SESSION 10 · UNIT 1 — CRITIQUE 1 · Nov 24, 2026

Francesca Woodman & Vivian Maier

Woodman 1958–1981 · American — Maier 1926–2009 · American

Recognition after the fact — work that has to stand on its own



Self-portrait, Chicago · Vivian Maier

"I suppose nothing is meant to last forever. We have to make room for other people."

— Vivian Maier, in a recorded conversation

KEY WORKS

- Angel Series, Rome, 1977–78 — self-portraits performing flight and disappearance (Woodman)
- Some Disordered Interior Geometries, 1980–81 — her final, self-published photographic book (Woodman)
- Street portraits of Chicago and New York, 1950s–1970s — over 100,000 negatives, almost none printed in her lifetime (Maier)
- Self-portraits caught in mirrors, shop windows, and shadows, 1950s–1970s (Maier)

CONTEXT

Francesca Woodman and Vivian Maier never met, worked decades apart in different cities, and neither saw real recognition in their own lifetime. Woodman, photographing mostly in Providence and Rome as a student in the mid-to-late 1970s, made small, staged black-and-white self-portraits — blurred, camouflaged, half-hidden in decaying interiors — that her family found and championed only after her death in 1981, at age 22. Maier, working nearly forty years as a live-in nanny in Chicago and New York, shot well over 100,000 frames of street photography on her days off and showed almost none of it to anyone; her negatives surfaced only in 2007, sold out of an unpaid storage locker, and her name reached the public before most people could even confirm whether she was still alive. Both bodies of work arrived with no photographer present to explain an intention, a sequence, or a meaning — the pictures had to do that work completely on their own.

WHY THIS PHOTOGRAPHER

Woodman and Maier are the pairing to sit with on a landing day, because neither photographer is in the room to tell you what a picture means. Woodman's negatives were found by her family; Maier's were auctioned off from a storage unit to strangers. Today's critique asks your Unit 1 work the same question: without you there to explain a choice, does the photograph make it anyway?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Woodman's negatives were found by her family; Maier's were bought at a storage-unit auction by strangers. If you could never explain a single one of your own photographs to anyone, would today's Unit 1 landing still say what you meant it to say?
2. Neither photographer left much behind explaining their own intentions. Does that silence make the work more open to interpretation — or does it just leave more room for other people to get it wrong?

MORE IMAGES



Self-portrait, age 13–17 · Francesca Woodman



Angel Series, Rome · Francesca Woodman, 1977–78



Some Disordered Interior Geometries · Francesca Woodman, 1980–81



Shadow self-portrait · Vivian Maier



Street portrait, Chicago · Vivian Maier



From her 1959–60 world tour · Vivian Maier