

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Magda Keaney, Head Curator of International Art at the National Gallery Australia, and former Senior Curator Photographs at the National Portrait Gallery London. The NGA recently purchased a work by artist Francesca Woodman called Blueprints for a Temple (II) that is on display now through the end of January 2027. And we'll discuss that piece specifically in a bit, but first, could you introduce us to Woodman and her work?

MK: She is really one of the most important American artists of the late '70s and early '80s. She is an artist who primarily worked with photographs, lens-based media, photography, and in a performative capacity. So she was working at a time from the early '70s through to the early '80s, a period of nine years only. That was a time of radical change in our world and in the art world, and particularly for women and women photographers. So there was a big shift in how photography was perceived as a medium that coincided with photography being considered as a conceptual art practice. But also that as a woman, Francesca intersected with that second wave feminism of the 1970s, where you have a number of different women artists and women photographers whose practice, certainly in photography, is performative. So encompassing being the artist behind the camera, but also performative practice in front of the camera and using her own body, using their own body to make work and to explore conceptual ideas.

The other thing I think that it's important to say is that she often worked in series. Her work was informed by the history of art, especially Italian art and culture, by surrealism and by literature. And I think it's as though in her work, she's working out ideas so that in each distinct series of photographs that she's making, she's working through a different idea. And I think that those are ideas about picture making. They're ideas about the body in space, about time and photographic time, about archetypes and mythologies, and about narrative sequencing.

AT: Now, something that is unusual from most artists that I've heard about is that, like many artists, she did have a relatively short career. But in her case, her work spans from around age 13 until she ended her own life at age 22. And I'm very curious how that youth aspect impacted her work compared to other artists or even compared to what she may have done later in life.

MK: Look, I think every artist has their own unique trajectory, as a human, as a person. And there are established structures in the art world and the art market, which mean that in the mainstream or in the canon, we see particular patterns of practice. But of course, really interesting work and fantastic artists sit outside those conventional trajectories of practice. And often women artists, until relatively recently, have largely sat outside of those trajectories. And there's lots of different reasons that artists or women artists may have relatively compressed careers. And some of those might be at a young age, like Francesca. Some of them might be in midlife. And other artists, other women artists, work for a relatively short period later in life. Julia Margaret Cameron's a really great example of that, working for 15 years only from her late 40s or early 50s. And what I would say is that even in her earliest work, you really see the strengths of Francesca's artistic vision and her unique approach to photography. And she was so skilled in the way that she used the structures, the techniques, the tools of photography to create images. For example, a work that she regarded as her first work, Self-Portrait Age 13, although she took the photograph at age 13, it wasn't until several years later, a number of years later, that she titled it and presented it as part of her practice. And that was when she was a student studying at RISD, the prestigious Rhode Island School of Design. And in that work, Self-Portrait Age 13, you see Francesca sitting on a chair and she's in the background of the picture. She's holding a cable release and that's the mechanism by which she's taking the photograph. And the cable release looks like a line or a rod that runs down through the centre of the photograph. And what you see here is her really clever, sophisticated use of light and shadow, the way the picture and the composition is divided up into very subtle areas of light and shadow. There's a kind of a glow around her head. You see the way, already at this time, the techniques and processes that she remained interested in, the use of focus, for instance. The photograph

moves between a kind of blur in the foreground to a sense of clarity when you get to Francesca sitting back in the chair so that there's this idea already of the figure of presence and absence. And these are ideas that she keeps exploring and they're ideas that you can see that she's already working with at age 13. And then when she's at art school, when she's at RISD, she becomes very conscious of.

Another group of works that I think are really fantastic from her very early practice is a set of images that she made outside. Now, Francesca Woodman made many of her images inside. She would work in sort of studio spaces and run down interiors. But this is a group of early works that she made at a similar time between the ages of 13 and 15. And she made them in Andover in Massachusetts. And she photographs herself nude in the landscape. And she's kind of exploring aspects of the landscape. In one image, she's under a tree, she's climbed up a hill or a rise. In another, she is by the river as though she's picking something up in the river or perhaps like the Narcissus, looking at her own reflection.

And there again, this very early work where you can make these associations with her interest in mythology that she really continues later. And what's interesting, I think, is the sophistication of the compositions, that she's outside and the way she's positioning her camera viewpoint. Again, if I think about art historical points of reference, and I think of the female figure in nature, nude and unobserved or observed, the subject in painting of Susanna and the elders. There's a very nymph-like, joyful quality to these images. They're very beautiful.

This is a young woman, a figure who is really comfortable exploring nature. And in that sense, when I looked at them, I sort of also thought about the archetype of Eve in a way. Though instead of that being a feminine archetype of destruction, ultimately, that it was an archetype of joy and celebration in her work.

Much of the work that Francesca made then was made when she was a student at RISD. And so her practice and her body of work reflects that, but also how incredible she was as an artist and her individual artistic journey. In arriving at art school, she's arriving at a different point than many of her peers. And that's something that's acknowledged by her peers and by her teachers. So, she's coming with specific ideas and ambitions and concepts that are extremely resolved and prodigious. So, yeah, I think those things are unique to Francesca's practice. Certainly, some of the work that she produced at art school is related to the fact that she was at art school, but it also reflects her own individual, creative, artistic trajectory. And in fact, I suppose her incredible vision and tenacity as a young woman.

AT: Well, I guess that raises the question of, because we know that artists don't have to be formally educated to make incredible art. So I'm curious, what was going on with her earlier life in terms of influences that meant that she was farther along in her development as an artist than a lot of people would have been at that age?

MK: Francesca was born in Denver, Colorado. Both of her parents were prominent artists. So, George Woodman, a painter and photographer, and Betty Woodman, an incredible ceramicist, a really important ceramicist. So that she grew up within a family that was based around her parents' artistic practice. Her parents not only were artists, but her father was also an academic. Their family also shared an incredible passion for Italian art and culture. And so when Francesca was relatively young, the family would travel frequently to Europe and to Italy. And she did complete some of her early schooling in Italy. The family also purchased a farm, a property outside of Florence. And so it became this world of living between America and Italy, but living around a community of artists, a family of artists, frequently visiting museums. So I think that that context is really important, thinking about her work. When we think about Blueprint for a Temple, the incredible work that the gallery has acquired, which is this very large-scale diazotype collage, classical temple structure, that's based on a temple at the Acropolis in Greece. And Francesca notes herself, and there's fantastic photographs of her actually visiting the Acropolis with her family in her youth. So I think there are these really interesting points of reference, but also this very rich artistic family context that was part of her life.

AT: Now, my understanding is that Woodman used nudity in her work. And I'm curious, because women's

nudity is often depicted in any number of ways for different purposes, whether they're passive or active, whether the depiction is exploitative or assertive. So how did Woodman use her subjects' clothed or unclothed states to convey meaning?

MK: So many of Francesca's photographs, often small-scale, gelatin, silver photographs she was making with a medium format camera, and she was printing them in the darkroom – so the darkroom process is also really important to her practice – do utilise body and performance for conceptual purposes. That includes her own body. But I think it's a simplification to consider that Francesca's project is overly or exclusively focused on her own body. But she photographed friends as well, both dressed and undressed. And I think, also crucially, she also photographed men. Francesca's photographs of men are a really important part of her practice. And I would say they're a part of her practice that have been less discussed, but are receiving more attention. And again, they are conceptual performative photographs that are also highly directorial. So there's often a kind of ambiguous narrative or staging component in her work, and the body is a part of that.

So, Francesca was really interested in surrealism, and of course, the body is a key motif in surrealism and surrealist photography. And I think there are some really interesting examples that speak to this in her work, and particularly her use of the male body and the male nude. And I'm thinking of an image that she made between 1979 and '80, and it shows a male sitter lying on the floor, and he's topless. There's a beautiful quality of light and shadow in the image, and in the corner of the room, there's an oval mirror. There's this sense of ambiguity, and ambiguity of narrative. So, at once, it's highly directorial, and what I mean by that is Francesca has constructed this image very consciously. It's not impromptu, but we have this male figure lying topless in the image, and in his arm is resting an egg. And there's absolutely no explanation offered for that, but it's an incredibly beautiful and subtle image. And I think it's an image where her interest in surrealism and surrealist narrative and ambiguity of narrative is coming to the fore.

That same man, in another image, is photographed, again topless, and in that image, he's holding a pomegranate in his hand. Again, completely unexplained, but of course, a pomegranate has many biblical and mythological significances. And around his waist is tied a dress that Francesca Woodman owns, and she appears in this dress in other photographs that she's taken. And in this image of this man holding the pomegranate, the dress kind of flies up behind him like a vapor trail. But again, there's the use of these symbols, these props, and this sense of staging and directorial narrative, which has this wonderful ambiguity or surreal quality.

When she was studying in Rome, on her honors year from RISD, she became a part of a group of artists who would congregate around a particular bookstore in Rome that specialised in surrealist literature. And one of the close friends that she made at that time was a man called Paolo. She created a number of images in Rome that I think, with her interest in surrealism and obviously this circle and the circle's wider interest in surrealist literature and art, we see these narratives, again, being staged and played out and resolved in her photographs. Generally, Francesca Woodman would make, though she worked in series in her black and white photographs, she would make singular images. Now, there's a number, a small number of images where she made these triptych images. So there's three images that she's put together in a mount. And one of those is this triptych portrait of her friend Paolo, who was one of the co-owners of the bookshop. And again, you have the use of the male body, the male body unclothed. Paolo is topless in the images. And it's a sequence of three images of him taken at a distance. But in one of those images in the triptych, again, with no explanation or context, Francesca places a dead bird in the nape of his neck.

And so here again, we have this idea of narrative, of surrealism, the use of bodies, Francesca solving problems, working through ideas. She was an artist who would plan her photographs, many of her photographs, and we know this because we can see it in the archives. So that she would write references to images that she wanted to create that you then see her resolving with her camera. She would make sketches. She writes letters. So there's this conscious sense of method, of planning, and points of reference that she

brings to her use of the body. And in the examples that I've just been talking about, in fact, not her body, not the female body, but that's a really important part of her work, but the male body. And I think I just also want to say in thinking about Francesca's use of women's bodies, of her own body. She often photographed friends. She photographs people's bodies, and we don't know who they are. But I'm not sure she was actually consciously thinking about nudity as such when she was making those photographs. I think she was thinking about the concepts and questions that she had in her own mind for her work and her narratives that come from the ideas that we see her exploring, in the archive, in her journals, and that then she carries through into her picture making.

AT: Now, bringing it back to *Blueprint for a Temple*, could you tell us about this work, why people should be sure to see it when they visit – and what is a diazotype?

MK: Yeah, so, look, it's absolutely fantastic that the National Gallery has made this major acquisition of *Blueprint for a Temple (II)*. It's quite a unique work within Francesca's practice. And it really represents a moment of breakthrough, of resolution, of fantastic ambition. It's one of only two large-scale classical temples that Francesca Woodman made using this diazotype technique. So it's between three and four metres tall, it's large scale.

It is made, as you note, using diazotype process, which you might call also blueprints, photographic blueprints. And so, diazotypes are a print reproduction technique, essentially, and they were developed in the late 19th century. The word diazotype refers to the paper, to the support that the image is printed on. And so, it would be a paper coated, as photographic papers are, with light-sensitive material. In this case, for the diazotype, that's with diazonium salts. And this technique produces a positive image, which is developed with photographic chemicals. It's a technique that in the 1970s and '80s, I would say, was often used by architects, so in terms of blueprints. In that sense, it was a commercial technique. But what it enabled Francesca to do was really to experiment with scale and move away from these smaller format square silver gel prints for which she's very well known. It's a commercial process, essentially, but Francesca used it in an artistic, creative capacity. For the temples, she photographed both friends, people, women, and she photographed figures in her studio, friends of hers. And she would dress each figure in a kind of costume that resembles classical robes and drapery to kind of reconstruct this caryatid figure. And, of course, the caryatid are the female figures at the Acropolis, substitute for a column the women that literally hold the temple on their shoulders, that hold up the temple. So, a key component of Francesca's temples, the two temples she made, are these incredible caryatid figures. She then also photographed bathrooms in New York and architectural fragments from bathrooms in New York, tiles, a feeder bath, which she used then to create other architectural aspects of the temple. And to make these very large diazotypes, she worked with a roll of paper. And so they're longer than they are wide. And so, she would, say, photograph figures in her studio. She would photograph them using her camera. And because she wanted to experiment with scale, she wanted to make these really large-scale images. And, again, we see her talking about that in her journals and in her diaries. What she would do is take the negative and make an internegative. And, essentially, that's a colour transparency, a slide. And she would take the slide in her studio and put it into a slide projector, essentially. And she would project the image. So, let's say, the form of the caryatids, the women's bodies, she would project those images onto the roll of paper and therefore be able to enlarge them in her studio. And she was projecting that image onto the sensitised photographic paper. What she would do then is she would take them down from her wall. You can see in the temple, it's really fantastic. She literally just rips them off the roll. And that sense of her physically ripping is really interesting, I think, too, because, again, it gives her a real reference point, I think, to her body and to performance or a physical act, the act of her ripping the paper. She would then roll these sheets up. Now, at the moment, they're not developed. So, they just look like plain pieces of paper. She would take them down to the diazotype shop and then they would be developed. And

that's when you would get the blueprint on the paper. She then, because she's constructing this big temple that's made up of many of these large sheets of diazotype, and as we've said, some of them are figures that she's posed in her studio. Other parts are tiles, bathroom tiles from her friend's bathrooms. Other parts are the claw feet from their bath. So, she's got all these components. She enlarges them. She gets them developed. She brings them back. And then she literally brings them back to the studio and starts physically assembling these two temples. The temple that now belongs to the Met, *Blueprint for a Temple (I)* and *Blueprint for a Temple (II)* at the National Gallery. That's also a really important part of the production of these pieces is actually putting those pieces together.

And it's quite fun because in our temple, Francesca Woodman has a cat called Anchovy. And you must come to Canberra and have a look at the print and see if you can find the place in our print where Anchovy's paw print still remains. And knowing that's there is so evocative for me because I imagine her in her studio with these unwieldy large prints putting together, physically assembling these immense architectural structures. You'll also notice when you come and see the work that there are some smaller scale diazotype prints. What look like entries from her journal, a figure, sort of a study, compositional study, as well as a group of really beautiful profile portraits that run along the very bottom of the image. And I think it's quite lovely. Francesca's mother, the acclaimed ceramicist, Betty Woodman, her portrait is one of those profiles. So I think that's really beautiful. We don't always know who Francesca's sitters are or who she's photographing. And often it's not important. But I think it's just a nice detail. So to make those smaller diazotypes, she could make those using a slightly different technique, a contact print technique. So in those cases, she would produce an internegative, but that would be a smaller scale paper internegative. And then she could contact print them and then get them developed. So there's the two different ways she worked with the diazotype process.

You'll also notice that in the temple in Canberra, the piece, there's a group of gelatin silver photographs that run down the right edge of the work. When I look at that combination of her inserting these matted gelatin silver photographs, it's so distinct for the time. I can't think of any other work like it. It's hard to know where it comes from, this experiment, this juxtaposition. It's something that feels much more familiar in postmodernism, say. But I think in 1980, it's quite incredible to think of the way she has included not only the diazotype prints, but also then inserted these gelatin silver prints in there that really disrupt the classical symmetry of the temple in a way. So I think there's also a sense, because in making the temples, Francesca herself noted, she was interested in the subject of art. What is the subject of art? The classical subject of art. The temple is the subject of art. And I think she's having a bit of fun, too, in this juxtaposition of materiality. But also, as she says herself, in the way she uses details from squalid New York bathrooms to make these classical temples.

But the prints are very beautiful. The one at the bottom is an image of a woman in a bath, and she has her hair falling over her face. That's actually her friend and fellow student at RISD Sloan Rankin. It's a really beautiful print, and it's quite amazing because it is actually the only version of that print that exists. So when the Woodman Foundation were meticulously reconstructing the temple, and they found the diazotype prints in storage, some of these discoveries were made when they looked at the documentary images that Francesca had made, because the temple that we have in Canberra is the temple that she exhibited during her lifetime. So there's photographs of it on display. There's photographs of her standing next to it. And so they realised that this image of Sloan Rankin in the bath belonged on the temple.

The gelatin silver photographs portray different aspects of bathrooms in New York. And in one of those, if you look carefully, I wouldn't say it's a self-portrait of Francesca, but you can see a reference. You can see a detail of her camera and part of her body standing next to that. And again, I think that's a really beautiful connection to her own exploration of self in her work, in the gelatin silver works. Now, she said she is consciously trying to get away from those intimate narratives. We know that. She's experimenting with scale. She's looking, she's questioning the classical subject of art. But there's still this beautiful little thread through the gelatin silver prints connect to her work in earlier decades. So Francesca made studies and different experiments and theories. The temple project wasn't the only project that she developed using the diazotype technique. Sometimes she

would make smaller studies and contact prints using smaller sheets of diazotype paper.

And the diazotype has this really rich, beautiful blue hue. I think that's really interesting and beautiful, too, to think about in the history of photography. The cyanotype is a completely different process. But it also was a process that was famously used by a woman photographer, Anna Atkins, in her fern book project, and has been used by other artists, too. I love some of those dialogues, too, across the history of art.

So, within the diazotype process, that allowed her to break away from these smaller, more intimate photographs she was making during the mid to late '70s. She was able to experiment with scale and different concepts and produce these two incredibly ambitious temple projects. And I think they're also very, very interesting because, of course, in 1980, when she assembled them, a woman making such large-scale, defiant in some ways works is really, really bold and courageous because photography doesn't look like large-scale photographs that we're used to today. Photography in the late '70s, it starts to change in the early '80s, photography up to that point is really more smaller-scale, gelatin silver prints. Now, there's a range of sizes within those prints that might be 20 x 24, it might be 10 x 8, but they're not really, really large-scale. And so, for a woman to take up that space to make that work is incredible. An absolute breakthrough, not only in her practice, but also in what was going on with artists who were working with photography at that time.

AT: So, I'm curious if the other one has been at the Met for so long, how did this one come to be at the NGA all the way around the world?

MK: It is quite fascinating. Betty and George, Francesca's parents, donated the Blueprint for a Temple (I) to the Met, I think, in the early 2000s. And it was known that there was a second Temple collage because there's photographic documentation of Francesca standing in front of it, but the whereabouts of it was not known. And I had the great privilege of developing an exhibition in collaboration with the Woodman Family Foundation, who are the custodians of Francesca's and Betty and George's work in New York. And we worked really closely together on a show that paired the 19th century British photographer Julia Margaret Cameron with Francesca Woodman, and explored resonances between their work. So, I was really fortunate to be able to go to the archive, to the foundation in New York, and to spend time with them and to look through the archives and the prints and so forth. And during that process, one day, quite excitedly, I got an email from my colleagues at the foundation, and they told me that in the course of their really important work, which is around cataloguing Francesca's practice, that Blueprint for Temple (II) had been rediscovered.

So, it had been found in the component parts, and it had been there all along. It had just been in storage, and quite a large project for the foundation to research and catalogue the work of Francesca, Betty and George. And so as they were working through things, they discovered these pieces and were able to pretty quickly determine that, "oh my gosh, this is the second Temple." And it wasn't possible, unfortunately, for us to exhibit that work in London, but there was a lot of work that the foundation did, conserving it, putting it back together, because these are all the original diazotype pieces that Francesca's made.

And so, when I came to the National Gallery of Australia, it was a work that I was familiar with. I suppose the vision of the international art collection in Australia is really to be a reference point for the best and most important work by international artists for people in Australia and Australian communities. And this work was just such an important moment, I think, a moment of, as I said, resolution and breakthrough, that it seemed like an incredible thing to be able to talk about making happen here. And within the context of our photographic collection, which is an amazing collection, having this piece in dialogue with Australian artists from the same time, but with other women artists in our collection, has been incredible that we've been able to bring it here. I see it as a beginning. So I'm looking forward to a lot more work and research into the piece, into Francesca's use of diazotypes and to women photographers of the period.

AT: Could you go more into the performative aspect? What do you mean by that?

MK: Her photographs, coming during the 1970s in a context of second wave feminism, women's bodies in the history of photography, as in the history of art, are most often represented as model and muse by men, by male artists. So in the 1970s, as a young woman who, for her own reasons, was using her own body to explore conceptual artistic practice, taking the photographs as well as performing them. It's also interesting to think about why women's practice is so important in terms of the history and trajectory of photographic practice and particularly a kind of performative conceptual practice that is at once historical.

You could think of figures like Clementa, Lady Hawarden, you can think of Julia Margaret Cameron, neither of those women photographed themselves, but they were photographing women in narrative compositions. Cameron is also positioning and staging women in mythological context and literary context, just as Woodman, almost 100 years, later was doing. But then in the early decades of the 20th century, an artist like Claude Cahun is performing and dressing up in front of the camera. And in doing that is actually not only an aesthetic project, but a project about identity and politics and gender and representation.

There's Ana Mendieta, who's also working at a similar time. As we've said, then there are other artists in the contemporary period that I am not wanting to imply were influenced by Woodman, but that Woodman is another step. An artist like Cindy Sherman, artists like Sarah Lucas, Gillian Waring, Sam Taylor-Johnson, whose practices are also photographic practices that explore gender through self-performance and exploration of the body and women's bodies in space.

AT: I think that you see this in science as well as art, is that everyone is on some level building on the work of people who came before. And even if you don't see all of those stones that are building the foundation, they are there.

MK: Absolutely. And I was thinking about this in relation to Julia Margaret Cameron. It doesn't have to be linear like that. So an important question for me as an art historian and as a feminist art historian in relation to women artists has been how can we look at artists working from different periods and break the linear art history? Because that's the structure of the canon of art history, but maybe looking at women's practice in these ways that aren't literal, but allow space to create dialogue between artists who are working at very different times enables us to make more space for their practice to understand their work in new ways.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast. And remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.