

FRANCESCA WOODMAN

WORKS FROM THE VERBUND COLLECTION, VIENNA

Exhibition Facts

Duration	4 April – 6 July 2025
Opening	3 April 2025 6.30 pm
Venue	Tietze Galleries The ALBERTINA Museum
Curator	Gabriele Schor
Assistant Curators	Eva Haberfellner & Sophie Rueger
Works	82
Contact	Albertinaplatz 1 1010 Vienna T +43 (0)1 534 83 0 presse@albertina.at www.albertina.at
Opening Hours	Daily 10 a.m. – 6 p.m. Except Wednesday and Friday 10 a.m. – 9 p.m.
Press contact	Daniel Benyes T +43 (0)1 534 83 511 M +43 (0)699 12178720 d.benyes@albertina.at Lisa Trapp T +43 (0)1 534 83 512 M +43 (0)699 10981743 l.trapp@albertina.at

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Francesca Woodman

Works from VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna

4 April until 6 July 2025

The ALBERTINA Museum presents the first museum exhibition of the American artist Francesca Woodman in Austria with works from the VERBUND COLLECTION. Since its foundation in 2004, the VERBUND COLLECTION has continuously acquired photographs by Woodman. All 82 works on display in the exhibition, including 20 photographs developed by the artist herself, are from the VERBUND COLLECTION. This means that the collection – apart from the estate – has the most comprehensive holdings of this extraordinary artist.

Francesca Woodman (3 April 1958 – 19 January 1981) created her oeuvre in a nine-year creative phase from 1972 to 1981. Her work is characterized by a passionate self-presentation and the creative positioning of the female body in space, in the context of conceptual photography and performance. Most of the photographs have a small, square format, are black and white and were taken with a medium format camera. Like many artists of the feminist avant-garde, the artist often uses her body naked and in a surprisingly unconventional way, like a tool. In her unusual studio spaces, in the abandoned factory halls, she explores her curiosity about the female self.

“With the first comprehensive Francesca Woodman exhibition in Austria, the ALBERTINA Museum is paying tribute to one of the most influential female photographers of the 20th century. In just nine years, Woodman created a groundbreaking body of work: her haunting depictions make her not only the central motif, but also the medium of her art. Through the targeted use of mirrors, she expands the view of herself and opens up new, mysterious perspectives. Her fascinating black and white photographs and the playful interplay of light and shadow impressively negotiate the transience and fragility of life.

The exhibition underlines the importance of the ALBERTINA Museum as one of the leading exhibition venues for photography, and at the same time it is part of a clear focus on female artists – with a total of six solo shows this year. My special thanks go to the VERBUND COLLECTION, whose outstanding

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Woodman collection has made this exhibition possible and whose ongoing commitment to women artists is invaluable,” says Ralph Gleis, Director General of the ALBERTINA Museum.

VERBUND CEO Michael Strugl explains: “In our company, we focus on gender balance, equality and diversity. This attitude is also reflected in the orientation of the VERBUND COLLECTION. The cooperation between the ALBERTINA Museum and VERBUND makes it possible to present our works to a wide audience in a renowned Viennese museum. That makes me very happy!”

Gabriele Schor, founding director of the VERBUND COLLECTION and curator of the exhibition, explains: “The fleeting appearance of the female body is sometimes interpreted as an aesthetic anticipation of her suicide at the age of 22. The exhibition, on the other hand, aims to interpret her work not from the end, but from the beginning of her creative period. Even in her early years, during her studies in the USA and Italy, the artist succeeded in staging the female body in space in a virtuoso and unique way. Her use of props such as mirrors, gloves, wallpaper, flour, shells, tiles or eels, as well as her skillful formal use of light and shadow, reveal her genius and mastery. Her subtle use of these props creates a poetic metaphor. Her photographs pose questions, suggest answers and reflect a specific ambivalence about what it means to be a woman.”

Woodman's work only gained international recognition after her death and is widely received today. The themes of her works revolve around the creative self-presentation of the female body. The artist left behind an impressive body of work that remains unique and visionary even four decades after her death. The exhibition also includes two of her own artist's books.

Biography

Francesca Woodman grew up bilingually in a family of artists in the USA and Italy. Her parents were passionate about Italy, gave their daughter her Italian first name and the family spent almost every summer in their old farmhouse in Antella, Tuscany. Through visits to museums, Woodman became familiar with art history and modern art at an early age. Her first artistic photograph *Self Portrait at Thirteen* (1972) was taken at a young age and three years later she had her first solo exhibition in Andover, Massachusetts.

Between 1975 and 1979, she attended the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in Providence, where, unusually early on, she rented her own studio, a space in a former textile factory in Providence. From 1977 to 1978, she spent a year studying abroad in Rome, where she photographed in an abandoned pasta factory, among other places, and had her first European solo exhibition in 1978 in the Libreria Maldoror bookstore in Rome. The dilapidated and outdated aesthetics of the rooms seem to correspond with Francesca Woodman's preference for the Victorian era.

From 1979, she lived and worked in New York, where she earned her living as a secretary, nude model and photography assistant. Some of her photographs also bear witness to her attempts at fashion photography. On January 19, 1981, she took her own life at the age of 22. Woodman leaves behind an extraordinary body of work consisting of photographs, artist's books and drawings.

Exhibition Texts

Introduction

The Albertina Museum presents Austria's first museum exhibition dedicated to the American artist Francesca Woodman, with works from the VERBUND COLLECTION. This Viennese collection has continuously acquired photographs by Woodman since soon after its founding by the energy company VERBUND in 2004. With 82 works, 20 of which are vintage prints developed by the artist herself, the VERBUND COLLECTION holds the most comprehensive collection of works by this exceptional artist, second only to the artist's estate.

Francesca Woodman is born April 3, 1958 in Denver, Colorado, into a family of artists. Growing up bilingually in the USA and Italy, she becomes familiar at an early age with the art of the Renaissance. While studying in Rome, she also engages deeply with Surrealist literature. Her work shows a passionate positioning of the female body in the context of conceptual photography and performance. Like many of her contemporaries in the Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s, the artist uses her own body, often nude and often as a kind of tool. While still a student, she works in unconventional studios in abandoned factories, making poetic use of props such as gloves, mirrors, and rugs to create a surprisingly strange relationship between the female body and a very particular experience of space.

Francesca Woodman's entire oeuvre is made in a nine-year creative period from 1972 to 1981. The fleeting glimpses of the female body, occasionally disappearing behind peeling wallpaper, have sometimes been interpreted in relation to her early death at the age of twenty-two. By contrast, this exhibition seeks to read her work not from the end of her productive period but from its beginning. Her subtle use of props, her special perception of space, her skillful formal use of light and shadow, and her poetic image compositions enable us to recognize her virtuosity and genius.

THE BEGINNINGS

Francesca Woodman spends her whole life living alternately in the USA and Europe. In 1965 she attends second-grade elementary school in Florence and learns to read and write Italian. In 1968 her parents buy an old farmhouse in Antella near Florence, where the family spends the summer months of most years. Francesca likes to draw copies of Old Master paintings in the museums of Florence. From 1972 to 1973 she attends Abbott Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, one of the few American high schools that offer art tuition. At this time she passionately reads the novels of the French writer Colette. Under the guidance of her professor Wendy Snyder MacNeil, Woodman discovers the medium of photography, beginning to formulate visual ideas and developing her own prints in a makeshift darkroom.

Around the summer of 1972 Francesca Woodman uses a cable release to photograph herself in her parents' house in Antella, with her face turned away from the camera, and gives the image the title *Self-Portrait at Thirteen*, probably an allusion to Dürer's *Self-Portrait at the age of thirteen*. This marks the beginning of her artistic life's work. She then attends Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, from 1973 to 1974, graduates high school in Boulder, Colorado in 1975 while also observing photography courses at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Her early photographs herald a concern with the dynamic relationship between the female body and the space that surrounds it, to which she will return obsessively over the following years.

SPACE AS STAGE SET

A seventeen-year-old Francesca Woodman begins her studies at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence in 1975. She takes courses in photography and poetry. Early on during her time as a student, she expresses her desire to have a studio of her own. Eventually she moves into Pilgrim Mills, a former textiles factory, where she lives and works for two years. Because of her giftedness and intelligence, Woodman is described as working with concepts far above the level of her year group. In the abandoned factory halls she produces the extraordinary works on view here.

Using a medium-format camera on a tripod, she tilts the space in an irritating way and lets the floor sway. We see a body in a display cabinet, pressed up against the glass wall as if wanting to tip it over or shove it along the floor. The artist proclaims: "I am interested in the way people relate to space. The best way to do this is to depict their interactions to the boundaries of these spaces."

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Woodman lifts a door off its hinges and makes it hover. She takes what we conventionally understand as space—right angles, surfaces, parallels, height, width, and depth—and sets it in opposition to her own perception. Later, in 1980, to illustrate her spatial vision, she alters a school textbook on Euclidian geometry, sticks her photographs into it, and calls it *Some Disordered Interior Geometries*.

FEMALE BODY – PROPS

In response to the question why she uses her own body so often, the artist says: “It’s a matter of convenience, I’m always available.” Her use of her own body as a model connects her with her contemporary women artists of the 1970s. The artists of the Feminist Avant-Garde in Europe, the USA, and Latin America used their own bodies in their actions, performances, and photographs, collectively putting the female body into the picture from the perspective of women themselves for the first time in art history.

Francesca Woodman often works with props. During her studies in Providence, Rhode Island, she makes numerous photographs in which she uses flour, melons, mirrors, gloves, tights, glass, flowers, masks, or spirals. Even the human body becomes a prop. All these objects function as tools, inspiring the artist to compose her pictures according to formal and poetic considerations. Woodman was a master when it came to the formal composition of an image. In her diary she writes: “Glass makes a nice definition of space because it delineates a form while revealing what is inside.” With her photographs she creates a world in which she gives meaning to things that are meaningless to us, such as a piece of glass. She creates a world in which she brings together things that do not belong together, arranging, combining, and linking them, conjoining them into a whole. She balances movement and stillness, savors rapidity and slowness, and immerses herself in pose and dance.

ROME

As part of her studies at the Rhode Island School of Design, Francesca Woodman spends a year abroad in Rome (May 1977 to August 1978). There she attends art history lectures, pursues her own artistic interests, and undertakes excursions to other Italian cities. Being bilingual helps her make friends with Italian artists. On her walks through Rome, Woodman discovers the Libreria Maldoror, a bookshop specialized in avant-garde movements such as Futurism and Surrealism and named after the apocalyptic *Songs of Maldoror* by the French writer Lautréamont. Woodman visits almost daily.

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Her early affinity for reading encourages her to immerse herself in the literature of Surrealism. She admires the author André Breton and follows his injunction to practice poetry (“Pratiquer la poésie!”). On days less infused with poetry, she remarks: “Noticing how prosaic I am these days.”

In 1977 the abandoned pasta factory in the Via degli Ausoni is converted into an art space in which Woodman stages some of her performative photographs. She uses effects of soft focus and blurring, with the outlines of bodies sometimes vanishing. In March 1978 the artist has her first European solo exhibition in the basement of the Libreria Maldoror. For the invitations, she cuts out little pictures from her contact sheets and sticks them onto postcards. In June of the same year, she takes part in a group exhibition at the Galleria Ugo Ferranti.

PICTORIAL REPERTOIRE

From an early age, Francesca Woodman visits numerous museums with her parents. Even as a child—sitting on the floor—she draws copies of Old Master paintings. An Italian friend notes: “She knew all the painters of the sixteenth century.” Woodman draws on a wide-ranging historical repertoire of images, letting her art historical knowledge flow into her art. During her stay in Rome she creates a remarkable photograph that can be interpreted as a dialog with Michelangelo’s famous fresco in the Sistine Chapel, *Last Judgment*. Allusions to the Renaissance, ancient mythology, and Christianity materialize in her work. The *ecce homo*, a visual motif with a central place in art history, seems to find an echo. Another photograph is reminiscent of depictions of the Egyptian queen Cleopatra. A woman hanging in a doorframe forms a counterpart of the pose of the crucified Christ. And the image of Narcissus, much loved since antiquity, is given a feminine reinterpretation.

Francesca Woodman’s visual repertoire ranges widely. She feels a connection not just to the painters of the Renaissance but also to the aesthetics and the women artists of other epochs. Because of her interest in surrealism, she may also have been familiar with photographs by the French surrealist artist Claude Cahun (1894-1954). She reads *A Room of One’s Own* by the British writer Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), whose portrait resembles one of her photographs.

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NEW YORK

In January 1979 Francesca Woodman moves to New York to the East Village, where the bathroom of her apartment functions as a darkroom. She finds jobs as a secretary, photographic assistant, and nude model. Woodman sends portfolios to fashion photographers, including Deborah Turbeville, whom she greatly admires. She spends the summer with her boyfriend Benjamin Moore in Stanwood, Washington.

She spends July 1980 as artist in residence at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire. There she develops a series of photographs that combine the female body with natural objects, addressing mythological themes. In 1980 the artist participates in two group exhibitions. She reads Marcel Proust and declares: "Proust inspired me a lot. I'd really like to create a work of art like that, rooted in and linked to everyday life but addressing questions of great scope."

On January 19, 1981 Francesca Woodman dies by suicide in New York at the age of twenty-two. Soon after, a Philadelphia publisher releases her artist's book *Some Disordered Interior Geometries*, made in collaboration with the artist (to be seen in Room 2). One of her last photographs shows a portrait of the artist with her birth certificate positioned in the background, as if she wanted to say to us: look at my work not from the end, but from the beginning.

Press images

The following images are available free of charge in the Press section of www.albertina.at.
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Francesca Woodman
Face, 1976
Posthumous silver gelatine print, 1997
12 × 12,5 cm
VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna
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Francesca Woodman
Self-Deceit #1 from the Self-Deceit series, 1978
Silver gelatine print
Vintage
9 × 9 cm
VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna
© Woodman Family Foundation / Bildrecht, Vienna
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Francesca Woodman
From Polka Dots or Polka Dots from the Polka Dots series, 1976
Posthumous silver gelatine print, 2004
13,1 × 13,2 cm
VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna
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Francesca Woodman
Self-Portrait Talking to Vince, c. 1976-77
Posthumous silver gelatine print, 1997-99
12,8 × 12,8 cm
VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna
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Francesca Woodman
Untitled, 1976
Posthumous silver gelatine print, 1997-99
14 × 14,4 cm
VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna
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Francesca Woodman
#1 or House #1 or Abandoned House from the
Abandoned House series, 1976
Posthumous silver gelatine print, 2005
14,5 × 14,8 cm
VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna
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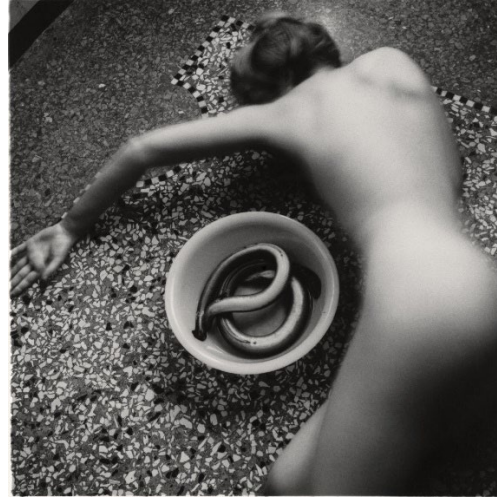
Francesca Woodman
From Space² or Space² from the Space² series, 1976
Posthumous silver gelatine print, 1997-99
16,2 × 16,5 cm
VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna
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Francesca Woodman
Untitled, c. 1975-78
Posthumous silver gelatine print, 2002
12,8 × 12,8 cm
VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna
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Francesca Woodman
Corner with Lily, 1978
Posthumous silver gelatine print, 2008
21,9 × 21,3 cm
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Francesca Woodman
Untitled, 1978
Posthumous silver gelatine print, 1997-2001
15,3 × 15,4 cm
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Francesca Woodman
Lucy with Goose or Leda and Swan, 1978
Posthumous silver gelatine print, 2010
12,7 × 12,9 cm
VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna
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