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Goldin Pays Tribute to Berlin's Creative Underground

By **Emilie Trice** January 23, 2011 6:00 am

Although the European Month of Photography officially ended at the conclusion of November, Berlin's keystone exhibition of the biennial arts festival, "Nan Goldin: Berlin Work," remains on view at the Berlinische Galerie, through March 28.

Curated by the artist herself and comprised of 80 photographs taken during her frequent visits to the city between 1984 and 2009, the exhibition (Alte Jakobstrasse 124-128; 49-30-78-902-600; www.berlinischegalerie.de) offers an uncanny glimpse of Berlin's underground art scene, as well as Ms. Goldin's personal relationships to the members of that scene.

At the press conference for the show, Ms. Goldin referred to her years in Berlin, especially the early 1990s when she was awarded a prestigious DAAD grant, as "the happiest time of my life." The artist's milieu — the bohemian fringe-dwellers, drag queens, musicians, writers and filmmakers whom she's been portraying since leaving home at the age of 14 — is depicted in her Berlin work through affectionate yet gritty snapshots. Intimate candids and portraits of close friends, as well as shots of Berlin's signature style of kitsch, charmingly unkempt interiors, touch on deeper themes like mortality, decadence, sexual longing, social defiance and existential curiosity.

A recurring cast of characters is witnessed throughout the exhibition, including a few iconic figures, among them the artist Kiki Smith and the actress Tilda Swinton, as well as close friends such as Alf Bold, the former director of the Arsenal Institute for Film and Video Art who originally invited Ms. Goldin to Berlin in 1984 and would ultimately succumb to AIDS while the deadly epidemic was at its apex in the 1990s.

Concluding the exhibition is Ms. Goldin's documentary "I'll Be Your Mirror," a look at the devastation wrought by AIDS within Ms. Goldin's constellation of sub-cultures, in both Europe and America. Ultimately, "Berlin Work" pays tribute to an era of the city's history when its creative underground and Ms. Goldin's vanguard social circle helped to define the unique artistic landscape that continues to characterize the city's cultural identity.

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