

Marriage Under Glass: Intimate Exposures



Sally Mann/Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery

By LYLE REXER

AT the conclusion of a slide lecture in May at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, the photographer Sally Mann asked whether the audience would be interested in seeing some images of work in progress. The audience was eager for such a glimpse and seemed genuinely moved by what it saw. But controversy, like fame, is easier to court than to control.

A few days later, the governor's office announced that it had received an anonymous letter complaining about the presentation, especially the new photos, and it scolded the museum, as a taxpayer-supported institution, for presenting "displays that push the envelope of decency." The museum, recognized for its outstanding collection of modern art and its commitment to presenting the work of Virginia artists, was put on the defensive, and Ms. Mann found herself suddenly, again, in an all too familiar place: at the eye of a cultural storm.

Whatever terms of censure or praise photographs might provoke have already been applied to Ms. Mann's work. In 1992, she exhibited and published some 65 photographs dealing mostly with her three children under the title "Immediate Family." In some of the pictures, the children



Kim Rushing

Top, "Untitled," a 1996 photograph by Sally Mann of Larry Mann and the arms of their daughter Virginia; above, Ms. Mann in 1998.

Sally Mann has courted controversy with moving, candid images of her children. Now she explores another side of domestic life, with just as much frankness.

were naked. The reaction was as immediate as the title. To many people, the photographs' blend of fiction and documentary appeared to be a calculated assault on the last fortress of decency. Heterosexuality and sanctity had fallen to Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano, and now childhood innocence was being violated. Among art critics, objections seemed to focus not so much on the myth Ms. Mann had clearly constructed as on her willingness to "use" her children as subjects and pose them. Defenders and detractors took their sides, and for better or worse, these images became Ms. Mann's signature and source of celebrity.

Artists tend to find themselves in hot water precisely because they

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Eric Brady for The New York Times

Sally Mann with her greyhounds Katie, left, and Baby Dodo.

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illuminate places most of us prefer to keep comfortably dim. "Immediate Family" created a place that looked like Eden (it is actually a river on Ms. Mann's farm in Virginia), then cast upon it the subdued and shifting light of nostalgia, sexuality and death. Her childhood Eden is encircled by a darkness that both comforts and encroaches.

In the late 1990's, however, after the storm had passed, Ms. Mann began to exhibit large-format landscapes of Georgia and Virginia. It seemed that she had left Eden and the family behind to confront in the spectral, luminous hills different intimations of change, loss and timelessness. What sort of images could have caused the current stir in the state house? I asked a museum staffer this question. "Pictures of her marriage," was the reply.

Ms. Mann has been married to Larry Mann for more than 30 years. He is a sculptor and metal worker turned lawyer who practices in and around Lexington, Va., which, if not the cradle of the Confederacy, is surely its grave. Both Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson are buried there. The Manns live outside town, in a new house they designed on the farm once owned by Ms. Mann's father, a Lexington physician of legendary eccentricity. Two of their three children are in college, their daughter Jessie, 19, at Washington and Lee University in Lexington and their son, Emmett, 21, at Marv Washington in Fredericksburg. Their youngest, Virginia, 15, is in private school. If it weren't for the cow pastures and the Arabian horses the Manns board, the setting might be Italy, with its hill crests and rolling vistas. Just beyond the pastures and into the woods runs the Maury River, where images of "Immediate Family" were taken. The farm is a protected place, "a domain," in the words of the artist Cy Twombly, a Lexington native and family friend. His phrase suggests a defensible realm, where you can see trouble coming from a long way off.

Ms. Mann, who is 49, did not see this

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trouble coming. "I never expected the new pictures to raise a commotion," she says, "and I was very distressed that the presentation caused anguish for the museum, which is a wonderful treasure. I have presented the slide show half a dozen times and never had a complaint. Quite the opposite. People have come up and said, 'I had doubts about your work, but now I see what you're trying to do.' I do believe if I could bring everyone here to see how these pictures grow out of a place and the people around me, if I could put the pictures of my marriage in context, even the most rigid Puritan would give them the benefit of the doubt."

At first glance, these new pictures seem almost too casual to present to an audience. Ms. Mann calls them "inchoate" and has no immediate plans to exhibit them in a gallery setting. Unlike the composed icons of "Immediate Family," they seem as quotidian as snapshots, full of unremarked things that make up the creaturely content of our days: the water of a bathroom shower, the light of an afternoon through a bedroom window. They are also unflinchingly confidential. Ms. Mann began to take pictures of her herself and her husband as early as the 1970's, and she has built a voluminous chronicle of their life together. Nothing about the physical facts of existence is edited out: menstruation, bathing, lovemaking, repose, moments of vacancy and ecstasy. "It's a record of intimacy and quietude," says Ms. Mann.

We live in an age of photographic self-documentation, of Nikon narcissism, from Nan Goldin's narratives of sexual dysfunction to Cindy Sherman's theater of stereotypes, and the hunger for glimpses of other

Lyle Rexer is the author of "The Antiquarian Avant-Garde: The New Wave in Old-Process Photography," to be published next year by Harry N. Abrams.



people's "real" lives seems insatiable. But Ms. Mann's images have a different, familiar quality, almost as if someone had photographed our memories, or remembered all the things we barely noticed. Perhaps this is because a woman is doing the looking. Throughout the history of photography, with all its erotic domestic images by Alfred Stieglitz, Harry Callahan, Emmett Gowin and others, no woman has ever turned the camera so candidly on a man.

With fully half the nation's marriages ending in divorce, the intimacy these pictures extol must seem to many viewers more mysterious than titillating. Perhaps they offer only a mute affirmation of continuity. "What most people ignored about 'Immediate Family,'" Ms. Mann says, "were the everyday pictures on which the icons were built that gave them meaning. Our marriage has been going for a long time, and the new pictures arise out of a curiosity about that everydayness, about the 'glue' that holds a marriage together. Sometimes it's messy and embarrassing."

There is flip side to the myth of Pygmalion, in which an artist falls in love with his creation and brings it to life. Art can intrude on reality, ride roughshod over relationships. Ms. Mann admits that she wasn't prepared for the reaction — positive as well as negative — to "Immediate Family." It is one reason she has chosen not to exhibit or publish the current pictures in a book (Ms. Mann agreed to reproduce some of the images for this article). "It changed our lives," she says. It made her children celebrities and forced her and Mr. Mann to confront a process that may have made them all grow up too quickly.

"I can't tell you how many commercial offers we refused," she says. The images themselves became fair game for attack and appropriation from all quarters. Kathryn Harrison used them as the basis for a novel about pedophilia, an arrogance that still distresses Ms. Mann. The film director James Cameron copied an image from "Immediate Family" and displayed it prominently in "Titanic" without Ms. Mann's permission. The resulting grievance was settled out of court for a substantial sum just weeks before the Academy Awards.

Ms. Mann herself went to the Federal Bureau of Investigation at the time "Immediate Family" was published. The studio of the photographer Jock Sturges had been raided by the F.B.I.'s child pornography unit, and she wanted to head off potential trouble. To her knowledge, Ms. Mann has never been investigated.

By now, her immediate family is fully attuned to Ms. Mann's compulsion to compose pictures. As she says: "They'll see me begin to squint my eyes, as if I'm framing something, and they'll say, 'Oh no, here we go.' They're certain they'll end up in the 8-by-10 square. Toward the end of taking the pictures for 'Immediate Family,' I felt the children were thinking about what would make a good image, even about what games to play and what to wear."

If the children have been collaborators, Ms. Mann's husband is a confederate. "For Larry to submit to the camera is an act of profound trust and an expression of faith in the sincerity of what I am doing," she says. Then she continues, perhaps only half-joking: "It's probably a misplaced trust. Everyone knows portraits are not 'objective,' even ones made with a camera. Look at



Steichen's portrait of J. P. Morgan. He turns the man into a rapacious monster gripping a knife. Photography is so dangerous. The sitter has no idea what the photographer is doing with them or to them under that hood."

In fact, there is an ulterior motive to the most recent photographs, but rather than raising doubts about them, it lends poignancy. In 1997, Mr. Mann was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy, a condition in which muscles progressively weaken and atrophy. There is currently no treatment. Mr. Mann has encouraged his wife to document the progress of the disease, at least initially with an almost clinical detachment. "We are trying to use art to make the best of a bad situation," Ms. Mann says. "We are putting a frame around something difficult, trying to give it meaning." She pauses. "When my father was sick, I was determined to take pictures of him. But I didn't have the strength to do it. I had to sit with him for two hours before I could. I don't know how this will go, except it won't be easy."

The light of imminent loss transforms the photographic inventory into elegy, and elegy may be Ms. Mann's true manner. It is the place she has come to as a matter of inheritance more than choice. Born to a Boston

Brahmin and a Texan, she composes laments that are spare but full of shadows. They abide in the mind like a visit to the Lee Chapel in Lexington, with its New England Congregational symmetries giving suddenly onto a Gothic altar bearing the cenotaph of the general. In the mid-1990's, partly as a result of a commission to photograph the Georgia landscape for the High Museum in Atlanta, Ms. Mann became intrigued by the idea of using the 19th-century method of wet plate, or collodion, photography. In it, she found a way to write Emily Dickinson and William Faulkner into a single sentence.

Glass plates coated with a mixture of gun cotton and ether and bathed in a silver solution are exposed still wet in the camera. The result is a swirling, ethereal image with a center of preternatural clarity. It is the same technique Mathew Brady used to document the battlefield dead and Lexington's own Michael Miley the career of Robert E. Lee. In 1972, Ms. Mann came upon Miley's glass negatives at Washington and Lee University and has printed thousands of them. She learned the actual wet-plate negative technique from the contemporary collodion masters Mark and France Scully Osterman. Her fascination led to the murky, evocative landscapes of "Deep South," her 1999 exhibition at Edwynn Houk Gallery in midtown



Photographs by Sally Mann/Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery

An album of pictures by Sally Mann: top, "Untitled," 1998, from the "Deep South" series; above, "Vineland," 1992, from the controversial "Immediate Family" series; left, "Untitled," 2000, showing the bones of Ms. Mann's greyhound, Eva.

Manhattan, which made Mississippi look like a jungle ruin. Collodion also supplied her the means to create a remarkable memorial to her dead greyhound, Eva, which she is currently completing.

Beloved by the Mann family, Eva died suddenly in full stride. Rather than bury her, Ms. Mann and her husband skinned the body and kept it above ground and protected from animals for more than a year, so time could do its work and the camera could testify. The large-format images of bones and dirt, with their uneven edges and lunar textures, seem excavated more than taken, paper apocalypses prompted by the photographer's command that the earth give up its dead. It is difficult not to think of Faulkner's "tragic mute insensitive bones . . . that can bear anything." Ms. Mann calls them graven images, and the memorial reference suits the antiquarian method.

"There's an ineffable quality, a refusal, to collodion that the ordinary silver negative cannot capture," Ms. Mann says. "Maybe it's the thickness of the glass that adds gravity to the image. When you pour the plate, it turns cold in your hand and a frisson goes through you. It becomes a ritual act of reverence for the picture you are about to make."

And an act of alchemy, too, like mixing an elixir to resurrect a lost loved one or attain prohibited knowledge or ward off harm. The earliest photographers could not describe the things they made. They vacillated between the terms of art, science and magic, between intention and opportunity, nature and culture. Yet they had in common the desire to fix the look of things, to interrupt the flow of time and make the instant permanent: exactly as it was, it will be.

Ms. Mann's scenes from a marriage and a mortuary leap to the heart of this impossible desire. To penetrate the mystery of living and dying she re-enacts the initial mystery of photography. She emerges from the darkroom with something that, as Faulkner wrote in "The Unvanquished," can "hold intact the pattern of furious victory like a cloth, a shield between ourselves and reality, between us and fact and doom." □