ART

REVIEW

Tangled, timeless visions of the South

Survey of Sally Mann's work shows photographer's willingness to engage with the painful realities of race, mortality and growing up

SALLY MANN/THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO/ART RESOURCE

BY SEBASTIAN SMEE

Sally Mann came to interna- onal prominence — and notori- y — in the early 1990s. Photo- raphs she took of her three oung children whiling away the ummers on a verdant riverside roperty outside Lexington, Va., ere published in "Immediate amily." That book — half family lbum, half delirious art spell — ffered a read on family dynamics hat had the aura of a dream and he psychological complexity of a ovel.

Shot with an 8-by-10 camera nd masterfully printed, Mann's hotographs were beautiful, al- hough never cloying, and impos- ible to reduce to clean readings. ut one of the deeper things they aptured was the ineluctable pain - even in idyllic circumstances — f growing up.

A selection of these family pic- ures is on view in "Sally Mann: A housand Crossings" at the Na- ional Gallery of Art, a much- nticipated overview of Mann's ong engagement with the South. The show was co-organized by he Peabody Essex Museum in alem, Mass., where it will travel his summer before moving on to os Angeles, Houston, Paris and tlanta.)

In number, the photos are not nough to convey the gamut of motions that accumulate over he pages of "Immediate Family." ut it is a pleasure to see them in he context of Mann's ongoing areer. The exhibition shows, be- ides much else, that the family ictures were no fluke.

Mann, 66, is a throwback. For ecades now, she has been mak- ng photographs using enormous ameras and glass plates doused n sticky collodion and then ipped into silver nitrate. She xposes these to reflected light hrough a broken, moldy old lens nd develops them in darkrooms ccording to a set of esoteric nstructions, the finer details of

hich she takes a sorcerer's de-ght in ignoring. Chance effects, chemical voodoo and poetic iggestion are all part of Mann's rtful approach.

So it's not easy to compare hat she does with most of what ounts as contemporary art. But happens, once in a while, that artist will come along and ake work that looks almost per-ersely out of time, as though aught up in some warped ro-ance with the past, which none-heless looks greater than almost verything around it.

Mann's distinctly Southern ensibility is drenched in nostal-ia. At the same time, a reality rinciple is always pushing hrough. Her abiding sense of ortality and awakening politi-al conscience lift her quixotic nterprise into an urgently felt oetic realm that only seems out f time.

"We are spinning a tory of what it is to row up. It is a omplicated story."

hotographer Sally Mann

That said, Mann does have a pecial way of tumbling into trou-le. Drawn repeatedly to fraught ubjects, she seems constitution-lly incapable of playing it safe. ehind all her photographs lies he force of her huge, contradic-ory personality: romantic, ruth-ess, tender, tenacious, heartfelt, ubristic.

Her family pictures, which in-luded images of her prepubes-ent children in various states of ndress, were caught up in the ulture wars of the late 1980s and 0s, when artists who pushed gainst social orthodoxies came nder sustained attack.

Mann's subsequent work, hich includes portraits of young frican American men, as well as hotos of places that carry memo-ies of atrocious violence, feels ulnerable in a different way.

In particular, Mann's 1998 pho-ographs of the bridge in Missis-ippi from which Emmett Till's urdered body is thought to have een thrown, and of the site here his corpse may have been rawn from the Tallahatchie Riv-r, are uncomfortable (and prob-bly more so for an African Amer-can than for a white Australian like me).

Readers of Mann's 2015 mem-oir, "Hold Still," will know the heartfelt sincerity with which she has grappled with race, and with the contradictions of her own upbringing. Like many other white Virginians of her genera-tion, she was largely raised by a black woman.

Virginia Carter, or Gee-Gee, was employed by Mann's parents for 30 years. She had five children of her own. She sent them all to boarding school and through col-lege. She lived to be 100 and remained extremely close to Mann and her children. Mann addresses the ambiguities of the relationship and scratches at its wider meanings in her book and in a section of the exhibition devoted to Gee-Gee.

Would that we were all so hon-est, so soul-searching, so eager to engage with painful underlying realities. There is only a sense in which, just sometimes, Mann seems eager to make a spectacle of her private moral reckonings.

People will make up their own minds. What strikes me about the landscapes evoking Till's murder — and the earlier images of Civil War battlefields — is that the violence is registered as an ab-sence: unspeakable and in many ways unapproachable. The pic-tures are haunted by trauma, but they don't try to own or co-opt it.

Why does Mann photograph things? These days, she writes in "Hold Still," "either to understand what they mean in my life or to illustrate a concept." Her more recent images of contemporary African American men — a pecu-liar project, on its face — are her attempt to reconcile her feelings of shame, to make amends for earlier obliviousness.

One wonders whether artful photographs, or ornate words, are up to the task. Yet the result-ing images, which dwell on both the fragility and monumentality of these young men's bodies and faces — still shadowed, even in the 21st century, by the specter of slavery — are among the most powerful in the show.

The "concept" Mann appears most intent on illustrating is sim-ply death — the apprehension that we all have bodies, we will all perish. This message emerged even in the family pictures, which showed her children posing moodily in fictional tableaux, of-ten in proximity to damage and death.

The results were at once so congested with meanings and so rich in intimacy that you felt little knots of love and worry form and collapse inside you as you moved from one to the next. When I look at them now, I feel the unalloyed affection of a mother for her children. But I am impressed by them as art because they combine that affection with an unyielding resistance to sentimentality.

The absence of sentimentality where it is expected — where it is all but compulsory — is part of what makes others nervous about Mann. "We are spinning a story," she wrote in connection with the family pictures, "of what it is to grow up. It is a complicated story and sometimes we try to take on grand themes: anger, love, death, sensuality, and beauty. But we tell it all without fear and without shame."

I am all for shamelessness in art. We live in an era that is fearful and self-censoring, when not say-ing things can sometimes seem like the only way to hold every-thing together. The big themes get overlooked in this atmos-phere. They feel too dangerous. But the repressed will return. It always returns.

I am more ambivalent about Mann's obsession with storytell-ing. Sarah Greenough (who orga-nized the show with Sarah Ken-nel) points out in her catalogue essay that spinning stories has always been important to Mann. She studied literature, loves the poets and has a flair for language.

But photographs, in the end, are not quite stories. And there are some things that don't neces-sarily benefit from being pulled into Mann's incorrigible myth-making.

A big part of her, thankfully, is alive to this. Again and again, Mann's headlong infatuation with narrative is stopped dead — almost rebuked — by the road-block of real things. Faces, bodies, landscapes and church buildings emerge from her best photo-graphs mute, inviolate and inac-cessible to the wishful thinking of "story time."

Consider Mann's sequence of photographs of Civil War battle-fields. If you've been to these sites, you'll know how strangely banal and resistant to historical imagi-nation they can be. Mann's large, dark, immersive images of them ride the gallery walls like scars — blasted by chemicals but bat-tered, too, it seems, by Mann's ferocious determination to wring meaning from them.

Yet they are, finally, just land-scapes. Spend time in the dark-ened gallery, and what comes through is a blessed, bosky si-lence and the furtive suggestion (more wishful thinking, alas) of a story not yet told, an ideal not yet betrayed, a promise not yet bro-ken.

The battlefields are matched in poignancy by several giant close-ups of the faces of Mann's grown children. These monumental countenances seem afflicted by unwanted forms of adult aware-ness. They have a weathered, sub-marine quality that blurs the bar-rier between life and death.

They suggest the paradoxical liberation of grief. Not so much a mother's grief (they were made more than a decade before the devastating loss of Mann's son Emmett, who suffered in adult-hood from schizophrenia). Rath-er, a kind of self-mourning avail-able to every person who strug-gles to reconcile themselves to their own lost innocence.

That, probably, would account for all of us.

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SALLY MANN/PRIVATE COLLECTION

In images such as "The Ditch" (1987), above, and "Bloody Nose" (1991), left, Sally Mann captured moments of childhood that were at times idyllic yet haunting. She grappled with race in later works, including the 1998 photograph "Deep South, Untitled (Bridge on Tallahatchie)," below, which depicts the river where Emmett Till's corpse was recovered. A new National Gallery of Art exhibition rounds up works that span the photographer's career.

SALLY MANN/MARKEL CORPORATE ART COLLECTION

Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings March 4 through May 28 at the National Gallery of Art. *nga.gov*