



'I WANTED TO TELL MY TRUTH'

Nan Goldin, centre, with other Pain protesters at the V&A's Sackler Centre in London, 2019, photographed by Antonio Olmos for the Observer.

Nan Goldin's battle against the Sackler family, the billionaires behind the opioid epidemic, upended the art establishment. As a documentary about her life is released, the US photographer talks to *Sean O'Hagan* about family tragedy and her journey from addiction to activism

In September 2016, I met with Nan Goldin in C Wing of Reading Gaol. She was there along with several other artists at the invitation of Artangel, the London-based organisation that specialises in often ambitious site-specific installations. The ensuing group exhibition paid homage to Oscar Wilde, the prison's most famous inmate, whose writings Goldin first encountered as a teenager. The message she took from his life and work, she told me, "is that you can remake yourself completely."

Since then, that is in effect what she has done, becoming a high-profile activist who has used her status as an artist radically to change the landscape of the American and European art world. Goldin's much-publicised war on the billionaire Sackler dynasty, whose company, Purdue Pharma, fuelled the deadly opioid epidemic in America, has resulted in the Sackler name being removed from a raft of major galleries and museums, including the Tate, the Louvre and the Guggenheim. For a long time, the family's name was a byword for almost unparalleled philanthropy and largesse towards the arts; it is now synonymous with shame and misery on an even grander scale. "If that's what a group of 12 people can do," says Goldin, referring to the friends and assistants who form the core of her small, but dramatically effective, organisation, Pain (Prescription Addiction Intervention Now), "then anything is possible."

Goldin's dramatic transformation from artist to activist is brilliantly traced in a new documentary feature film, *All the Beauty and the Bloodshed*, which won the Golden Lion at this year's Venice film festival. It is directed by Laura Poitras, best known for her Academy Award-winning 2014 film *Citizenfour*, about the American whistleblower Edward Snowden. Poitras deftly weaves Goldin's activism into the larger story of her life and art, including the rawly intimate photographic projects such as *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* and *Sisters, Saints and Sibyls*. From the off, her photography drew directly on her life and her circle of friends: bohemians, transsexuals, addicts and fellow self-made artists in her native Boston and later in New York. Her style, often described as diaristic, has been enormously

influential and made her one of the world's most famous photographers.

Goldin's anti-Sackler campaign was already well under way, and being documented by an assistant, when Poitras came on board in 2019. "A producer said to me, 'If you want this to be seen, you need a name director,'" explains Goldin. "He put me in touch with Laura and it was a good call, even though it was hard at times for me and her to work together. We're two strong women who are not used to anyone saying no to them. It was difficult at times, but we're still friends."

I ask Poitras if she had any reservations about taking over the project. "Apart from being a little intimidated by Nan herself, no," she says, laughing. "She is definitely a formidable presence, but as soon as she told me about the project, I volunteered. This was essentially a story about an individual taking on the big forces of power and that is exactly the kind of subject I'm drawn to."

Poitras describes Goldin as "a no-bullshit person" and says she admires the artist's almost reckless approach. "There's a rawness and a drive to what she does. She's not calculated. If she decides something has to be done, she finds a way to do it and worries about the possible consequences later. Here is an artist using her position in the art world to try to hold this family accountable. I just wish more people would use their power in that way."

When we chatted outside Oscar Wilde's prison cell on that afternoon in 2016, though, Nan Goldin did not seem focused or driven. As she talked me through her installation of photographs and videos, she appeared at times distracted and edgy. When I accompanied her outside into a courtyard for a cigarette break, I asked her outright if she was using heroin again – Goldin had struggled with addiction in the late 80s and we had talked about it in the past. She shook her head and said, "No, it's Oxy."

It was the first time I had heard the street term for OxyContin, the prescription painkiller mass-produced and marketed by Purdue Pharma that would soon become one of America's biggest news stories as addiction rates and deaths by

Continued on page 10 >>