

Revealing Francesca Woodman's *Temple Project*

SUMMARY

Francesca Woodman's *Temple Project* was given to the Metropolitan Museum of Art as a promised and partial gift in 1999 by the deceased artist's parents, Betty and George Woodman. From the outset, this magnificent collage has presented challenges to photograph conservation due to its immense proportions, the relative fragility of its pieced construction and thin paper base, and its unfamiliar medium in the art world: the diazo process. Questions related to its conservation and exhibition have been directed to Woodman's ever helpful family, close friends, and associates who have provided invaluable insights into her working methods and philosophies. Technical aspects of the diazo process are described in the companion summary by Dana Hemmenway entitled "Identifying an Unknown Francesca Woodman: An Investigation into Diazotypes" (see p. 11).

Exhibited only once in 1980 shortly after its creation, the *Temple Project* represents the façade of a temple, the pediment and entablature supported by caryatids. The image is nine by fourteen feet in size, collaged from approximately twenty-nine individual purple diazo images. Woodman enveloped friends in makeshift drapery and stood them on chairs to raise the height of the "columns." The basket-like capitols on the caryatids' heads as well as the patterns in the pediment and entablature are details photographed by Woodman in various New York City bathrooms. The result is an impressive façade embodying the strength and stoicism of these massive, ageless women, a diffuse, flowing image in a vulnerable medium.

The twenty-nine individual sheets are adhered to each other and to a once sturdy secondary paper support with dabs, lines, and smears of what appears to be a rubber

cement adhesive, alternated with some type of polyvinyl acetate dispersion (PVA). Some, but not all of the rubber cement is desiccated and no longer adheres the parts. The PVA is holding strong. There are pressure-sensitive tapes on the secondary support and tape adhesive residues on the image, although tape does not seem to have been used to secure any of the parts to the whole. The lower two thirds of the diazo composite protrude beyond the protection of the secondary support resulting in white spots, creases, and tears, which doubtless occurred over the last twenty years of rolled storage.

Discussions with family and friends have delved into how far the treatment should be taken. All agree that while basic preservation steps necessary to safeguard the piece during handling, while in storage, and while on exhibition are essential, the spontaneous and informal appearance of the piece should be respected, representing as it does the artist's youth and energy. Thus major tears will be mended and sharp creases relaxed, but an effort to make the object "pristine" will be avoided. The discolored and damaged secondary support will be separated from the collaged images and replaced with a comparable paper of larger dimensions to fully support the piece. The removal of this secondary support is delicate due to the PVA adhesive used to secure the photograph to the mount. Other aspects of treatment normally taken for granted, but made more challenging by the piece's proportions, have included the handling, transportation, viewing, and documentation.

Of real concern is the presentation of the work in a gallery setting, as the diazo process is not only vulnerable to light but also quite sensitive to environmental factors. Intended for use by architects, the diazo process was designed for drawings that served a limited lifetime and were generally not exhibited. While the piece should ideally be hung informally on the wall without glazing, the short and long term effects on the image are largely unknown and potentially devastating. Discussions with the artist's family, with curators, and with conservation colleagues continue as we determine the best way to respect

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the artist's intent while safeguarding the future of this unique work of art.

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