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This Is Not a Fashion Photograph. Allen Frame

DI VINCE ALETTI

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“Nan Goldin at her birthday party, with Allen Frame in the reflection, in Nan’s loft on Bowery, in 1981”. From the book “Fever” (Matte Editions, 2021). COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND OF GITTERMAN GALLERY.

When the Mississippi-born Allen Frame moved to New York by way of Harvard in 1977, he was 26, avid, and ambitious. He fell in with a group of artists, writers, and performers, many of whom were as new to the city as he was, and, he writes, “continued what I had been doing in Mississippi, photographing my world of friends and relationships.” Because New York was often on the brink of bankruptcy in those years,

that world could be precarious, but the city was cheap and exciting—full of promise. Describing the metropolis in a much earlier period, the legendary avant-gardist Charles-Henri Ford wrote, “The most marvelous thing about New York was the feeling you had that anything was possible, anything you wanted to happen could happen and there was no danger of any kind.” Frame chooses that 1930 quote to introduce his new book, *Fever* (Matte Editions), and set the tone for a series of casual and atmospheric color photographs he took in 1981. Inevitably, they recall the color work Nan Goldin made around the same time, first projected in a slide show with music, and published in 1986 as *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. But although *Fever* features a similar, sometimes overlapping, set of characters (including Goldin herself), its mood is lighter and far less fraught than *Ballad's*; if there's drama in Frame's work, it's mostly offstage.

In his introduction to *Fever*, the curator Drew Sawyer points out that as Frame got involved in the theater in the 1980s, both as performer and director, “his photographs took on the aesthetics of the stage.” But the pictures in *Fever* seem to draw upon an earlier influence: Italian postwar cinema, notably [Michelangelo Antonioni](#). The looseness, spontaneity, and natural light in Frame's work combines the immediacy of the snapshot with film's wide-screen impact for a sense of emotional intimacy that's contained but never cramped. I don't know about you, but I can easily imagine myself in these slightly scruffy apartments, among these vaguely bohemian characters, waiting for something to happen. Sadly, what happened, not long after these photographs were made, was AIDS, which killed a number of Frame's friends and many more outside his immediate circle. “I'll never be that free again,” one of them says of life in New York in the '80s in testimonies gathered for the book. But Frame's images of the freedom we took for granted then aren't just poignant, they're wonderfully vivid—especially when the subject is Nan Goldin, seen here all dressed up for her 24th birthday party. Frame, reflected in a full-length mirror, catches her anxious anticipation tenderly, as if it were his own.

Vince Aletti is a photography critic and curator. He has been living and working in New York since 1967. A contributor to “Aperture”, “Artforum”, “Apartamento” and “Photograph”, he co-wrote “Avedon Fashion 1944-2000”, published by Harry N. Abrams in 2009, and is the author of “Issues: A History of Photography in Fashion Magazines”, published by Phaidon in 2019.

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