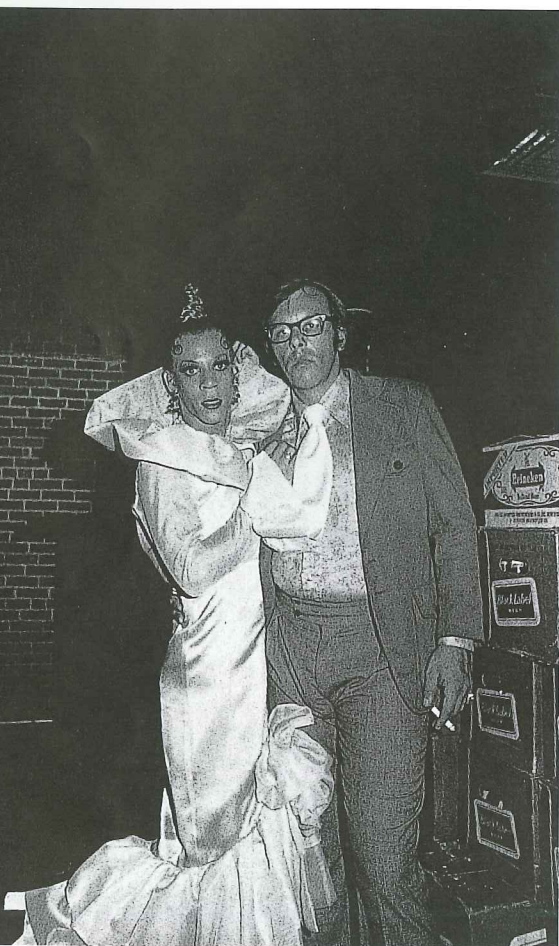
The book radically shifts gears as it moves on to the post-punk, 1990s New York drag scene revival of Wigstock and Gay Pride parades, a series of portraits of a transsexual friend in Paris, photographs from Manila and Bangkok, and a long sequence of another friend, "Joey." Taken together, the images show the nuanced complexity of drag practices as they vary from decade to decade and city to city.

The Other Side lets loose with the gayness and gender transgressions that often seem



suppressed by the relentless heterosexuality of the book version of *Ballad*, so it's all the more disappointing that this new work seems so cold, so emotionless. Charting romantic obsession until death, *Ballad* was sad and sexy, sometimes brutal, oddly real. *The Other Side* is stagey and theatrical; even shots that probably weren't posed look as if they were. Perhaps this theatricality is inherent in the material, since drag is so much about spectacle and show, about presenting the self as an elaborately artficed image. Still, aside from the series "Greer (New York, 1981-1987)," which follows a transvestite friend in the East Village for six years, we never feel on the inside. There is a casualness to the images of Greer that evokes the sense of intimacy, of catching subjects off-guard, that characterized *Ballad*. But even in this sequence there is one image, *Greer Modeling Jewelry, New York City 1985*, that's downright awkward in its staginess, evoking bad East Village fashion photography. Why is it here? To give us a sense of the times, their tawdry glamor? It's hard to tell.

Artistically, the sequences don't hold together. This seeming lack of structure or editing mars the book as a whole. There are great, moving, gorgeous images here, inexplicably



Crystal with a friend, Boston 1973

for her slide show and subsequent book, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (Aperture, 1986), a classic of sub-cultural photography that presented glimpses of downtown urban milieux (in New York, Boston, London, and Berlin) in a family snapshot mode. Like that project, *The*

mixed in with rather awkward diptychs and prosaic bar shots. The selection is especially weak in comparison with *Ballad's* complexly orchestrated, almost cinematic sequencing, which had real narrative drive, real movement – a structure honed after years of presenting versions of it as a slide show, accompanied by pop songs. Without an over-arching structure, *The Other Side* reads as a compendium – “my life with drag queens” – and an awkward one at that.

While the New York portraits from the 1990s are sophisticated, the images from Manila and Bangkok risk a touristic naivete. Invited to Southeast Asia to go along on a shoot (for Jurgen Bruning's film on gay male prostitution, *Maybe I Can Give You Some Sex*), Goldin's pictures make her seem completely unaware of her own complicity in this kind of gay-male sex tourism. The photographs veer uneasily
Greer in a babydoll dress, NYC 1981



After the show, Bangkok 1992

from travel exoticism to fashion photography. Many of the images are of on-stage performances, heightening the sense of distance; caught up in the spectacle, the photographs can't talk about exploitation.

This blindness to uncomfortable or dark undersides haunts the entire book. As a project, *The Other Side* seems caught up in the terms of a “reverse discourse:” if the dominant culture sees queens as sad, pathetic, exploited, Goldin shows them as beautiful and triumphant, not “gender dysphoria” but “gender euphoria.” In so doing, it loses a lot of the emotional edge that gave *Ballad* its guts and heart. Are only heterosexuals allowed to fight, fuck, shoot up? While queens and queers must never be shown as self-destructive? If the over-arching trope of *Ballad* was the unmade bed, here it is the mirror. While the heterosexual couples in *Ballad* fought and mated in some eternal primal scene, the queens of *The Other Side* seem caught in a world of adolescent feminine sexuality, forever dressing-up and making-up before the mirror. It's a curious choice.

Judging from Goldin's introduction, *The Other Side* aims to present a world “beyond

gender,” a fantasy utopia where no one has to be the sex that they were born to. Yet what we see are images of men – men who make extremely beautiful women. Goldin's love for her subjects is fascinating, a desire almost without name, without category. This is the core obsession in the book: Goldin's love of drag queens, and her sense that she too 'is' one. Yet the stakes of this confusion of identities and positions emerge only intermittently – for

instance, in the image of Greer marrying her boyfriend. The viewer is left to wonder at the risks of apparently rejoining normative heterosexuality. We want Goldin to probe further, to attend to that loss. But she shies away from it, preferring to pursue more glamorous activities of 1990s drag stars Jimmy Paulette, Tabboo!, Cody, and

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Misty. The book's coolness and sense of remove, its willingness to stay on the level of the theatrical, suggest that Goldin is not fully delving into the dynamics of these people, the reality of their lives, or her own desire for them. The project is intriguing, important, and extremely timely, but it seems too cleaned-up, too cautious to do justice to its subjects or its own obsessions. 