

The New York Times

By CHARLES HAGEN

It is no exaggeration to describe Nan Goldin's monumental slide show, "The Ballad of Sexual Dependency," as one of the most important photographic works of recent years. This compilation of more than 700 of Ms. Goldin's color photographs, accompanied by a musical soundtrack that ranges from opera to blues to rap, became legendary in the 1980's in the downtown art world, where it was shown in night clubs as well as galleries. Since then, the work has been presented at museums, film festivals and elsewhere in the United States and Europe; it was in the 1985 Whitney Biennial and was published in greatly condensed form as a book in 1987.

A reworked version of the slide show is the centerpiece of Ms. Goldin's exhibition at Matthew Marks's new gallery space in Chelsea. Accompanying the 45-minute presentation are large prints of pictures from the piece and recent images from New York City, Berlin and Japan.

Part of the enormous cachet of Ms. Goldin's slide presentation came from its unconventional form and the equally unexpected places in which it was shown. In part a love poem to the bohemian life style of young people in New York City, it is also a melancholy meditation on the joys and terrors of romantic relationships, both straight and gay.

A strongly autobiographical strain runs through the work. Many if not most of the photographs are of Ms. Goldin and her friends and record their travails as they search for romance and sometimes find it. Some of the most revealing pictures are of Ms. Goldin herself, either dressed up to go out, gazing at herself in mirrors, or engaged in sex.

The emotional center of the work is a photograph of Ms. Goldin's battered face after she was beaten by a boyfriend. Despite pictures showing the effects of physical force on women, the piece never becomes a tract against domestic violence. Instead, Ms. Goldin emphasizes the complicity of relationships, with the partners involved in an intimate dance of attraction and rejection, anger and love.

The intense romanticism of the work will put some people off. At times, the show's attitudes toward relationships seem like hip, downtown variations of the weepy sentimentality of country songs. But there is no denying the intensity with which Ms. Goldin presents her pictures and the stories they point to. This is a strongly narrative work, with characters recurring throughout the sequence like threads in a richly colored fabric.

At times Ms. Goldin's diaristic, rebel romance verges on being self-absorbed. What saves the work is the art: her use of emotionally telling effects of color and lighting and above all her eye for interesting faces and expressions. Seen through her lens, the characters in her drama seem to become fully and inevitably themselves, with their personalities and physical appearance integrally linked.

All of these elements are presented in a style that seems as casual as snapshots but that also has a snapshot's uncanny ability to reveal unexpected truths. Through smart and often wryly funny sections devoted to images of women, men, couples, parties, weddings, children and other themes, Ms. Goldin offers a kind of encyclopedia of courtship rituals among young urbanites in the 1980's and 90's.

The reality of AIDS hangs over



Matthew Marks Gallery

A detail of "Kee at the Meiji Shrine," a photograph by Nan Goldin from her recent stay in Japan that is in a show of her work at Matthew Marks.

both the slide show and the prints, many of which were made from the images in the longer work. One sequence of five prints shows a male couple at different stages of their relationship as one becomes ill and dies; in a print nearby the melancholy survivor, a year later, slumps in a chair.

Other pictures are organized thematically or formally and presented in grids of 9 or 16 images on one sheet. A few individual photographs from a recent stay in Japan reflect attempts to record examples of bohemian culture in that country.

But Ms. Goldin's real achievement remains her epic slide show, with its emotionally complex meditation on the subject of love and life. Its fatalistic belief in the inevitability of relationships, good or bad, is summed up

in the final image, which shows a crude wall painting of two skeletons locked in an embrace. Even 10 years after its first appearance, this intensely personal document remains thrilling. Much of the immediate world it records has passed, as the effervescent downtown scene of the 80's has been overtaken by the somber realities of the 90's.

But Ms. Goldin's fierce insistence on leading with her emotions, and her ability to back up that initial impulse with a high degree of formal sophistication, gives the work a persistent strength. To have the opportunity to see it again is a rare treat.

Nan Goldin's work remains at the Matthew Marks Gallery, 522 West 22d Street, Chelsea, through April 16.