

# Miami Herald

WYNWOOD

**Photos by 'Badass Grandma' on display at gallery in Wynwood**



**Where:** Dina Mitrani Gallery, 2620 NW Second Ave. Wynwood

**BY RICARDO MOR**

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Wynwood galleries have long been keen on showcasing the works of young, emerging talent. Bucking the trend is Dina Mitrani Gallery, which is showcasing the work of Peggy Levison Nolan, a self-proclaimed “badass grandma” who has emerged as one of Miami’s most talented photographers.

Nolan, 69, says she’s always been a creative person. She majored in creative writing at Syracuse University before dropping out, and wrote often until raising a family consumed most of her free time. With seven children, her family struggled to make ends meet, and they lived in public housing for a time. Nolan had a creative breakthrough in her 40s when her father gave her a camera as a gift and she fell in love with the medium.

“I guess when I picked up a camera, [my passion] just kicked in like a vengeance,” she says.

Nolan’s pursuit of photography was as much a way to earn income as it was her personal passion. She first began shooting weddings, but not in the traditional sense: She told couples that as an artist, she would have creative freedom and final say in which photos she thought were best. From there, she worked part-time in the photography department for several public magnet schools. Now, she is an adjunct professor and slide librarian at Florida International University, where she completed her bachelor’s degree in 1990 and her master’s degree in 2001.

Her photography captures small moments that often go unnoticed by people — and most photographers. She says a friend best described her work as “the things you see when you’re talking on the phone.”

“If it doesn’t have a relationship to that ordinary life I’m leading, [a life] that I’m pretty happy with, then I’m not too interested,” she says.

Martin Margulies, a prominent local art collector who has a number of Nolan's photographs, says her work "captures the human condition" and that she is extraordinarily dedicated to her craft.

"She's a pistol. She's a person who has no fear. ... She'll go anywhere and do anything [for her art]."

While Nolan is inspired by photographers like Diane Arbus and Garry Winogrand, she says she receives more direct influence from the students in the color photography class she teaches.

"A class of beginners really keeps me humble because every one of them makes pictures as good as I do every once in awhile," she says.

Despite having a late start in her art career, she has managed to attract considerable attention and acclaim. Her work has been featured at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the MOMA in New York and the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington. Despite being a recognized artist, she had been reluctant to work with a gallery out of fear her work would be "commercialized."

Gallery owner Dina Mitrani, who now represents Nolan and has showcased three solo exhibitions of her work, says she became familiar with her work when she was working at the Art Museum at FIU (the former, smaller art museum before it became the Frost).

"I jokingly mentioned to Peggy that one day I would have a photography gallery and she would be one of my artists. And years later, it was reality. ... The first work that I sold was one of her images."

Her current exhibition on view at Dina Mitrani Gallery, "Tales in the Ground Glass: Adventures of a Bad Ass Grandma," is inspired by an exhibition she saw by photographer Philip-Lorca diCorcia called "1,000 Polaroids." Nolan's exhibition features 90 small prints placed directly next to each other at eye level. The layout is almost like an enlarged and developed film strip that peeks into numerous small moments in Nolan's life, everything from still lifes in her home to photos from her travels around the country.

Perhaps the most intimate works in the exhibition are a collection of photo books on display Nolan calls "the Alice books." They are named after her first granddaughter, who went into cardiac and respiratory arrest shortly after she was born. After a frantic call from her son, she flew to San Francisco to visit and photographed everything she saw. Nolan developed the photos in such a way to allow them to resemble pages in a photo album and bound them together herself as a way for Alice to later see the first moments in her young life.

"I wanted Alice to know the world she was born into in every possible way."

As her family has grown over the years, so has the number of albums. She now has four grandchildren with a fifth on the way, and she continues to make these albums for her family (she is divorced; her children are now in their early 30s to late 40s). The albums offer a private glimpse into the unique way Nolan sees the world through a format every family is familiar with.

While Nolan appreciates the recognition her work has attracted, she says it's not important to her. What she believes is more important is getting that next great photograph.

"I'm more worried about whether I'm going to make another good picture," she said. "Am I going to have the interest and the excitement and the surprise to keep doing this?"