HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

Family, Landscape, and Race in Sally Mann's Photographs

Mann's historical and social explorations are anchored in her embrace of her identity as a Southerner.

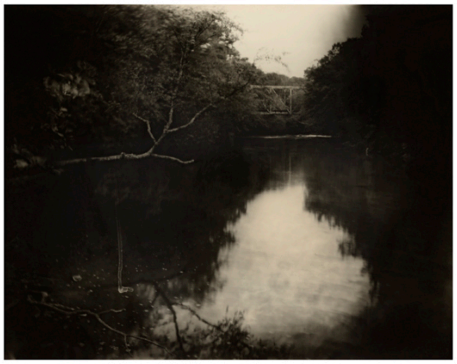
James Gibbons | 3 days ago

Sally Mann, "Bean's Bottom" (1991), silver dye bleach print, 19 1/2 x 19 1/2 inches, © Sally Mann, private collection

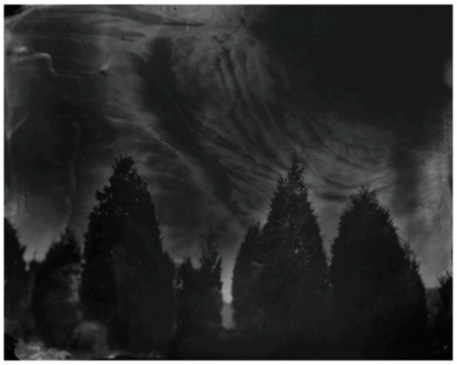
"How can a sentient person of the modern age mistake photography for reality?" asks the photographer Sally Mann in her memoir *Hold Still*. "Photographs economize the truth; they are always moments more or less illusorily abducted from time's continuum." Mann's slightly exasperated remarks suggest the irony in *Immediate Family*, the title of the book that made her famous — and for some, infamous — more than a quarter-century ago. All photographs, even the most intimate — *especially* the most intimate — are mediated endeavors, staged productions that preserve certain moments only by suppressing others. The images of her young children that became controversial in the early 1990s were founded on artifice that her more strident critics could not or would not acknowledge. The outrage directed at Mann's work reduced the photographs to evidence of a transparent state of affairs that could readily be decried: her children's nudity in some of the pictures was exploitive and obscene, or the very act of putting her children at the center of *Immediate Family* somehow made her deficient as a mother. Such accusations missed not only the patent intensity of Mann's feelings for her children but also the care she had taken to mount an exquisite and often discomfiting pastoral drama, focused mostly on her son Emmett and daughters Jessie and Virginia (her husband, Larry, comes on stage only occasionally). The photographs were like stills from some late 20th-century film depicting an enigmatic American Eden, tucked away in a pristine corner of the South.

The family pictures are what one first sees in *Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings*, a large exhibition (though not a full retrospective) currently on view at the National Gallery in Washington and accompanied by a superb catalogue with essays by the show's curators Sarah Greenough and Sarah Kennel, as well as Drew Gilpin Faust and Hilton Als. We live in an age of abundant outrage, but it's hard to imagine anyone now denouncing what Mann shows us in these images. If anything, one might idealize this family as leading an exemplary, off-the-grid lifestyle. The children seem so at home in their own skin, so connected with the natural world that surrounds them. If they're dirty, as Jessie is in "Jessie Bites" (1985), they wear their smudges like offhand adornments. Faced with the cool assurance of Mann's son and his friend in "Emmett and the White Boy" (1990), I thought of Emerson praising "the nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner," a posture displaying "the healthy attitude of human nature." Inhabiting a protected but not always unthreatening childhood world — Emmett was struck by a car in 1987, an event informing many of the portraits taken afterward — and enclosed within a lush and bewitching landscape, these children seem to have embarked on a slow, languorous, and imaginatively rich exploration of their emerging beings. Technology is rarely in evidence, and when it is it's hospitably accommodated, as in "Gorjus" (1989), in which a weathered pickup truck is a mere stage prop for a vignette of girls at play. In the current moment, when parents fret about "nature deficit disorder" and the ubiquity of glowing screens for even the youngest children, the Mann kids may well come across as aspirational figures.

Much of the power of these pictures derives from the tension between the children being captured in a phase of life they will soon outgrow and the photographs' evocation of childhood as a timeless human phenomenon. The private activities and rituals of this free-and-easy nuclear family play out against the backdrop of the human life cycle and the vivid spectacle of nature. These images might be said to exclude history, or at least push it to a distant margin. (All the more striking, then, that the outcry over *Immediate Family* arose as an extension of a very particular moment in which moral panic about children and sexuality led to the association of Mann's work with that of other controversial photographers, most notably Robert Mapplethorpe.) In the National Gallery exhibition, it is thus jarring to leave behind this familial realm and to encounter photographs that reveal Mann's preoccupation with history — specifically the history of the South and its intertwined legacies of slavery, war, and racial violence. At the heart of the exhibition are her explorations of the Southern landscape, which include pictures of ruined plantations and Civil War battlefields. These images leave out the human figure only to assert more forcefully a ghostly human presence, which haunts the depicted places and burdens them with the onus of ineradicable events. The historical consciousness suffusing these creations often extends to the techniques that Mann has employed since adopting 19th-century processes to best convey the fraught traces of a past that still troubles the landscape.


Sally Mann, “Deep South, Untitled (Bridge on Tallahatchie)” (1998), gelatin silver print, 37 x 47 1/2 inches, © Sally Mann, Markel Corporate Art Collection

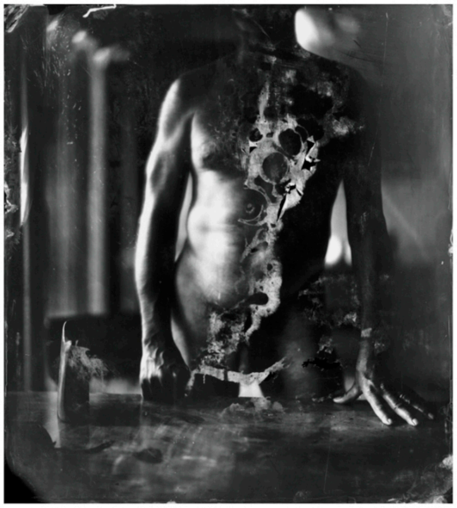
For a 1998 series of photographs addressing the murder of Emmett Till, Mann traveled to Mississippi and created images of landscapes that his killers would have seen in the days and hours before his death on August 28, 1955. In “Deep South, Untitled (Bridge on Tallehatchie),” a chemical streak punctuates the foreground, a spectral teardrop signaling that there is something more to grapple with than the placid, almost Pictorialist tableau that leads the eye to the bridge in the background, from which some say Till was hurled to his death. The picture of the place where Till’s body was recovered, “Deep South, Untitled (Emmett Till River Bank),” is at once as shocking as an open grave and disconcertingly ordinary — an uncommemorated site calling out for a reckoning. An analogous act of pictorial commemoration is evident in the tintypes Mann created a decade later of locales in southeastern Virginia, inspired by Nat Turner’s slave rebellion in 1831.


Sally Mann, “Battlefields, Fredericksburg (Cedar Trees)” (2001), gelatin silver print, 38 1/2 x 48 1/2 inches, © Sally Mann, printed 2003, Waterman/Kislinger Family

But Mann’s large prints of Civil War battlefields, mostly in or near her native Virginia, appear to work *against* commemoration, or at least to bypass the commemorative purposes that these sites — which attract tourists and other visitors — currently serve. Her use of the wet-collodion process collapses time, as it were, aligning her with the first photographers of these battlefields and the very beginnings of war photography, which focused on the aftermath of battles rather than active combat, due to long exposure times. Mann's images are murky, spooked, painterly, expressionistic; they seem as much portraits of the psyche under duress as documents of actual places. They have also been exposed to random alteration, as Mann invites accidents in the development process as a way of unsettling her own pictorial claims in the final pictures. Some of these effects, bestowed by that spirit whom she calls the "angel of uncertainty" (the wayward twin of Proust's "angel of certainty"), can be beautiful, others eerie or discordant. They all contribute to a sense that Mann is attempting to tease out something unruly, raw, and unpredictable from her Civil War subjects.

Mann's historical and social explorations are anchored in her embrace of her identity as a Southerner, her steadfast probing of the complex fate that she has inherited as a birthright. In her pictures and writings, she comes across as reflective and poetic about the South — neither celebratory nor excessively anguished or defensive about the region that has made her who she is. "Southerners," she observed in 2007, "live at the nexus between myth and reality where that peculiar amalgam of sorrow, humility, honor, loyalty, graciousness and renegade defiance plays out against a backdrop of profligate physical beauty." Along with the family photographs and the landscapes, *A Thousand Crossings* surveys projects whose social orientation is expressed in a more personal key: the images of Virginia Carter, an African-American domestic worker called "Gee-Gee" who helped raise the photographer and was the "best mother a child could want"; a long sequence begun in 2008 of African-American churches (which Mann associated with Gee-Gee); and the *Men* series (2006–15), comprising portraits of black men. Mann has been forthright that in taking up Gee-Gee as a subject she was compelled to redress a blind spot in her own life. Neither she nor her family had fully grasped the realities of Gee-Gee's life: "Why did we never ask the questions?" she writes in *Hold Still*. "That's the mystery of it — our blindness and our silence." Similarly, for much of Mann's life her relationship with black men had been superficial, thus the *Men* series was an attempt to "find out who these black men were that I encountered in my childhood, men that I never really saw, never really knew."

The perils here are nearly self-evident, as these sorts of projects are vulnerable to certain lines of criticism. The history of the representation of blacks by Southern whites (and other whites) is hardly innocent. And if Mann is engaged in an essentially therapeutic effort, if these photographs are simply directed toward assuaging guilt about the limits of prior vision, then they can at best exert a limited



Sally Mann, "Hephaestus," 2008, gelatin silver print, 15 x 13 1/2 inches, © Sally Mann, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Kathleen Boone Samuels Memorial Fund

claim on our attention, and at worst seem self-serving, even pernicious. How well Mann navigates these choppy waters is ultimately up to each viewer to judge. I tend to trust her historical awareness and her depth of feeling — which, throughout her work, transcends the merely personal — and find these portraits to embody a powerful, fruitful exchange between artist and sitter. The humanity of the subject is not occluded but amplified. And without exalting her achievement of a new mode of vision toward these once-misunderstood subjects, Mann demonstrates how regret and an unsatisfactory past might be transformed through the careful fashioning of images.

From her family photographs onward, Mann has always been open to transformation, sometimes at significant risk. Indeed, her willingness to court risk is what knits together her varied body of work. Her abiding restlessness shows itself in those transformations, those crossings that figure so abundantly in her photographs.

Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings *continues at the National Gallery of Art* (*between 3rd and 9th Streets along Constitution Avenue NW, Washington, DC*) *through May 25, 2018.*