

NOIR

Ann Chernow

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Burt Chernow Galleries
Housatonic Museum of Art

Original Transgressions: Women and Film Noir in Ann Chernow's NOIR

Richard L. Edwards

Often the original transgression of the dangerous lady of film noir (unlike the vamp seductress of the 20s) is ambition expressed metaphorically in her freedom of movement and visual dominance."

--Janey Place, "Women in Film Noir" (1978)

When film noir arrived unexpectedly in American theaters in the 1940s, audiences at the time saw the first stirrings of a new and exciting film style. Noir emerged in the early 1940s in a handful of American studio system films such as *The Letter* (1940), *Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Laura* (1944), and *Double Indemnity* (1944). Audiences had not previously seen this kind of gritty and fateful crime thriller. Commonly identified by its formal use of shadows, night scenes, and low angle shots, films noir were typically set in the dark underbelly of a city and populated by hard-boiled detectives, marginal criminals, corrupt officers, and dangerous women. It wasn't until 1946 that French critic Nino Frank coined the term *film noir* to describe this new batch of Hollywood films and that name stuck. Hollywood studios continued to produce hundreds of films noir through the end of the 1950s, with 1958's *Touch of Evil* commonly acknowledged as the end of the classic noir era. From the onset, film noir has been more than just another Hollywood style or genre. To get to the heart of films noir, it is necessary to pierce its ecstatic stylistic surfaces and plunge into the lower depths of its dark matter. The best films of the noir cycle in the classic era are tales of transgression with a world-weary sensibility and a subversive worldview.

Ann Chernow's NOIR 1, a series of stone lithographs inspired by the characters and contexts of classic film noir, embraces this transgressive potential of noir. At first glance, these lithographs seem to be lost stills from a newly discovered archive of classic films. But looking closer, we recognize that Chernow's images are new compositions that apprehend film noir's indelible ability to encapsulate a fraught and vertiginous world in a singular moment. The lithographs in her NOIR 1 series implore us to look with fresh eyes into the dark heart of *noir* through the etched attraction of presences and the slick repellence of absences found in her re-cast *noir* frames.



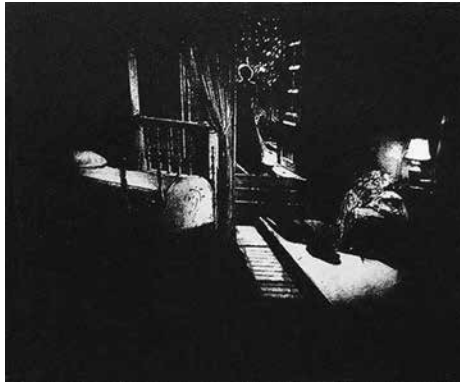
FOLLOW ME:

"How did you get past the 'no visitors' sign?"

"I never noticed it."

Chernow's lithographs in NOIR 1 focus mostly on women, especially one of film noir's most storied and iconic character types: the dangerous woman or *femme fatale*. Epitomized by actresses such as Veronica Lake, Ann Savage, Gene Tierney, Ava Gardner, Gloria Grahame and Jane Greer, the *femme fatale* was one of the liberating roles for women in classic Hollywood. In the classical era, women portrayed mothers, wives, girlfriends,

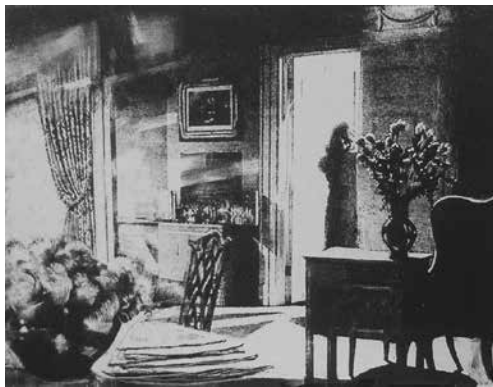
even conspicuously sexual women, but they tended to do so in movies that relegated them to secondary status to the men. The *femme fatale* of film noir was a subversive and transgressive role, a new power position that upset the patriarchal order of earlier Hollywood films. Seductive and destructive, *femmes fatales* visually dominated the screen as they expressed new possibilities and new roles for women in postwar America.



MOONLIGHT:
"I can be framed easier than Whistler's Mother."

The women in Chernow's NOIR 1 series appear in carefully constructed tableaux that belong to a lineage of noir moments without sentimentality or nostalgia. Moreover, each print reminds us that noir, as a form of expression, destabilizes worn-out mythologies. The noir sensibility provides an incisive vantage point from which artists can challenge simplistic cultural binaries or received notions of gender. Though frequently touted for its formalist embrace of style, noir thrives on a revealing and trenchant realism.

Chernow accentuates the visual dominance and mobility of women in film noir, often by positioning her female subjects on a physical threshold. We observe a woman in ***Follow Me*** traversing an open window at night—either coming in or going out, but a transgressive figure in any case. In a *mise-en-scene* that recalls 1941's *The Letter*, the female figure of ***Moonlight*** is poised at the doorsteps. She is bathed in a nocturnal gloom, but she is neither inside nor outside the mysterious and moon-dampened great room that dominates the foreground. We espy the titular Laura, her back turned to us, in ***Laura Walking***. With its conscious



LAURA WALKING:
"It's lavish, but I call it home."

evocation of Gene Tierney in Otto Preminger's 1944 film of the same name, Laura stands in the luminous recess of a doorway, as she is just about to leave or re-enter the light-streaked and shadow-swept parlor behind her. As staged by Chernow, each woman occupies a liminal zone that provides her the freedom to be in control of her actions and her movement.

Chernow's women of film noir resonate with emotional and psychological heft through the careful orchestration of gestures,

poses, and expressions. We don't see as much as we feel about the woman in **See No Evil** through the tactile image of her fingers burrowing into her temples and hair. Her fingers are like downed power lines that fail to illuminate her distraught visage.



SEE NO EVIL:

"I was born when you kissed me, I died when you left me,
I lived a few weeks while you loved me."

Seen in profile, the woman in **Clean Beds** looks away from a sign of cleanliness, knowing such claims to be inherently false



CLEAN BEDS:

"You call this dump a hotel?"
"That's what the sign says, fresh sheets every day."
"How often do they change the fleas?"

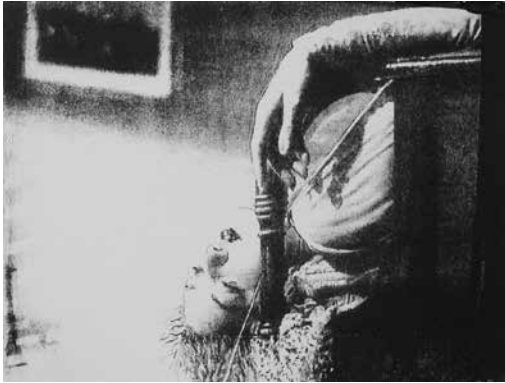
in a noir universe. She is visibly outlined in the lithograph with a subtle white tracing, so she stands out as a positively charged provocatrix in a transitory foyer built on lies. In the musically titled ***Ida, Sweet as Apple Cider***, we get a glimpse into Ida's eyes as windows to her soul. There are two tiny discordant details in Ida's eyes—one pupil is deep black and the other pupil is hard white. The contrast in her pupils makes us wonder what internal contradictions "Sweet" Ida is wrestling with as she pensively sucks her thumb. Chernow's NOIR 1 series ask us to consider multiple interpretations in each framing and to avoid passively reducing the meaning of any of these instances to a single final reckoning.



IDA, SWEET AS APPLE CIDER;

"Men like to see women cry. It makes them feel superior."

The seductive and sensual qualities of noir's dangerous women are showcased in these lithographs. ***All Choked Up*** is structured around a hallmark of the noir style: the low angle shot. Prominent upside-down rosebud lips are at the image's center, while a rope is loosely dangling diagonally through a chair. A single limp hand mirrors a similar pose of the Swede's (Burt Lancaster) towards the



ALL CHOKED UP:
"I did something wrong , once."

beginning of 1946's *The Killers*. These combined elements dare us to make either a prurient or fatal interpretation of this shocking scene. With her cigarette and wild platinum hair, Mona Lisa in Chernow's *Mona Lisa* might conform to existing stereotypes of *noir*'s "bad girl." But, as with other prints in this series, we should tread carefully when making such assignments. There is an uncanny afterimage in *Mona Lisa* that appears to be a silvery roll of celluloid rising from her exhaled plume of smoke—a self-



MONA LISA:
"I wouldn't give ya the skin off a grape."

conscious reference to the medium of film that harkens back to the cinematic origins of *noir* that inspire this entire series.

Chernow's NOIR 1 series reaches its climax in ***Rendezvous in Black***. In this print, Chernow exploits the use of black negative space and gives us only a partial, voyeuristic glimpse of an illicit encounter between doomed lovers (a common theme in film noir best exemplified by such films as 1944's *Double Indemnity* and 1949's *Criss Cross*). While possibly the beginning of an encounter between two lovers, this rendering of a tryst also foretells its own ending. The composition is dominated by the allure of enigmatic faces, but it is the presence of the man's white shirt cuff—hooking around her body, reaching into the nowhere of the inky darkness—which implies, in a fragmentary detail, the fatal and fateful framework of the noir universe. In true noir fashion, there will be no happily-ever-after. As Chernow's NOIR series so dynamically declares, even if her subjects possess such foreknowledge of fate and doom, once the raging flames of desire and transgression are burning in a bleak world, they cannot be easily dimmed.



RENDEZVOUS IN BLACK:
"The moment they met it was murder!"

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST:

NOIR 1 SERIES:

DETOUR, 2012-2015

Caption: "Why are we going this way?"
"Better scenery"

Lithograph printed on Canson paper

7 3/4 x 10 7/16 in. (sheet 11 x 13 7/8 in.)

Exhibition Edition 11/20, Courtesy of the Artist. #1 in Noir 1 series

FOLLOW ME, 2012-2015

Caption: "How did you get past the 'no visitors' sign?"
"I never noticed it."

Lithograph printed on Canson paper

7 3/4 x 10 7/16 in. (sheet 11 x 13 7/8 in.)

Exhibition Edition 11/20, Courtesy of the Artist. #2 in Noir 1 series

TROUBLE, 2012-2015

Caption: "If you want fresh air, don't look for it in this town."

Lithograph printed on Canson paper

7 3/4 x 10 7/16 in. (sheet 11 x 13 7/8 in.)

Exhibition Edition 11/20, Courtesy of the Artist. #3 in Noir 1 series

SEE NO EVIL, 2012-2015

Caption: "I was born when you kissed me, I died when you left
me, I lived a few weeks while you loved me."

Lithograph printed on Canson paper

7 3/4 x 10 7/16 in. (sheet 11 x 13 7/8 in.)

Exhibition Edition 11/20, Courtesy of the Artist. #4 in Noir 1 series

CLEAN BEDS, 2012-2015

Caption: "You call this dump a hotel?"

"That's what the sign says, fresh sheets every day."

"How often do they change the fleas?"

Lithograph printed on Canson paper

7 3/4 x 10 7/16 in. (sheet 11 x 13 7/8 in.)

Exhibition Edition 11/20, Courtesy of the Artist. #5 in Noir 1 series

MOONLIGHT, 2012-2015

Caption: "I can be framed easier than Whistler's Mother."

Lithograph printed on Canson paper

7 3/4 x 10 7/16 in. (sheet 11 x 13 7/8 in.)

Exhibition Edition 11/20, Courtesy of the Artist. #6 in Noir 1 series

LAURA WALKING, 2012-2015

Caption: "It's lavish, but I call it home."

Lithograph printed on Canson paper

7 3/4 x 10 7/16 in. (sheet 11 x 13 7/8 in.)

Exhibition Edition 11/20, Courtesy of the Artist. #7 in Noir 1 series

IDA, SWEET AS APPLE CIDER, 2012-2015

Caption: "Men like to see women cry. It makes them feel superior."

Lithograph printed on Canson paper

7 3/4 x 10 7/16 in. (sheet 11 x 13 7/8 in.)

Exhibition Edition 11/20, Courtesy of the Artist. #8 in Noir 1 series

A FOGGY DAY, 2012-2015

Caption: "Sure I'm meeting somebody, just anybody handy as long as he's a man."

Lithograph printed on Canson paper

7 3/4 x 10 7/16 in. (sheet 11 x 13 7/8 in.)

Exhibition Edition 11/20, Courtesy of the Artist. #9 in Noir 1 series

ALL CHOKED UP, 2012-2015

Caption: "I did something wrong, once."

Lithograph printed on Canson paper

7 3/4 x 10 7/16 in. (sheet 11 x 13 7/8 in.)

Exhibition Edition 11/20, Courtesy of the Artist. #10 in Noir 1 series

THE SHADOW, 2012-2015

Caption: "Doesn't it ever enter a man's head that a woman can do without him?"

Lithograph printed on Canson paper

7 3/4 x 10 7/16 in. (sheet 11 x 13 7/8 in.)

Exhibition Edition 11/20, Courtesy of the Artist. #11 in Noir 1 series

FALLEN ANGELS, 2012-2015

Caption: "You don't seem very sorry."

"I am sorry. Sorry that I was caught."

Lithograph printed on Canson paper

7 3/4 x 10 7/16 in. (sheet 11 x 13 7/8 in.)

Exhibition Edition 11/20, Courtesy of the Artist. #12 in Noir 1 series

A BIRD IN THE BUSH, 2012-2015

Caption: "I go where I want to, with anybody I want. I'm that kind of girl!"

Lithograph printed on Canson paper

7 3/4 x 10 7/16 in. (sheet 11 x 13 7/8 in.)

Exhibition Edition 11/20, Courtesy of the Artist. #13 in Noir 1 series

MONA LISA, 2012-2015

Caption: "I wouldn't give ya the skin off a grape."

Lithograph printed on Canson paper

8 x 10 7/16 (sheet 11 x 13 7/8 in.)

Exhibition Edition 11/20, Courtesy of the Artist. #14 in *Noir 1* series

RENDEZVOUS IN BLACK, 2012-2015

Caption: "The moment they met it was murder!"

Lithograph printed on Canson paper

7 3/4 x 10 7/16 in. (sheet 11 x 13 7/8 in.)

Exhibition Edition 11/20, Courtesy of the Artist. #15 in *Noir 1* series

Housatonic Museum of Art owns edition #18/20 of the *Noir 1* series

NOIR 2 SERIES:

OPEN, SESAME!, 2014-2015

Caption: "Not a shadow of a doubt..."

Aquatint printed on Canson Edition Antique White paper

8 x 10 1/4 in. (sheet 11 1/4 x 14 in.)

Artist Proof, Courtesy of the Artist. #1 in *Noir 2* series

VODKA, 2014-2015

Caption: "The problem with the world is that everyone is three drinks behind..."

Aquatint printed on Canson Edition Antique White paper

8 x 9 7/8 in. (sheet 11 1/4 x 14 in.)

Artist Proof, Courtesy of the Artist. #2 in *Noir 2* series

FATE, 2014-2015

Caption: "Shut up and deal..."

Aquatint printed on Canson Edition Antique White paper

8 x 9 7/8 in. (sheet 11 1/4 x 14 in.)

Artist Proof, Courtesy of the Artist. #3 in *Noir 2* series

FIRST LOVE, 2014-2015

Caption: "The postman always rings twice..."

Aquatint printed on Canson Edition Antique White paper.

8 x 9 7/8 in. (sheet 11 1/4 x 14 in.)

Artist Proof, Courtesy of the Artist. #4 in *Noir 2* series

A KISS IN THE DARK, 2014-2015

Caption: "A kiss is only a means to the end..."

Aquatint printed on Canson Edition Antique White paper

7 7/8 x 9 7/8 in. (sheet 11 1/4 x 14 in.)

Artist Proof, Courtesy of the Artist. #5 in *Noir 2* series

THE AFFAIR, 2014-2015

Caption: "I love trouble..."

Aquatint printed on Canson Edition Antique White paper
8 x 9 7/8 in. (sheet 11 1/4 x 14 in.)

Artist Proof, Courtesy of the Artist. #6 in Noir 2 series

LAURA, 2014-2015

Caption: "Home, sweet home..."

Aquatint printed on Canson Edition Antique White paper
7 7/8 x 9 7/8 in. (sheet 11 1/4 x 14 in.)

Artist Proof, Courtesy of the Artist. #7 in Noir 2 series

MEMORIES, 2014-2015

Caption: "Everything seemed so important then..."

Aquatint printed on Canson Edition Antique White paper
7 7/8 x 9 7/8 in. (sheet 11 1/4 x 14 in.)

Artist Proof, Courtesy of the Artist. #8 in Noir 2 series

MIDNIGHT, 2014-2015

Caption: "The night is Young..."

Aquatint printed on Canson Edition Antique White paper
7 7/8 x 9 7/8 in. (sheet 11 1/4 x 14 in.)

Artist Proof, Courtesy of the Artist. #9 in Noir 2 series

GOODBYE, 2014-2015

Caption: "Farewell my lady love..."

Aquatint printed on Canson Edition Antique White paper
7 7/8 x 9 7/8 in. (sheet 11 1/4 x 14 in.)

Artist Proof, Courtesy of the Artist. #10 in Noir 2 series

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