Nudes

Lee Friedlander, afterword by Ingrid Sischy

Author
Friedlander, Lee

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LEE FRIEDLANDER · NUDES

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THE NUDE LIES at the center of Western art. From the beginning of photography it has attracted photographers, many of whom have imitated the forms and postures portrayed by painters. There are a few moments when a photographer has abandoned derivative styles and allowed the viewer to see the body in a completely new manner. This occurred in America in the work of Edward Weston and in Britain in the work of Bill Brandt. It now occurs in the photographs of Lee Friedlander.

Over the last fifteen years, Friedlander has been working with a number of models to create his own way of seeing and photographing the female nude. Little of this work has ever appeared. The photographs are both highly intimate and coolly detached. The frequently surprising perspectives are balanced by the mundane backdrops of ordinary life, the real domestic interiors of the models.

This book is published on the occasion of an exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and confirms Friedlander's stature as one of the greatest photographers of his generation. He appears to have taken a primary theme of Western art and re-invented it.

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AFTERWORD BY INGRID SISCHY

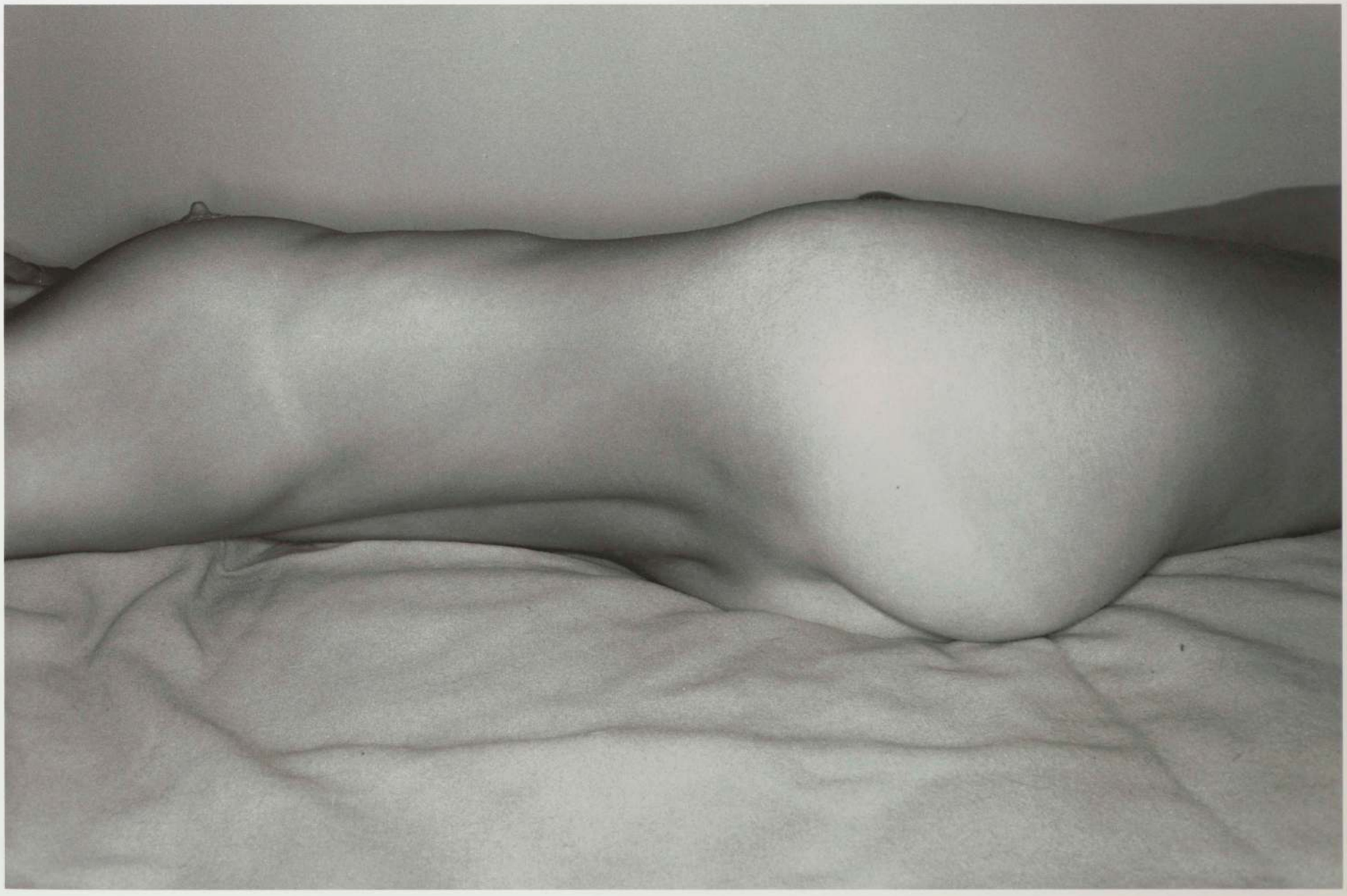
PANTHEON BOOKS · NEW YORK

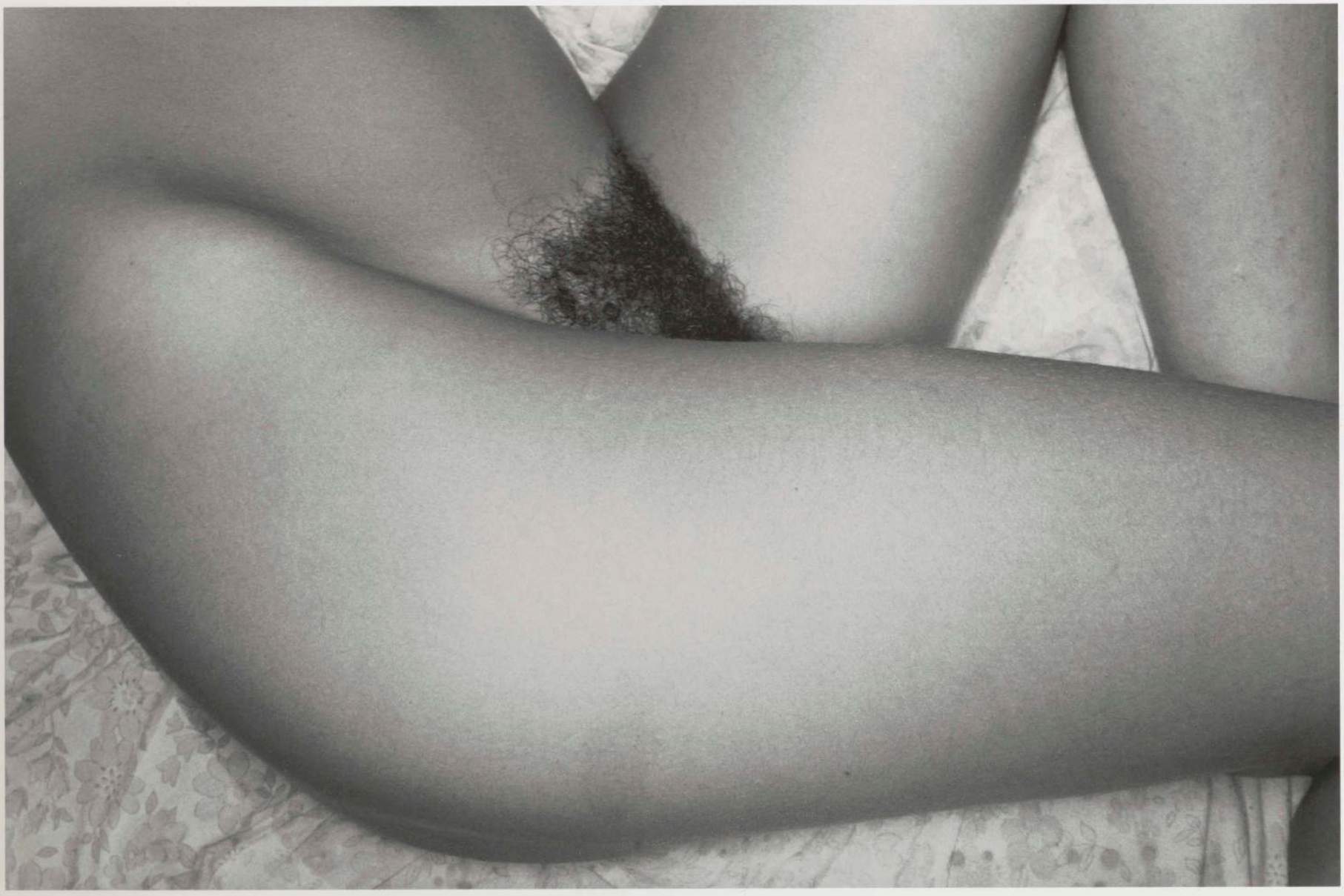
He moved his eyes off her, an act of will.

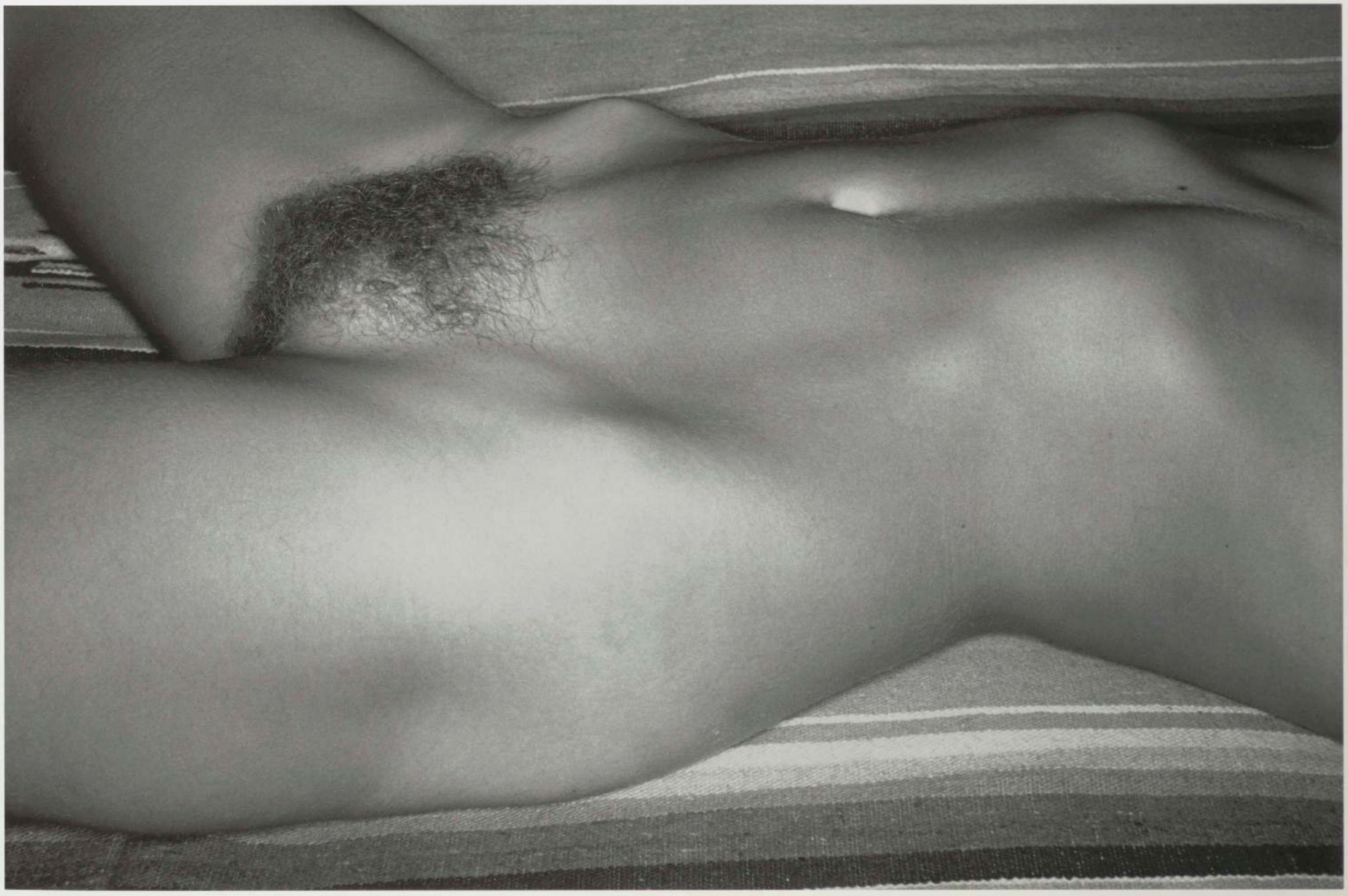
Pete Dexter
Deadwood

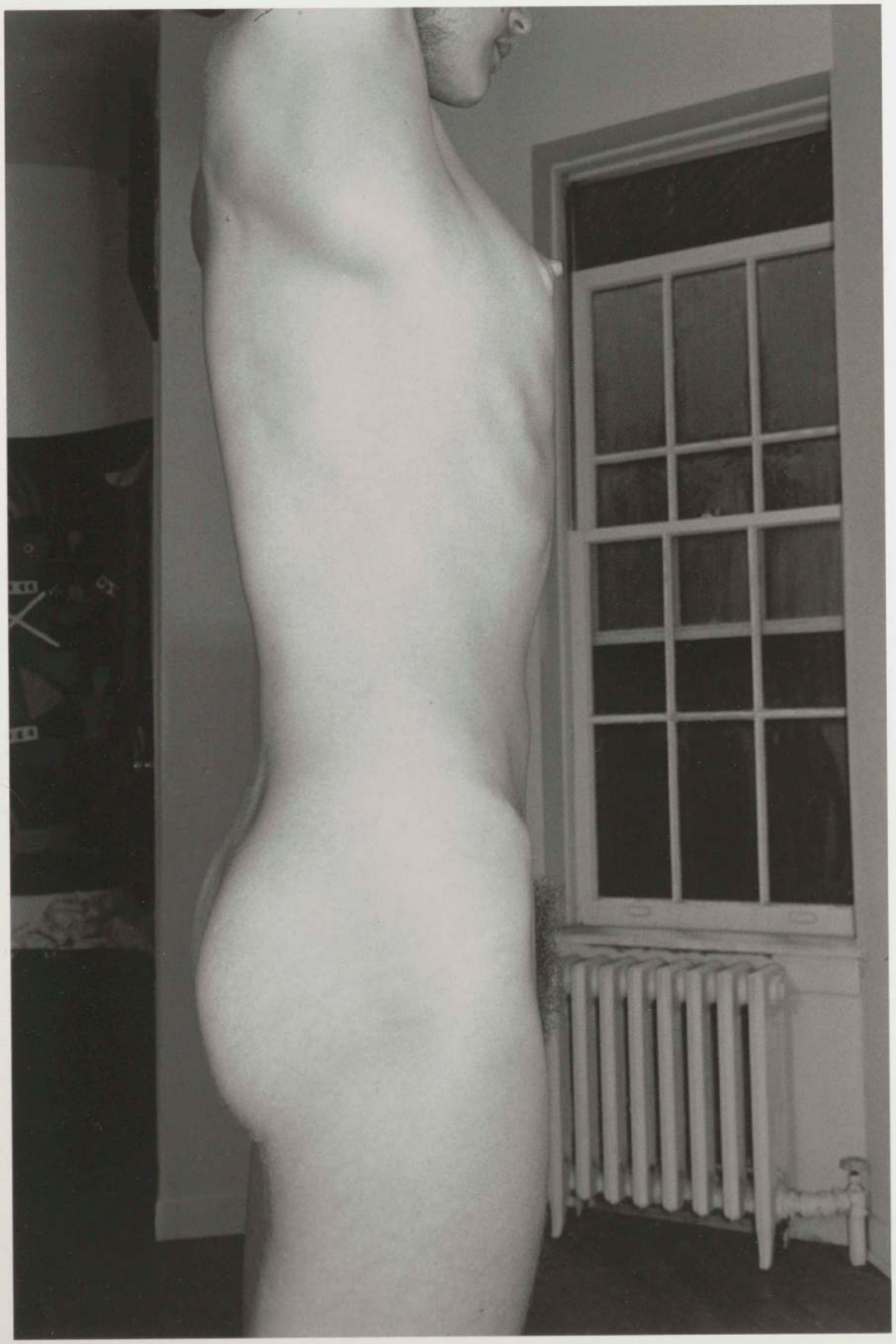
She didn't read books so she didn't know
that she was the world and the heavens
boiled down to a drop.

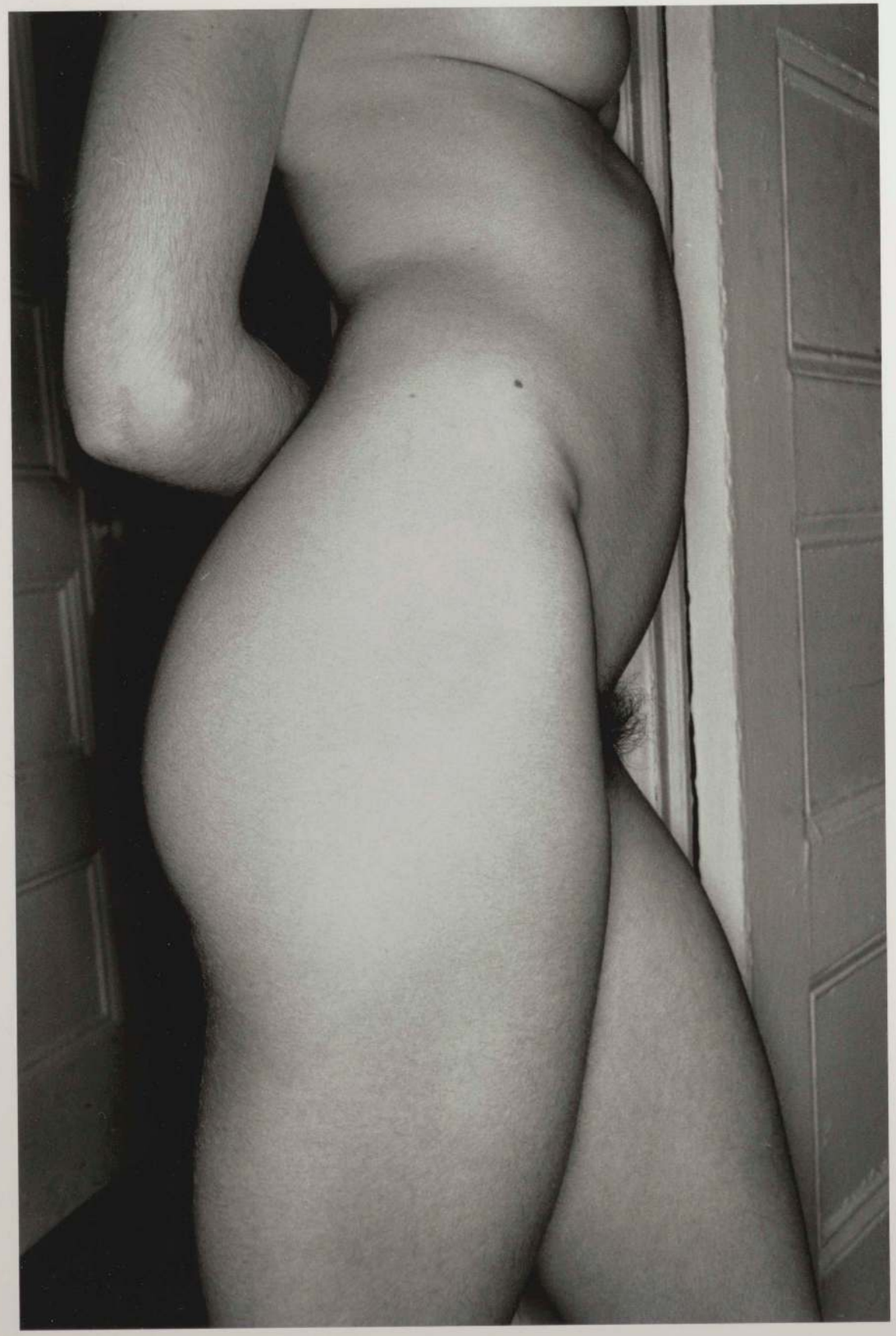
Zora Neale Hurston
Their Eyes Were Watching God

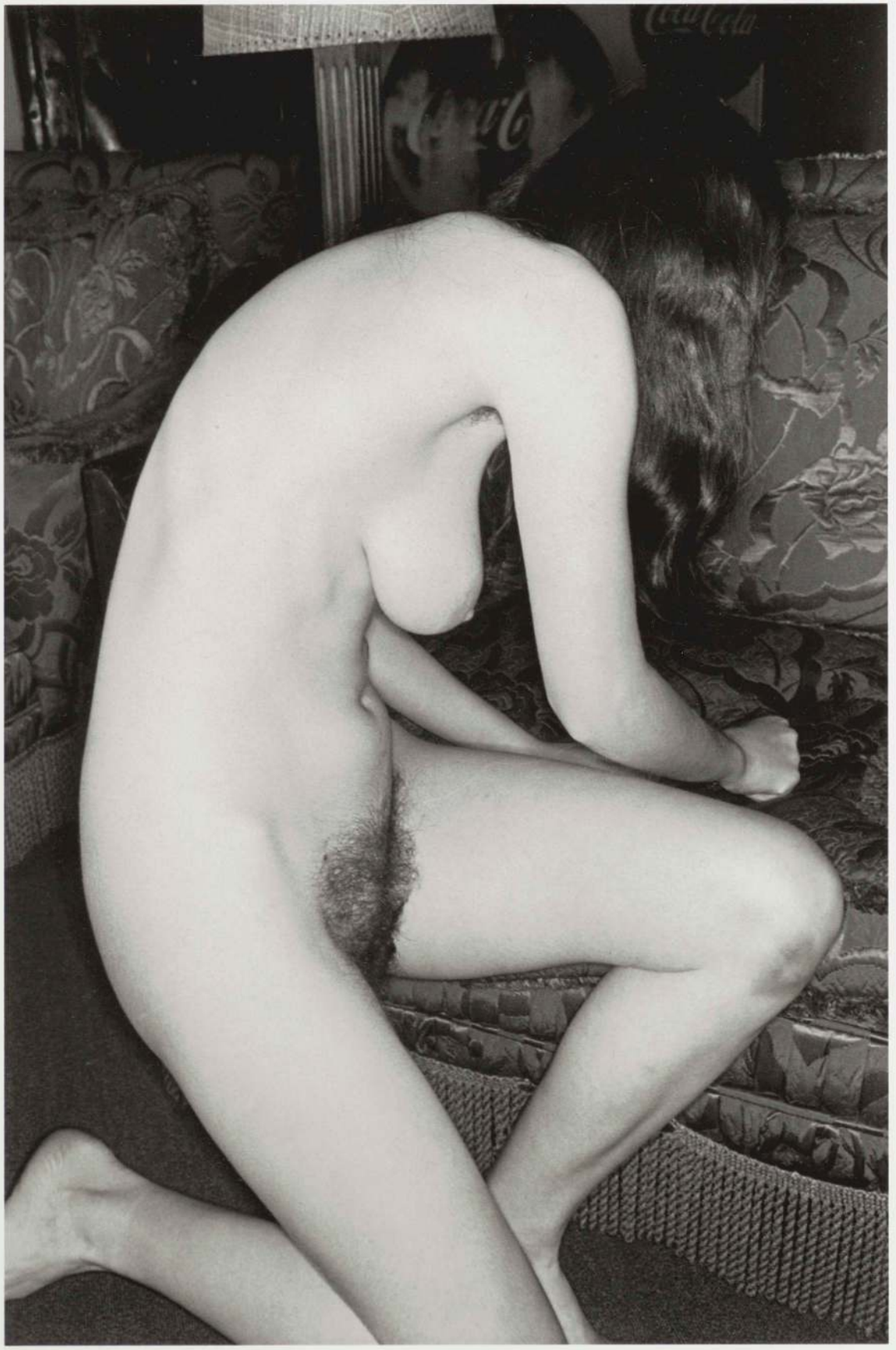








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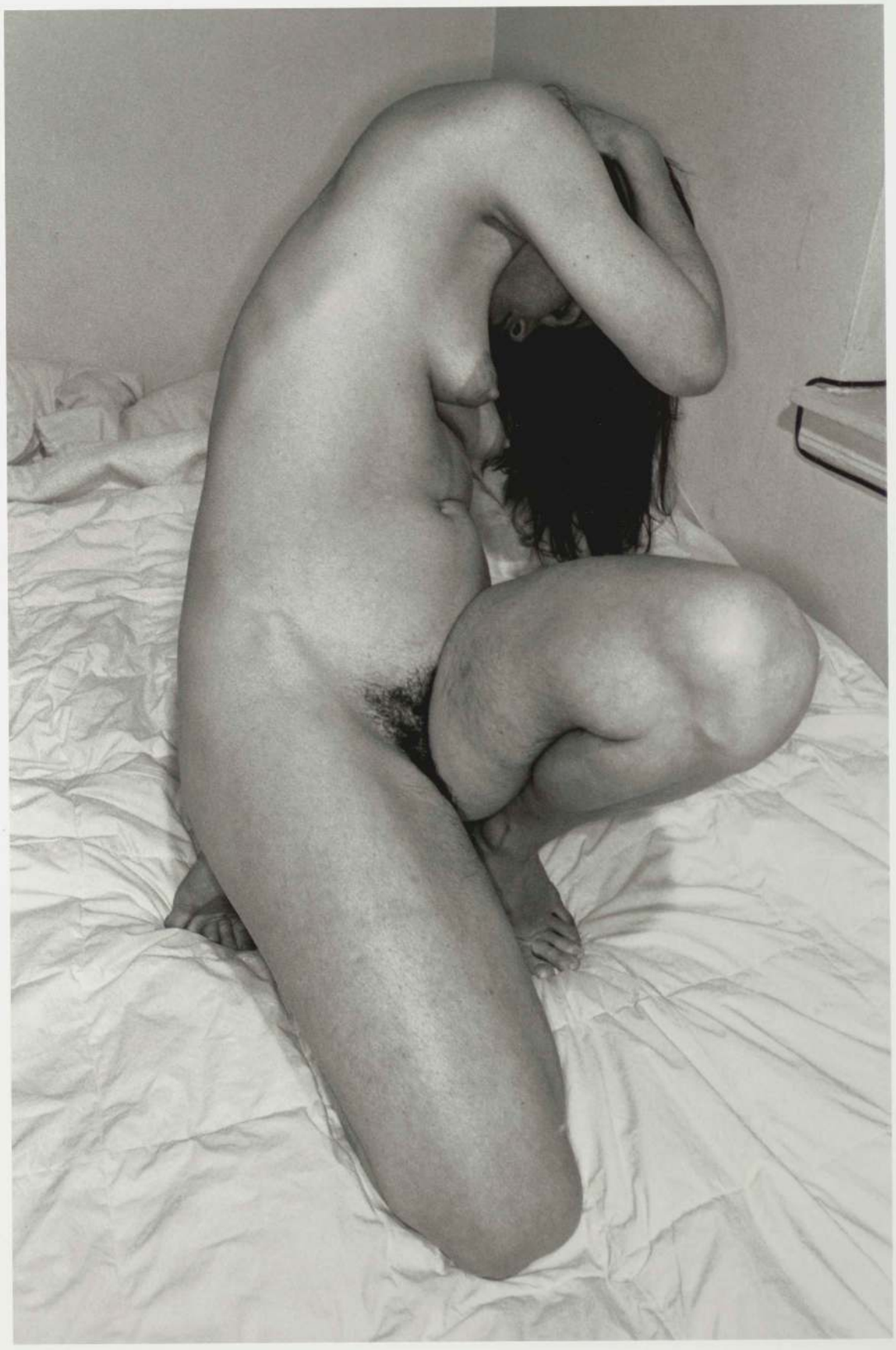

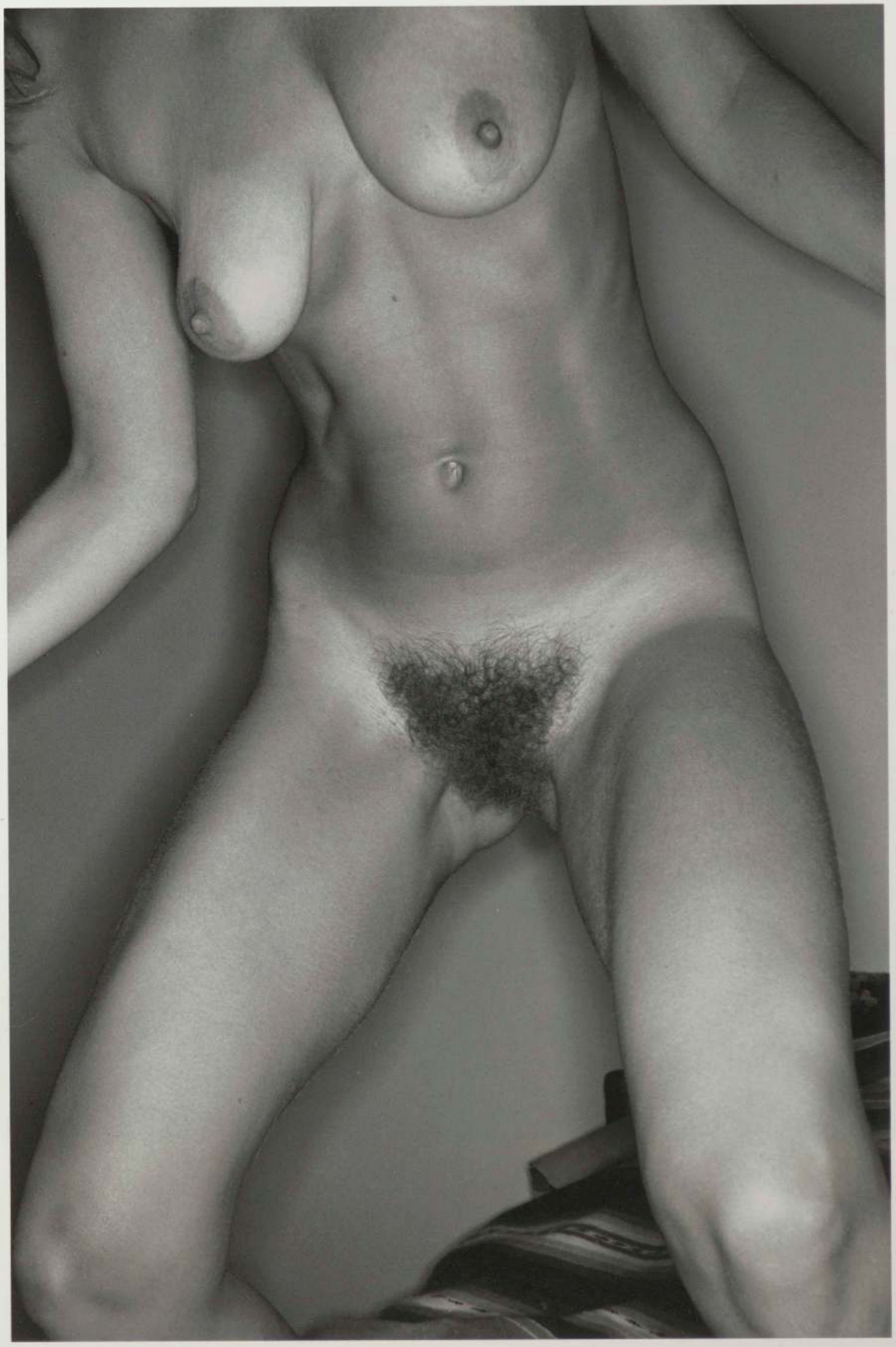

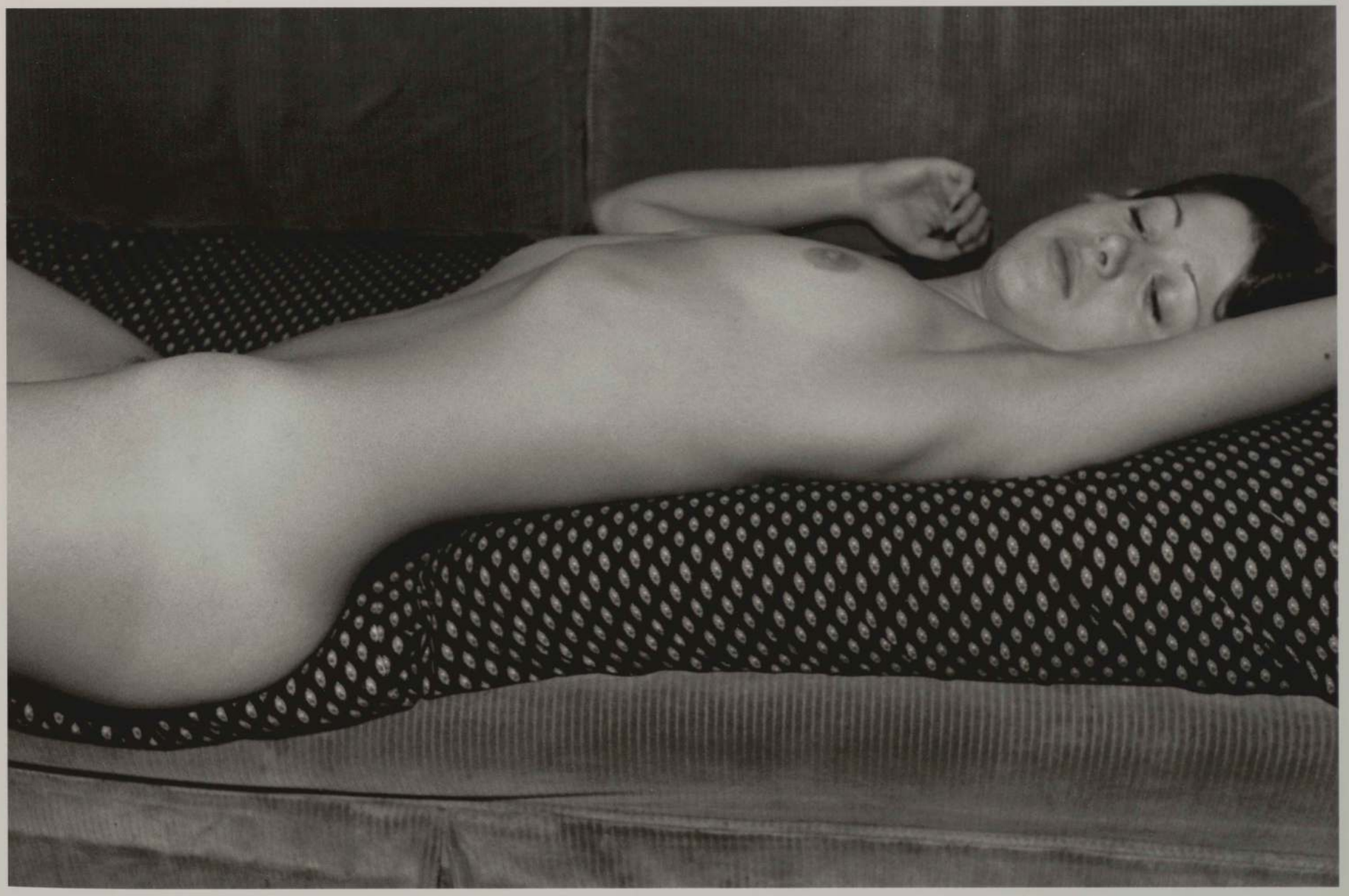

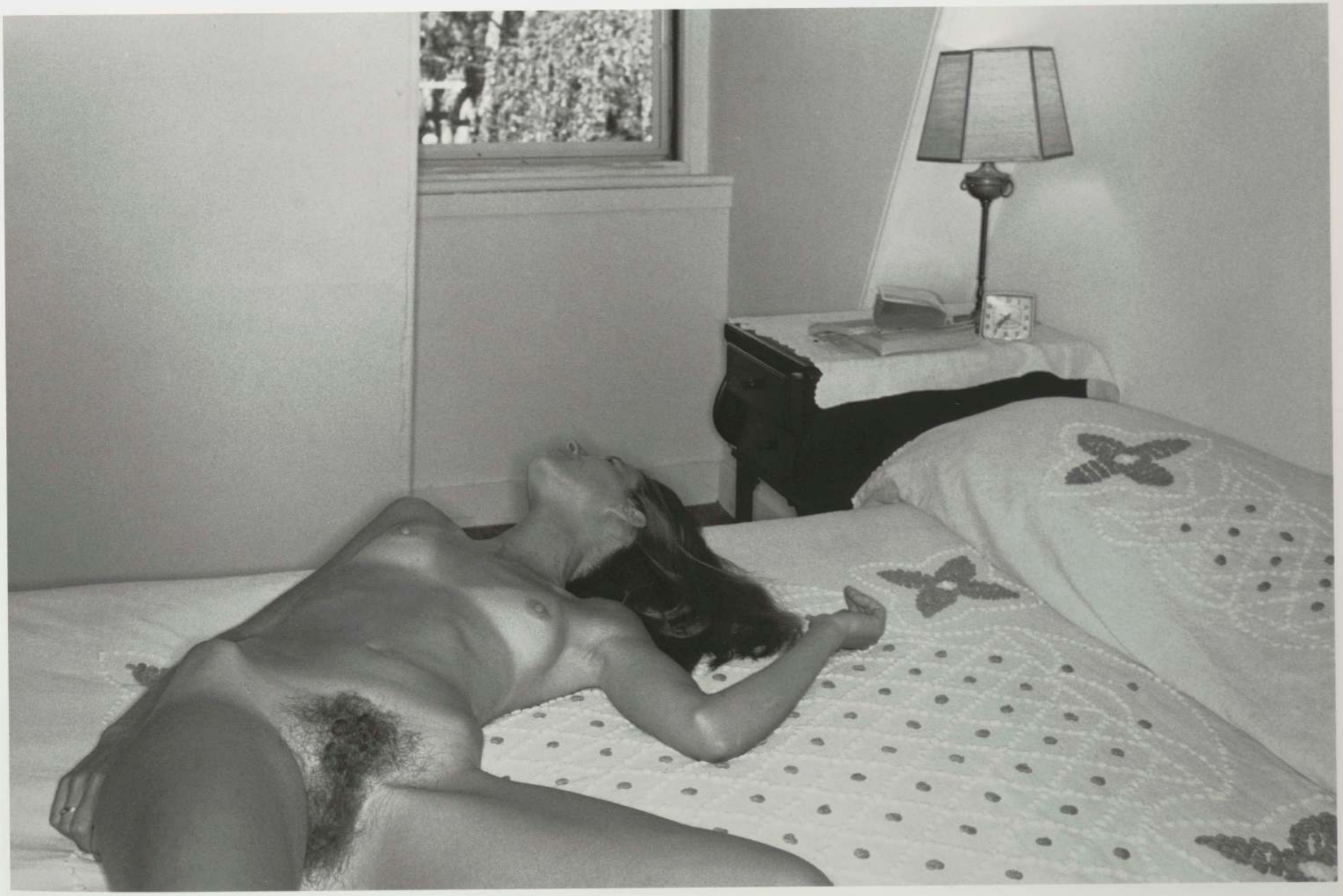

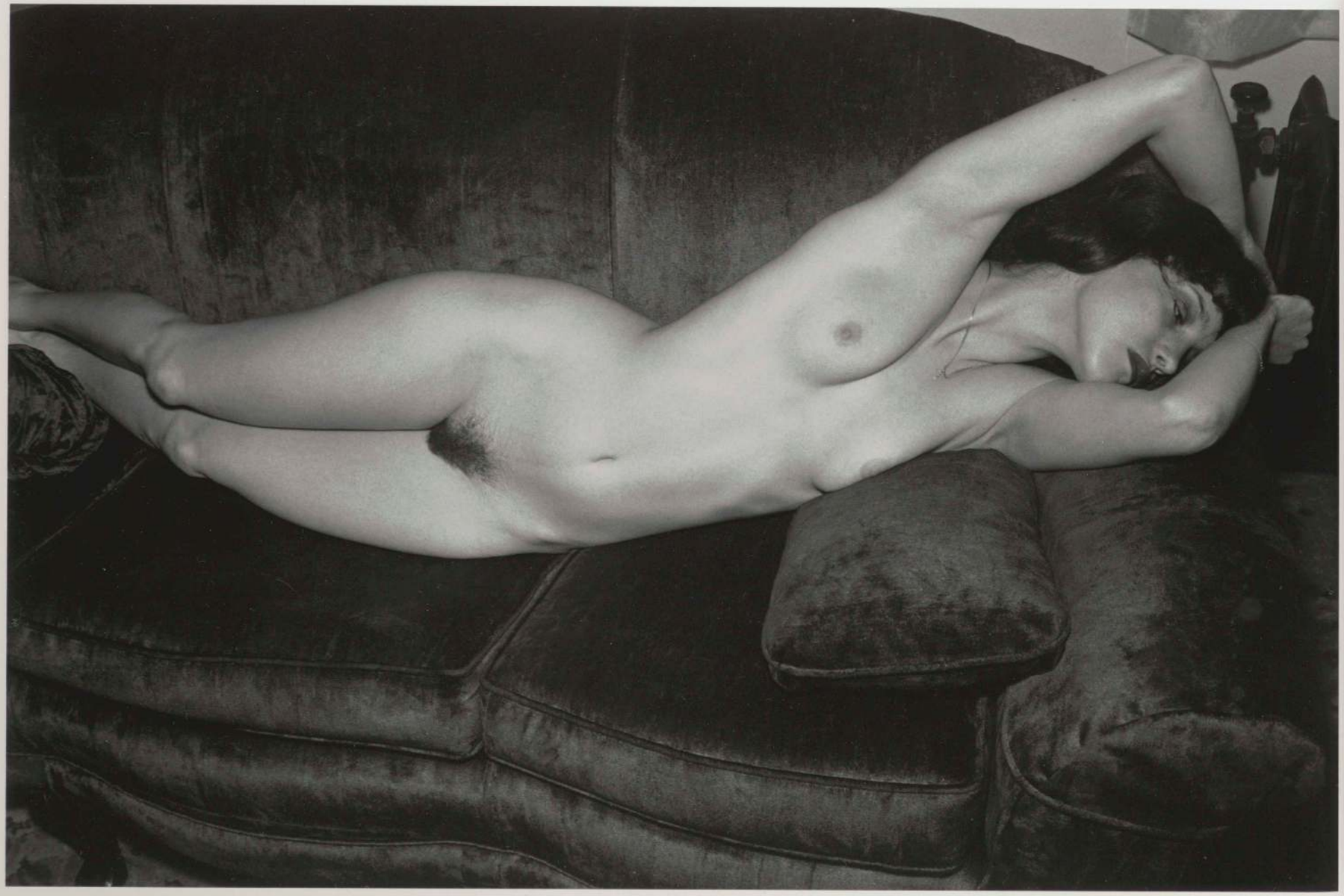

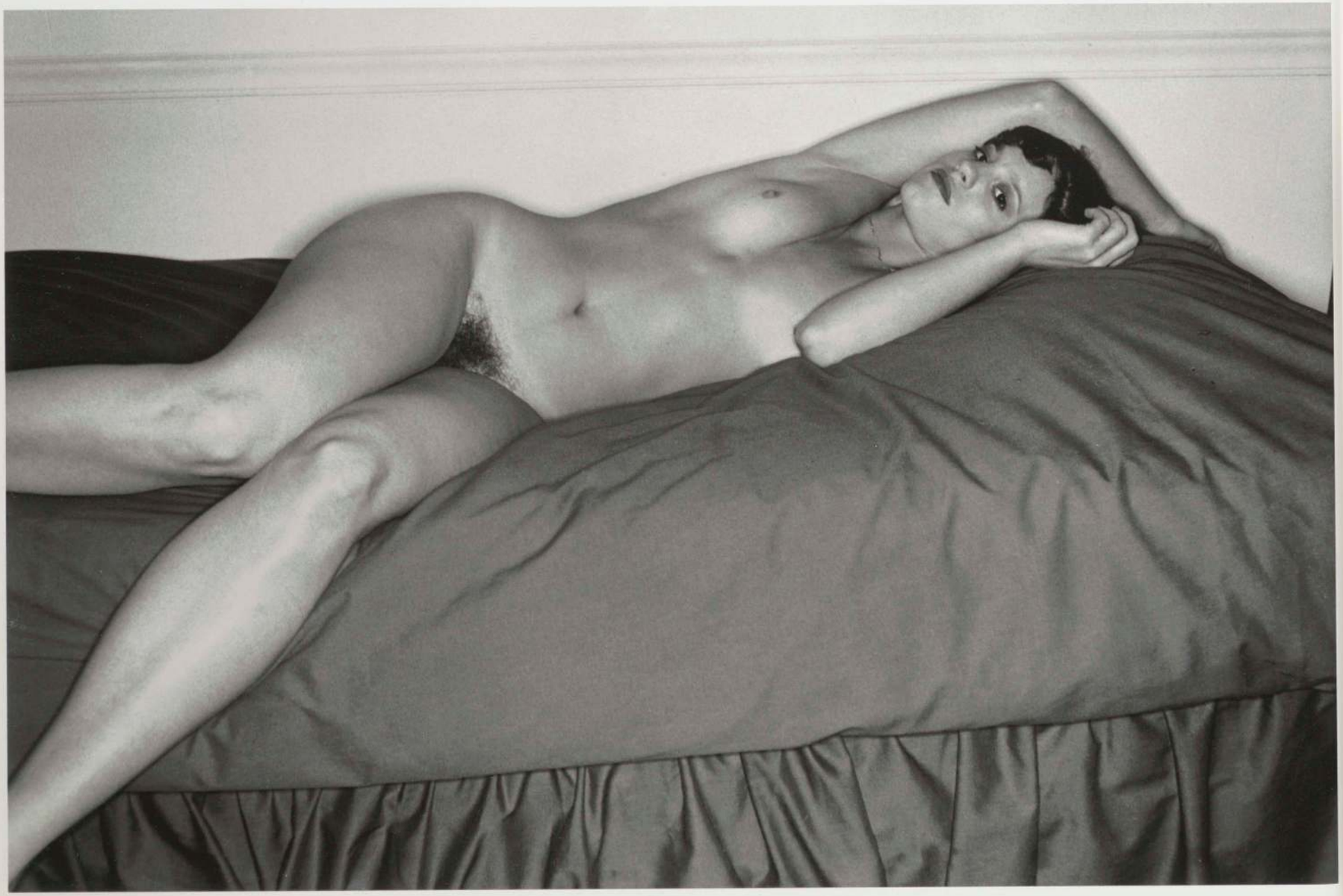

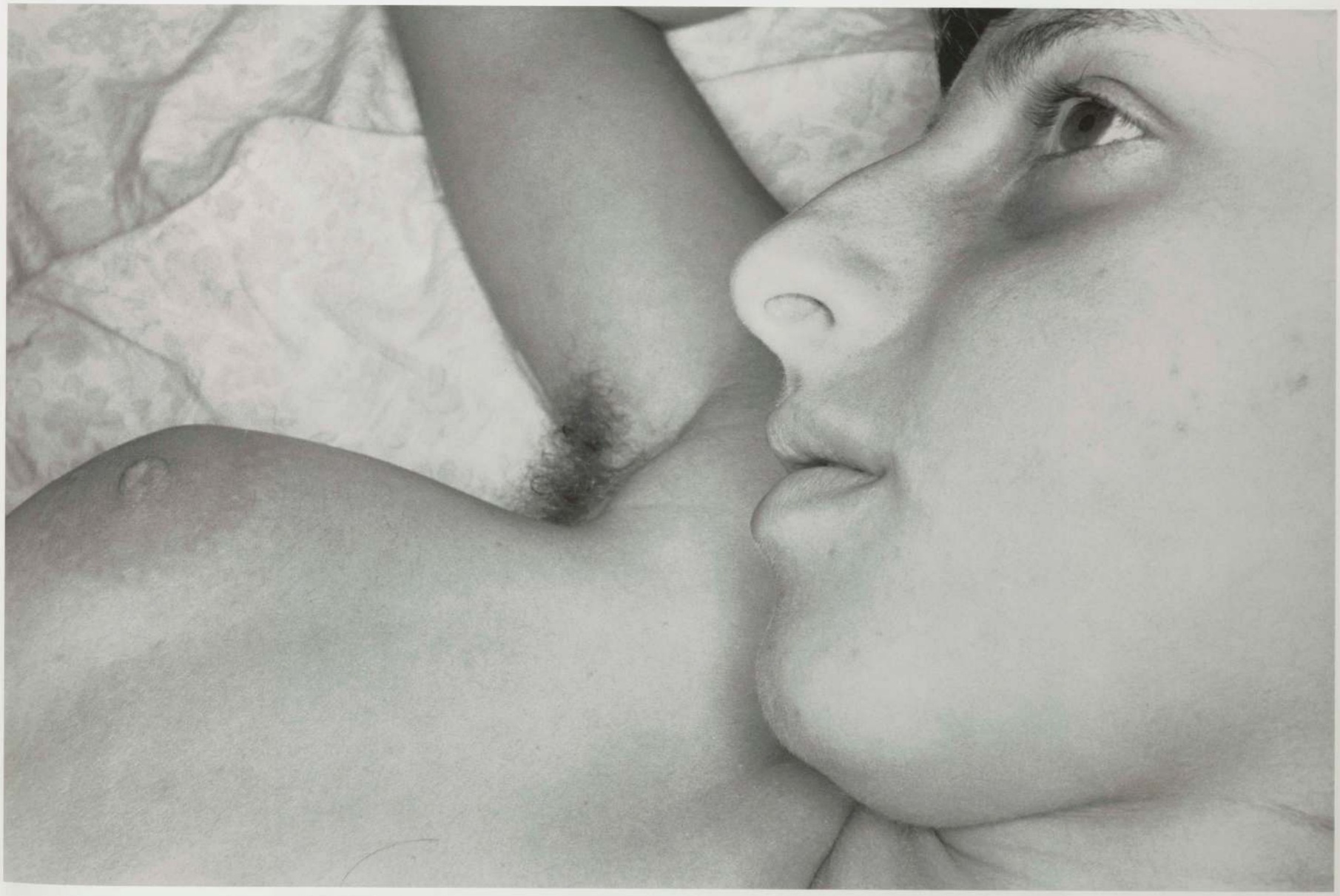

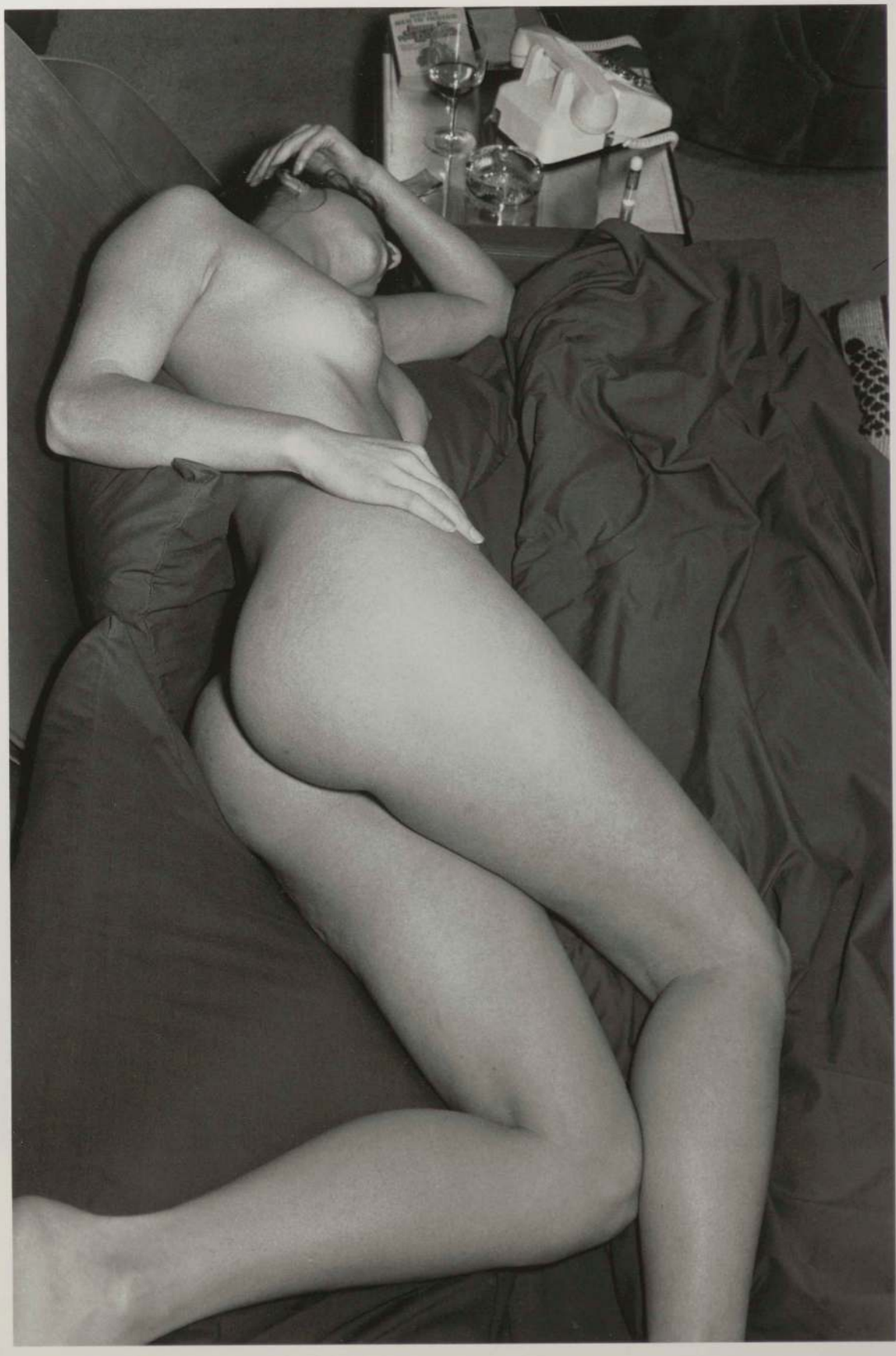

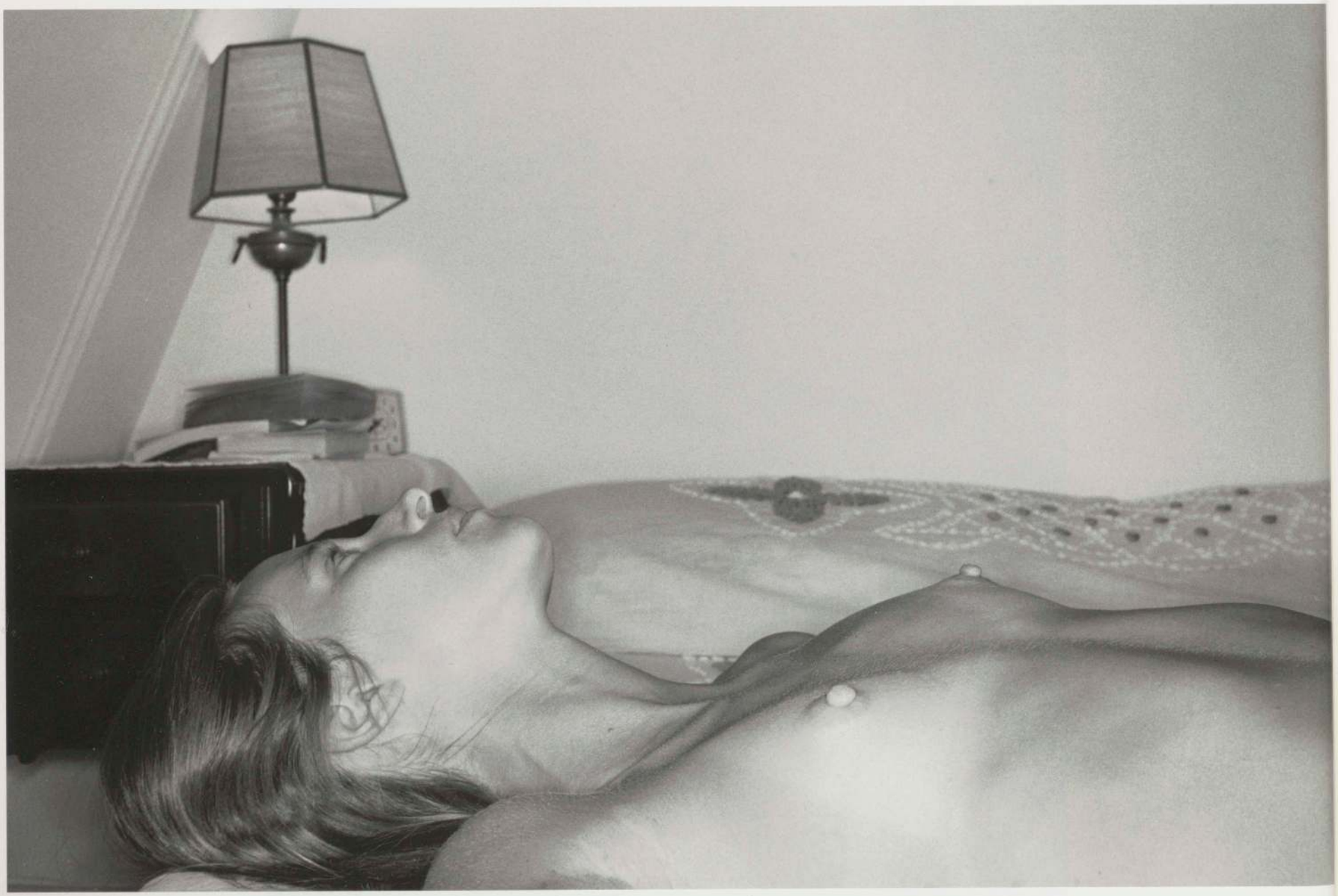

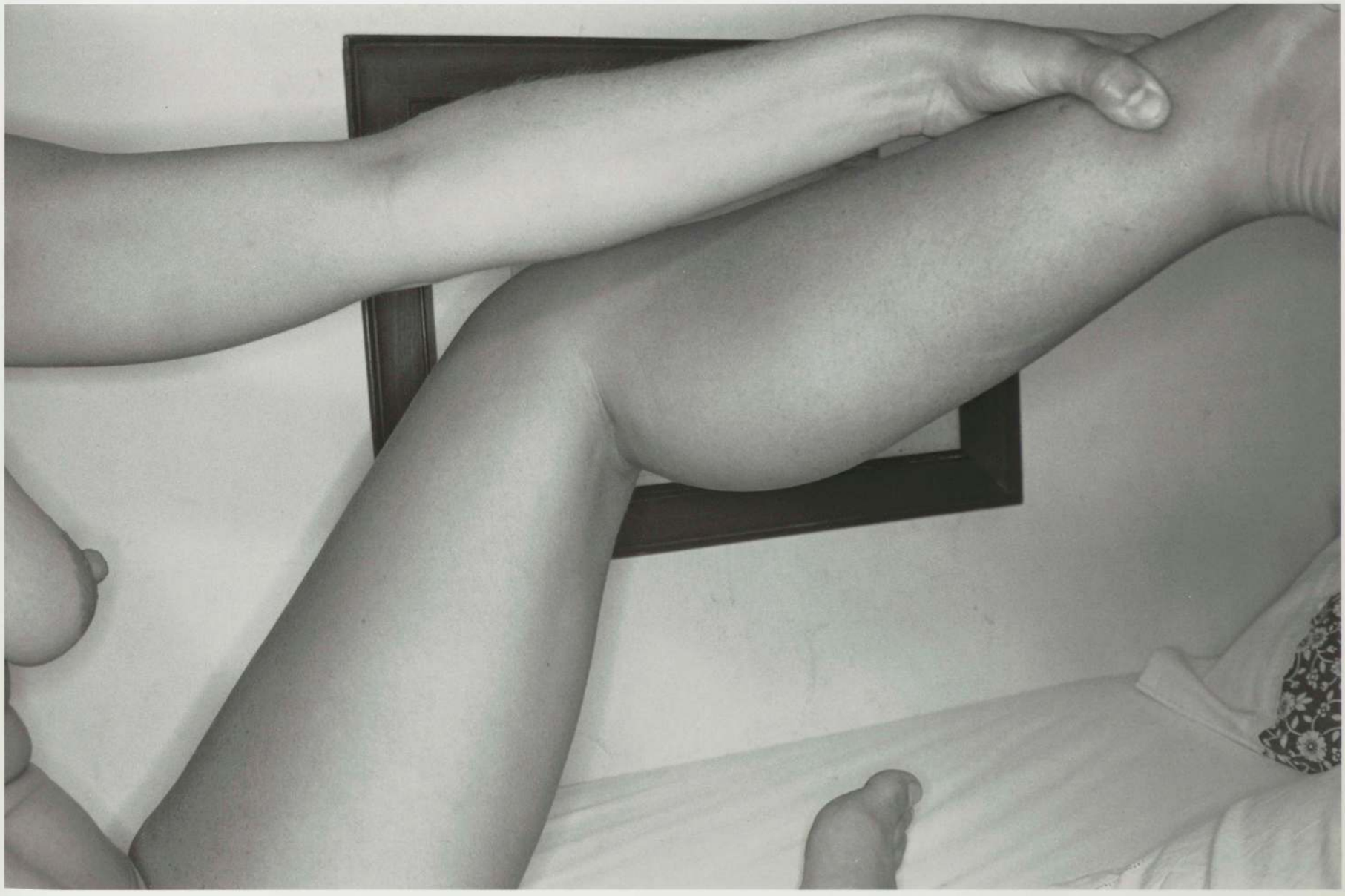

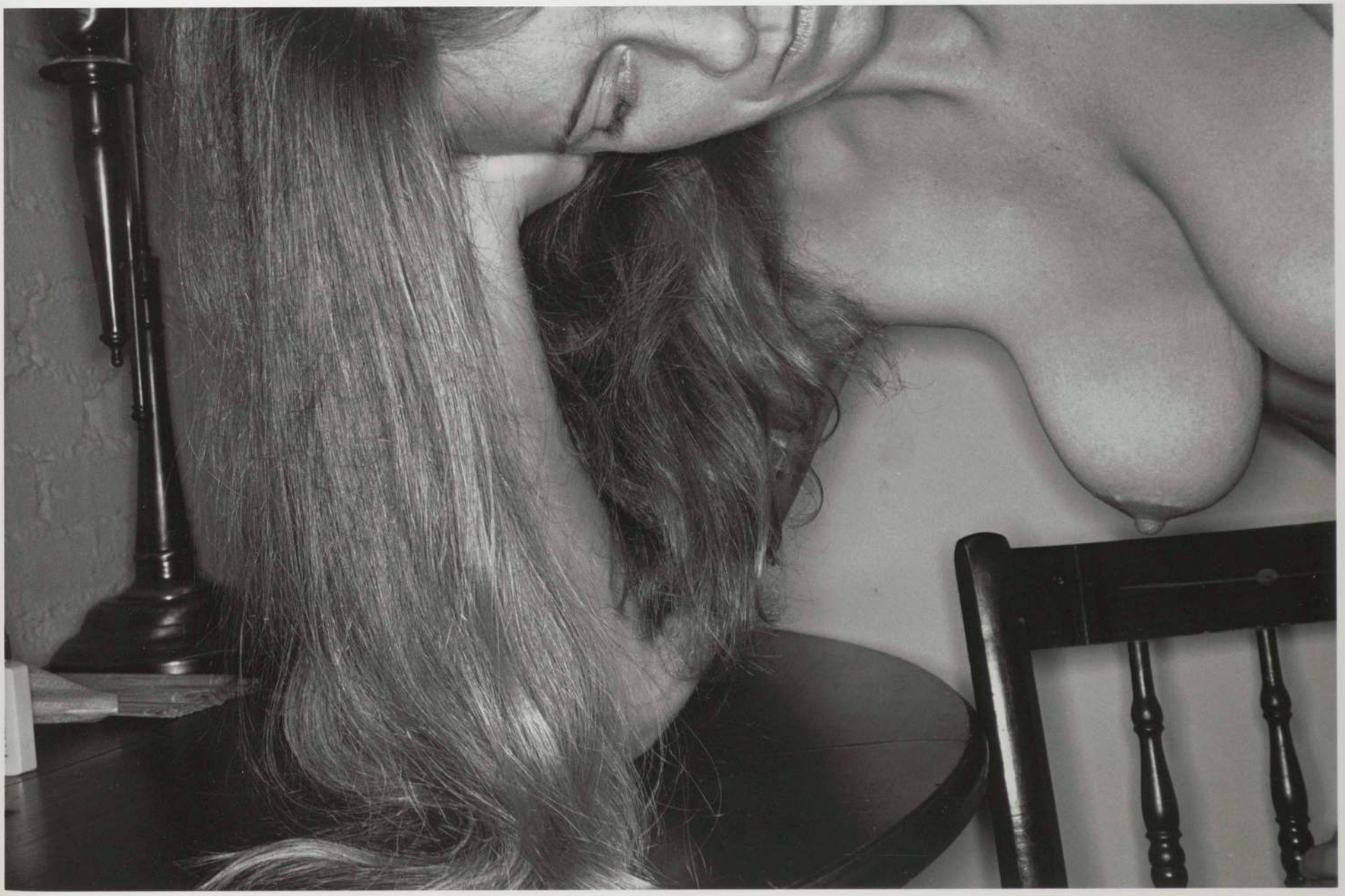

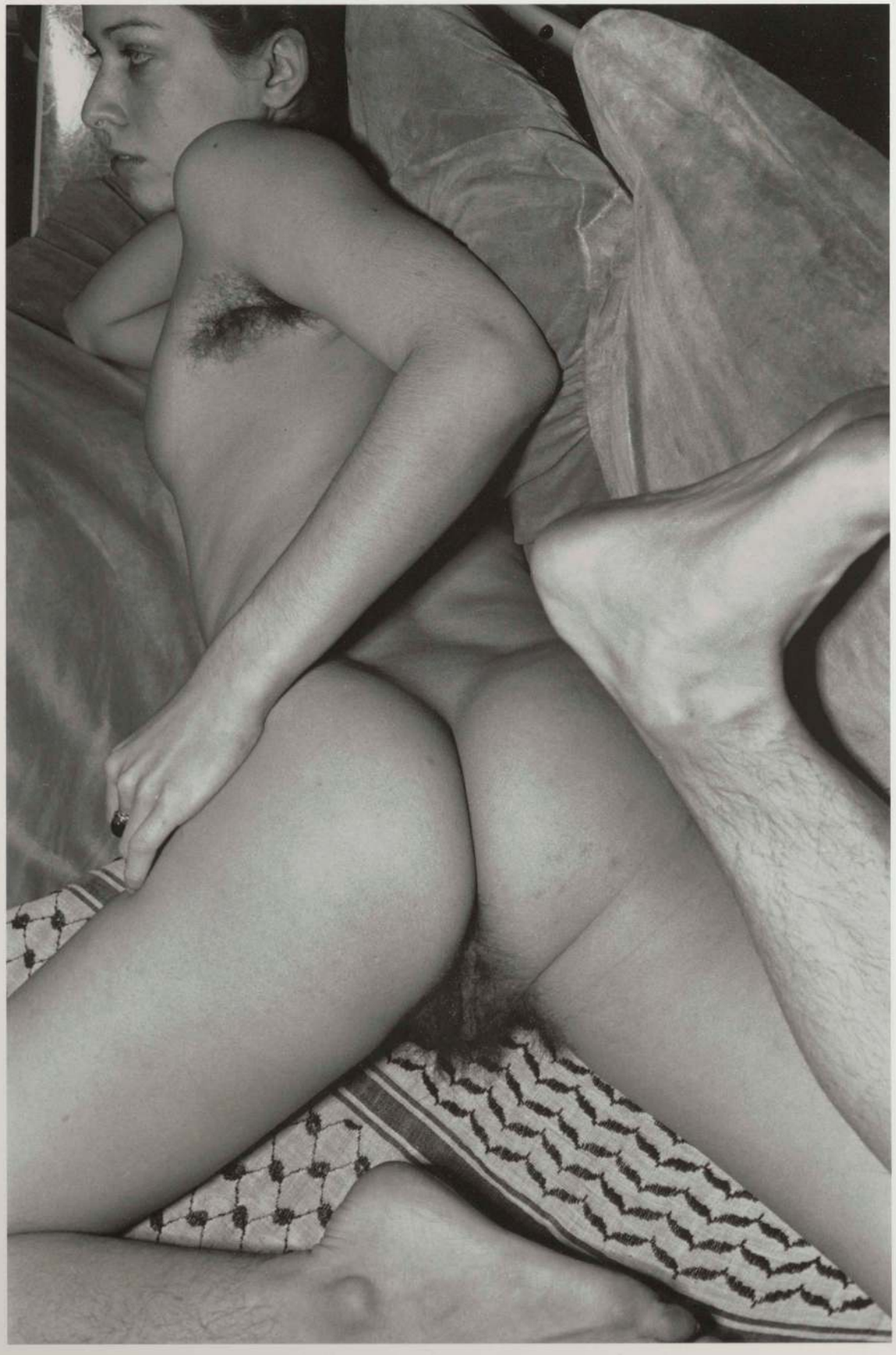

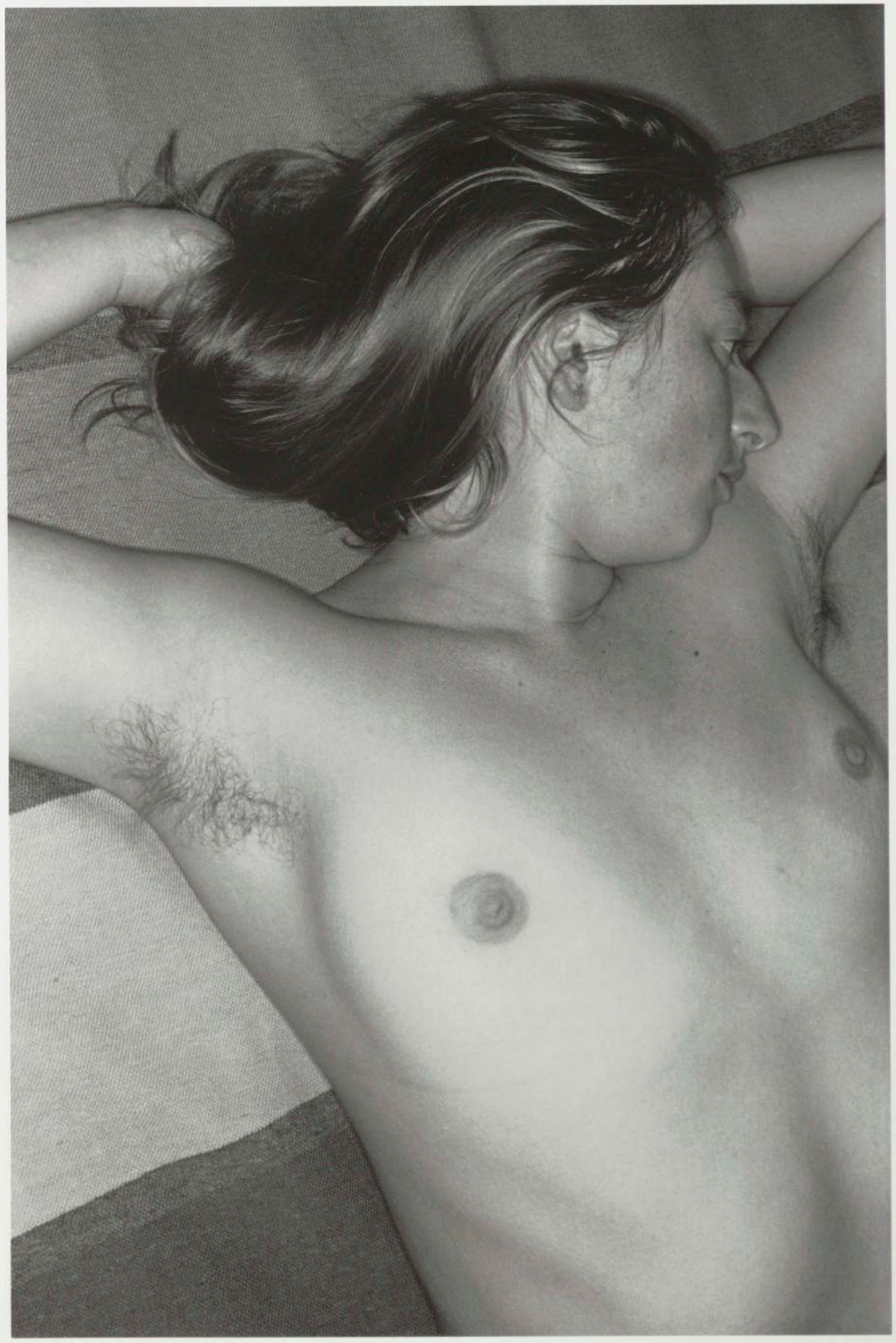


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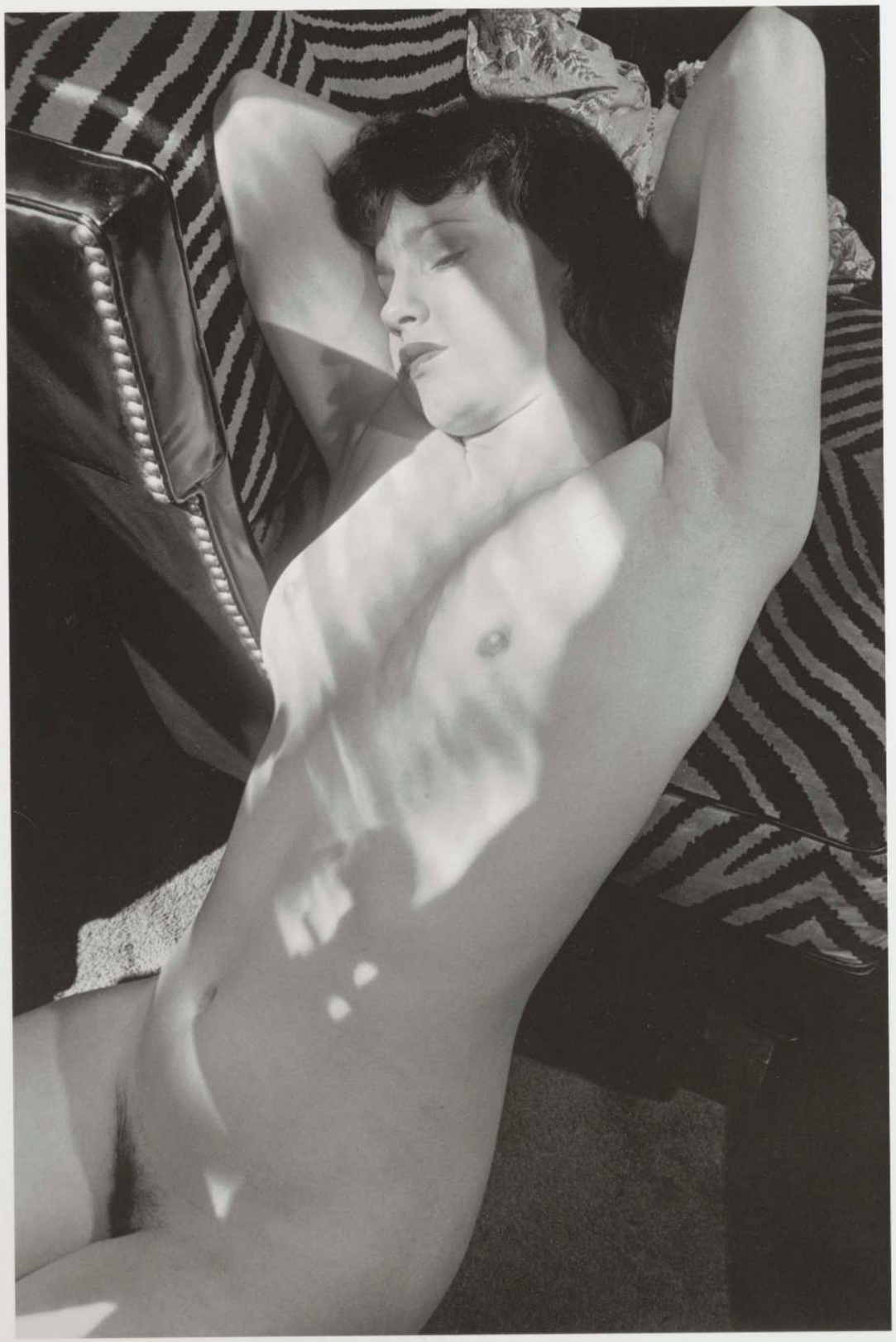

AFTERWORD BY INGRID SISCHY

AFTER SUCH AN IMMERSION in women's bodies, it's natural to ask about the photographer who took these pictures, to want to turn the tables for a minute on the beholder. What about Lee Friedlander? He's a big guy, unbuttoned-up, easy to be with, familiar-feeling. When his hair hasn't seen a barber for a spate, the time off brings out the cowlicks, putting an accent on the boyishness that's already there, preserved in him. It's that lightness that makes Friedlander ever-so-slightly different from most other men who are nothing special when it comes to physical appearance. It's a subtle quality you can sometimes notice in people who have a different relationship to their work than a 9 to 5 clock-in. But it wouldn't make him stand out in a room, or on the street. What might, however, lead you to know it's him, is the fanny-pack he's wearing, containing the photographic gear that's such a part of him, when he's out and about. If the police were looking for him the fanny-pack would be his "outstanding characteristic".

I hadn't seen Friedlander for a few years when I spotted him one day, shooting on the street. I was late, stuck in a taxi, in mid-day, mid-town traffic; he was up the block a bit, and my view of him was from the back. But he's done so many self-portraits in which his photographic apparatus is part of his silhouette that the sight of this similar figure just had to be him. When it turned out so, New York felt like the small town that it is, but that's not all—I watched Friedlander photographing the buildings, the shop windows, the people on the street. Although he was alone, it seemed like he wasn't. It was as if Eugène Atget was there, too, and Lewis Hine, Brassaï, Walker Evans—other legendary photographers who had paced the life of cities, and small towns, before him. Although I'd looked at their work often, I'd never pictured them actually out on the streets, doing it. Seeing Friedlander among the crowds on the sidewalk—melting right in, if it weren't for his hands up to his camera—made what they had done before seem less mythic, simple, and therefore even more amazing considering what they got. It must have been a double eyeful to have come across Friedlander and his friend Garry Winogrand shooting on the street together, as they did sometimes when Winogrand hit town. The image of Winogrand snapping away jumps to life when Friedlander describes him, remembering, "He would come to New York, and it would be like being with somebody who was horny or something. He just had to photograph everyone. Nobody could pass him that he wouldn't take a picture of." With that kind of attraction to people, no wonder Winogrand left millions of unprinted negatives as part of his legacy.

Winogrand isn't just a name one mentions to conveniently place Friedlander in his generation of American photographers. No, the tie between the two was stronger than that of people who happened to be working at the same time. They were life-long friends, who met when they were both starting out, who ate casseroles at each other's house, who talked on the phone at least every three weeks, who went after the same work, who produced very different kinds of pictures, two obsessive photographers who were obviously vital points of connection for each other. When Friedlander talks about Winogrand you can

feel the wonder he has for what Winogrand did—and his loss. He'll tell you that Winogrand became a real photographic intellectual as well as a great photographer, and his language reveals such respect it takes on a beauty. "He was such a force that was out there working," he states, and goes farther, "he was like a reflecting block." When we were talking about Winogrand's writings, Friedlander's hands embraced the air while he marvelled, "Those pieces are the size of the moon."

It is striking that Friedlander sees Winogrand as an intellectual, but not himself. So many of Friedlander's projects—his pictures of American monuments, his series of cherry blossoms, for example—exercise the mind as well as the eye. But then this is a man who loves the jazz that he grew up with—and that was one of his earliest subjects—so his focus on the improvisational scatting that comes out of his instrument is in keeping. He'll say, "What you need to know is in the pictures". Still, even the tiny riffs that he'll throw your way will tell you more about himself and his medium than most. Often he begins slide lectures with a self-portrait and the comment, "Don't ask me any complicated questions, because the photographer, as you can see in this picture, has straw in his head." Winning the MacArthur "Genius" award didn't make him pull this slide to protect his image. And indeed from the looks of all of Friedlander's self-portraits the photographer's happy to reveal himself as imperfect as the rest of us. The "straw-shot" is not only unglamorous, it's funny. It's a reflection of Friedlander's shadow on the ground, and so whatever was there on the earth has also been incorporated into his form. His shape's all off; the rocks look like protruding organs, he's got lumps and bulges in all the wrong places. Friedlander's someone who can't be accused of pretension.

His choice of camera echoes his insistence on the modesty of what he does. It's a Leica. "With a camera like that," as Friedlander explains, "you don't believe that you're in the masterpiece business. It's enough to be able to peck at the world. If I was using a piece of equipment that was big, and I had to carry that thing around all day, I'd probably think twice about what I did with it. But when you're using such a small piece, it doesn't matter. The more junk you put in, doesn't cost you any more. It's a wonderful little medium." And his use of flash is in keeping with his connection to the present. He's a photographer of our time. He'll take the picture of the highway, and of the TV; he's not a nostalgic image-maker. And so he wants his materials to be able to reveal the feeling of contemporary life. As he says, "Flash renders everything. And everybody knows when you've taken the picture. It's not a secret. It's not a quiet moment." Right there is the reason Friedlander's nudes may at first appear to be so aggressive. We're used to images of naked women being passive, not ones that jump out at you. Here in Friedlander's photographs sometimes the bodies twist, and the camera shouts. But they also rest together. Flash doesn't just make it patently clear that a picture is in process, it's the perfect tool for a photographer such as Friedlander, who wants to bring out elements that are usually so avoided you'd think you were the only one who had them. (Pubic hair is just the most obvious example.)

Perhaps that's why Bob Guccione, Sr., the publisher of *Penthouse,* was once quoted in the *Daily News* as saying that the idea of publishing Friedlander's photographs "was like scraping the bottom of the barrel". That's the kind of insult a man like Friedlander lives for. Funnily enough Guccione was talking about photographs Friedlander had made of the "Material Girl" in 1979–80 when she'd worked as an artist's model. About Friedlander's photographs of Madonna, four of which are in this book, Guccione apparently complained, "She wasn't well-groomed, there was lots of hair on her arms and hair sticking out of her armpits." Hair! Can you imagine that? What a scandal! Madonna has hair! What a relief, actually, of reality, after all the fake images that bombard us day and night. "I always have a distrust of subjects that look perfect," says this photographer. Ditto, I.

Friedlander, himself, offers the same kind of here-on-earth acceptance that his pictures have. He says things that most people are afraid to admit, lest they look like okies. When he talks about his early admiration for the heroes of photography he confesses, "And I didn't even know how to pronounce Atget." How many of us looked at that name and thought, "At get?" He seems to be comfortable enough with himself to state, "I'm not much for refinement. In Europe, it seems to me it's full of refinement." And witty enough to want to "photograph French people eating. I'd like to be there in the middle of the table with a flash. Wouldn't it be interesting to take pictures of people eating, especially people that make such a fuss about it?" Clearly he's an iconoclast. And all that's what gives these nudes their earthiness, their punch, their flesh-and-blood bodilyness.

They're not just different from the coy nudes one sees in titillation magazines. They're not like the usual nudes one finds in an art context either. Obviously they're much more concrete than painted figures. Even if the emphasis on realism is high in a painting there's still the fact that paint has a very different quality than skin. Photography can't be the real thing either, but it can bring it to you less mediated. Still, with most fine art photography that involves the nude, it tends to be much more artificial than Friedlander's, much more concerned about declaring itself art, with a capital A. Have you ever noticed how many photographers do nudes that look like peppers? Friedlander's not ambitious that way. His goal with these images was inherently photographic—to make nudes that felt as real as possible, of course using all of the vocabulary of his medium, highlighting, cropping, angling, et cetera, and ultimately the alchemy that happens in printing. (For the production of the book, Friedlander had the services of a true artist of the printing process, Richard Benson.) To make something seem real is harder than it sounds, for of course, here one's dealing with a human subject. And we humans have become pros at posing for the camera. With professional models one can have an even more static situation than with people one knows, or just finds, but that's not what happened here. Apparently some of the sessions got so relaxed that on a couple of occasions his models fell asleep.

There's about a baker's dozen years of work in this book. Like most of Friedlander's projects the nudes was a slow one

that built up as it did, not according to a schedule. Friedlander found his models through an informal network of friends, painters and other photographers, and he took most of the pictures in this country, in various cities where he'd go for work, but a few were done in France. The models were paid for their time, and Friedlander usually went to their homes, solo. (He's never had an assistant.) He says that most of the time he followed the models' leads in terms of posing, and apparently his instructions were usually on the level of "Turn to the left" or "Can you do that again?" All of the women are between their mid-twenties and early thirties; this age range seems to have been the only constant Friedlander was looking for. "I figured everybody has something that's interesting," is his comment. And he proves his point. He doesn't make a mountain out of a bruise, or a beauty spot, but he lets these kinds of features be part of the general assertion of each woman's individuality. In his hands, nudes have as much topographical information to look at as landscapes, and as much psychological potential as the viewer is willing to admit. And the surroundings that envelop the women fill in the images with additional fragments from life—a soft sofa, a radiator, a lace curtain, a creased bedspread, a shag carpet, patterns, weaves, cushions, a hardwood floor—these kinds of bits and pieces of information come with where the women lie, sit, or stand.

The idea of photographing nudes began when Friedlander got the Mellon chair at Rice University for a semester. His two kids were in high school in suburban New York (where Friedlander and his wife Maria have lived since 1959), and so Friedlander went to Houston alone. There he had much more time on his hands than usual. His friend George Krause was employing models for the photographs he was working on, and Friedlander asked to go along. But it obviously wasn't just convenient circumstances that inspired Friedlander's interest in photographing female nudes. He stuck with the subject for over twelve years. When asked if the nudes were tougher to do than, say, his pictures of American monuments, he affirmed, "The nudes are harder. With a monument, if you found the damn thing, you could always go back, unless somebody stole it, or removed it. Not so here." It so happens that all the women turned out to be white. I asked him about this, and his explanation was, as usual, matter of fact. "That's who cropped up."

Time has such a different meaning in these pictures than in others he has taken. With the monuments you feel their endurance over time, emphatically so because of the way Friedlander encourages other telling details within the frame of the image. With the nudes you can almost feel the seconds passing. You can just about see these bodies breathing. You witness them open, closed, turning away, contorting, arching, stretching, moving any which way, as well as not. Although Friedlander's such a master at anchoring his photographs with a sense of place, just look at all the details and textures he captures and juggles—the bedcovers, the windows, the bedside tables, the droop of a couch, the light at a certain spot in a room—these photographs are more about getting up close to see what things really look like, rather than being claims of intimacy. You'll notice many of them are cropped so there's no

face, and that when the head is included the subject is rarely looking at the viewer. See, Friedlander's not pretending to know these women, nor is he promising that we can, even with the right-in-your-face-perspective that he gets. That's what makes me trust his pictures. They're about his curiosity.

They're different from what we're used to, even if they look familiar, in fact *because* they look familiar. At times they seem disorienting, but isn't that what happens in real life when you're so close to another person's body that your perspective goes "off-balance"? What you see can get surreal, cubist, hyperreal, as it does here. No matter how much Friedlander admires Edward Weston's beautiful, sensual nudes, or Bill Brandt's sculptural, graphic ones, his work is not derivative of either photographer. Their work has had such an impact, conscious and otherwise, on anyone who pays attention to the subject that it's often somehow present when one looks at photographs of nudes. And in these images one can find moments where one's reminded of either Weston or Brandt, but these are like flashes of memory, more than copycat shots. Friedlander despises the idea of redoing what's already been done. This is not a postmodernist we're talking about. "I'm not Walker Evans in Saratoga," he declares, continuing with, "Don't you think that the real difference between photographers is that they each lived in their times? If times didn't change, there'd be nothing to photograph. It would all still look like Atget's pictures."

There's no mistaking these photographs as being a product of any other time than the one in which they were taken. In fact they're so specific that they already mark time, as well as indicate something about their maker. Friedlander says he wanted to photograph "women in their prime", before their bodies "start to slide". He clearly has a broader view of prime than is usually the stereotype, but he also has an old fashioned sense of aging when it comes to a woman. And something else is noticeable, he doesn't seem to have run into women who have gym and weightlifting as part of their daily routine. Who would have thought there were this many women left in America in the '80s who didn't work out? These women may not have articulated biceps, triceps, or quadriceps, but that gives them the softness that women who pump iron don't always have.

Does it make a difference that the photographer who took these pictures is a man? Would we react to them differently if they were made by a woman? Or, if they were of men nude, instead of women nude? You don't have to ask these questions. An old-style approach might be to talk about the pictures purely from the point of aesthetics. But one might as well be as candid as the photographs are. In 1991 if you look at a series of images that are as blatantly focused on women's bodies as these are, it's a different experience than it might have been, say, thirty years ago. We've made advances in consciousness, if not always in action, about women's lot, and that has affected the way we see images of women which could be said to be using them as objects. Shaking up accepted mores of how women have been treated and represented has meant more self-consciousness for both sexes. Perhaps the most honest way to begin to get to what the pictures are about is to involve oneself.

As a woman, when I see women zoomed-in-on as assertively as Friedlander does here, I'm not neutral about it. In general, the subject itself is too loaded, too burdened with "piggyness", to not set off instant alarms in me. How long do they ring with Friedlander's photographs? Well, it's complicated. There's no getting around the fact that he's been dressed in a room while his subject has been naked, and *he* is the one who's capturing *her* so the antennae do go up. Sure, I guess I could pull back and remember that nudes are one of the oldest subjects of art, or I could balance the fact that these are women with the fact that they might have been men, and then what would I say? But why do any of that, why tone down what's there, or what really happens at the sight of these photographs? One's later thoughts are an important part of the process of looking too, they are how we understand images in large ways, but that first gut response is to be grabbed. I relaxed as I went through the photographs, and started to examine the different elements that caught my attention. I trusted them as honest and open acts of looking. Each person will react differently, depending on who they are, what's happened to them, what else they've seen, what they feel when they see women in these poses. They're personal images that way.

And their personal aspect starts with their creator, the man who decided to do this, and then spent years on the subject—Lee Friedlander. Now, he could have said "No, that topic's too hot to handle", or he could have been unaware of how it implicates him. I doubt he wasn't at least conscious of the weight of the issues. It's our gain that he followed his instinct to say yes to the subject. "Yes, I'll follow my attraction to this enormous subject." Friedlander uses his curiosity as a guide to what he photographs; afterwards he finds what he brought back with him in the picture. But make no mistake, he's not casual in terms of his work. You have to be very focused to stick with a theme for the years that he takes with his projects. This is a photographer who has spent years photographing trees. Trees, another subject that, like nudes, in someone else's work might look monotonously the same. His trees aren't boring. But no matter how curious Friedlander was about trees, nudes are a whole different, if you want, formal, emotional, psychological, political set of problems. Friedlander's first step on this score is to not get too caught up in the problems and instead pursue his interest. Over and over he says the one thing he cared about when he did the photographs was that they feel "real". He succeeded, not only in the kinds of pictures he got, but because the pictures themselves give one a sense of the photographer's curiosity about women's bodies that feels very real. He isn't hiding his fascination. He's revealing it.

The results are fairly strange. To me a few are beautiful, but they're not all so. Some are tense, others have an awkwardness that's oddly like Egon Schiele's figures. Still others have humor, as the body can. There are erotic images, and analytic ones, and pictures that generate no electricity whatsoever. But each photograph is a clear presentation of how Friedlander met his subject. And that's what makes art bigger than many things—when it can bring to the surface something that feels convincing about an individual's response to the world, it has

done something profound. Then we the viewers can say, "I'm not alone," or, "I'm different from that"; agreement doesn't matter. Revelation's much more important than consensus.

Friedlander's photographs don't just light up the women who are in them, they light him up, and they call forth memory and history and what comes with all that—questions. The style of Friedlander's photographs is so strong, they are obviously the results of lots of decisions. Some photographs are that neutral that you don't feel the presence of their maker; a finger pressed the button, but it could have been any finger. This is not the case with Friedlander's pictures. You can sense the photographer getting up close, angling, moving about. When the voice of the photographer is this clear, something special is happening. A vision is being presented, not just visuals. You get interested in the person behind the vision.

Why only women? Friedlander's answer is that he's not curious about men. Why did he do these pictures when he was in his fifties? Friedlander's response was that there are certain seasons in a photographer's life when a subject becomes possible. But during our talks he gave me other clues about this work which also seemed to fit with its emotional tenor. He kept on saying that he has a bad memory. And I, psychological creature that I am, kept wondering whether this desire to photograph women at what he sees as the prime of their lives had to do with his sense of his own aging.

Then, at the very end of our discussion, he gave me something I think I'll never forget—an early memory, and with it an image as mistily clear as his photographs are crystal clear. "I had a great-uncle who was a farmer," he said. "I'm a first-generation American. My mother was from Finland. My father was German, German-Jewish. My mother died when I was quite young. But before that we'd go to her uncle's. He and his family had a sauna in the backyard. Every Saturday he'd get up in the morning and light the fire on the rocks. And every Saturday night all of the family from the area would come, and all the men would go take a sauna, and then all the women would go. We only went three times a year, because it was such a long car ride, but it was amazing. My cousins and I were always the youngest. There were about four tiers of benches. We, who weren't used to it, who were littler, were down at the bottom, trying to get air on the floor. There was the whole male side of the family there—the oldest were at the hottest place, which was at the top. When you see your whole family naked in the steam, it is a great scene."

"That whole event would have been a great photograph," I thought out loud. He agreed, "It would. But it's like a photograph in my mind. It's indelible." So he doesn't have such a bad memory, I mused. "And the women?" I asked, "Did you see them?" "No," he replied, "they came second when the stones weren't as hot, but it was really warm." And then I couldn't stand not asking, "So if you didn't see the women, are they part of that photograph that is in your mind?" "No, see the women went after the men." Isn't that what art's all about? Seeing what had been waiting in the imagination?

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LEE FRIEDLANDER

NUDES

LEE FRIEDLANDER was born in Aberdeen, Washington, in 1934. His first exhibition was at the International Museum of Photography, George Eastman House, in 1963. His work has been exhibited in major museums throughout the world. His books include *Self Portrait* (1970), *Lee Friedlander: Photographs* (1973), *The American Monument* (1976), *Factory Valleys* (1982), *Lee Friedlander: Portraits* (1985), and *Like a One-Eyed Cat* (1989). In 1990 he received the prestigious award from the MacArthur Foundation. His next book will be a collection of photographs of musicians of New Orleans, which he began in the Fifties.

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