ZEST
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Collection of H. Russell Albright, M.D. | New Orleans Museum of Art
Sally Mann's "Deep South, Untitled (Stick)," from 1998, evokes the haunting, divided spirit of a landscape with a fraught history.

Southern exposure

Through photography and sculpture, two MFAH shows explore complex American heritage

By Molly Glentzer
STAFF WRITER

Some of the arguments over Confederate monuments may have quieted to a simmer, but the American South will probably never be an easy place to reckon with, especially for black or white people born here.

That includes me, an old white lady (an owl!) who can't call any specific place home but grew up all over the South. I was born in Dallas, raised between Houston and Galveston; split my high school years between New Orleans and the mill town of Roxboro, N.C.; and went to college in the Blue Ridge Mountains, where Appalachian culture felt like another country.

Molly Glentzer / Staff
Photographer Mann's show "A Thousand Crossings" and "Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture, 1963-2017" are on view through May 27 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Testament to how deeply Southern a Southern kid can be, when we moved to North Carolina in the 1970s, a neighbor kid in Texas teased that I was becoming a Yankee. Maybe the word "North" confused him; our new home was well below the Mason-Dixon line. That was such a small, insignificant moment: Why can I still hear that comment when so many other things I would like to remember have evaporated?

I think Sally Mann and the late Jack Whitten would understand.

Mann, the William Faulkner of

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photographers, has been moored her entire life to her hometown of Lexington, Va. Whitten, who died in 2018, grew up in Bessemer, Ala., but fled to New York during the tumult of the civil rights movement.

Mann and Whitten are featured in major, unrelated exhibitions that have traveled from sea to shining sea and now appear as companion shows at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston's Upper Brown Pavilion. Juxtaposing such seemingly disparate white and black visions was a stroke of planning genius: Mann's emotional photographs and Whitten's hard-edged sculptures and paintings share a surprising number of parallels, mining themes of mythology, mortality and memory.

'A Thousand Crossings'

Few artists have explored the fraught legacy of the South as deeply and poetically as Mann.

"I've been coming to terms with the history into which I was born, the people within that history, and the land on which I live, since before I could tie my shoes," she once wrote. That quote is among several on the walls of her retrospective "A Thousand Crossings," organized in Houston by Malcolm Daniel.

Mann has a master's degree in creative writing, a sensibility that seeps into every grain of her imagery. Her works blend fact and fiction, romance and unflinching reality; sprung from life but not straightforward documentary. A consummate stager, Mann directs her subjects in carefully composed settings, then often layers on an elegaic, meditative tone with unpredictable equipment such as a faulty antique lens that creates light flares, a high-contrast film that exaggerates light and darkness, and the scratch-prone glass negatives of a 19th-century wet collodion process.

Mann's mystique grew from simpler techniques, in the family photographs of the late 1980s and '90s, when her kids were young. This controversial body of work hangs in the show's first room, including now iconic images of the often-naked, nymphlike Mann children cavorting in their natural environment. The grand landscapes around them glisten with Southern lusciousness but could be anywhere ancient.

Several rooms of large landscapes that follow seem terrifyingly quiet, depicting swamplands, fields and ruined estates across Virginia, Georgia, Mississippi and Louisiana. A laconic-looking river bank looks ho-hum until you realize this is what Mann saw near where a lynch mob dumped Emmett Till's battered body.

She more dramatically conjures bullets flying on Civil War battlefields or shoots from ground level to evoke a soldier's last vision of life on Earth. Her intensely dark and high-contrast "Blackwater" series reaches an almost abstract fever pitch; this swampy region is where whites in 1831 executed 55 rebelling slaves and hanged, flayed and beheaded their leader, Nat Turner.

The most politically sensitive section of the show, dating from 2006, examines race relations today, with stunning portraits of strong but vulnerable black men; close-ups of historical black churches near Lexington; and images (plus a vitrine of family archives) of Virginia "Gee-Gee" Carter, the granddaughter of a former slave and the Mann family's hired help for 50 years.

Carter was "the best mother a child could want," Mann once wrote. Mann's parents were progressive supporters of civil rights, but she began to understand their relationship — and think about what the segregated Jim Crow era meant to Carter — only after she was grown, with children of her own.

"Could the feelings exchanged between two individuals so hypocritically divided ever have been honest, untainted by guilt or resentment?" Mann writes in her 2015 memoir, "Hold Still."

Love anchors all in the show's final room, where the focus returns to Mann's immediate family. Only now, time has passed and keeps passing, and there's a palpable sense of loss in every image, from huge, blurred faces to emotional pictures of Mann's aging husband, who has late-onset muscular dystrophy. She is keenly aware that ultimately, all that remains is the land — the show's parting image.

Walking out, I teared up. I don't recall any museum show ever having that effect.

Private collection

A summer day looks like a mythical excursion in Sally Mann's "On the Maury," an image of her family canoeing down the river near their home in Lexington, Va., in the early 1990s.

'Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings' and 'Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture, 1963-2017'

When: 12:15-7 p.m. Sundays, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Wednesdays, 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursdays, 10 a.m.-7 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays, through May 27

Where: Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1000 Bissonnet

Details: $10-$17 (free on Thursdays; children 12 and younger free all days); 713-639-7300, mfah.org

Collection of the Estée Lauder Companies Inc.

"Two Virginias #4," from 1991, suggests the tender relationship between the Mann family and Virginia "Gee-Gee" Carter, their helper for 50 years. The elderly Gee-Gee holds Sally Mann's daughter Virginia, her namesake.

'Odyssey'

The wide-open galleries of Whitten's show came as a relief, with different revelations.

Although Whitten has been a giant of American painting for decades, "Odyssey" is organized around 40 previously unknown sculptures that add another dimension to his legacy.

Many are tabletop size, created as personal objects — not art to be consumed by the public — including protective sculptures Whitten made for himself, his wife, Mary, and his daughter, Mirsini Amidon.

Thrumming with powerful mojo that nods equally to the past, present and future, they fall roughly into three categories — faces inspired by 19th-century African American ceramics, totems and futuristic blade-shaped works — meticulously composed of wood, marble, copper, bone, nails, fishing wire, circuit boards and other found objects.

Whitten was manipulating his materials when Mann was still a kid running around the Maury River; shaping objects with carving and burning or giving them patinas with black shoe polish, every technique purposeful and meaningful. Some of the sculptures have inset reliquaries with piles of fish bones or other mementos.

The autobiographical nature of Whitten's work isn't as obvious as Mann's, but it's imbued in everything he made. He left the South by necessity.

The civil rights movement was heating up when he started college in the late 1950s, at the Tuskegee Institute and Southern University. He participated in the Montgomery bus boycott and demonstrations in Baton Rouge, La. Then, after a protest in 1960 turned violent, he took a bus north, fearing for his life.

He enrolled at Cooper Union, dove into both the downtown New York painting scene of the Abstract Expressionists and the uptown circles of African American artists including Romare Bearden and Norman Lewis, and graduated in 1964. Within a decade, his important and boundary-breaking paintings had earned him a solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

But apparently even New York wasn't far enough from the South for Whitten. In 1969, he bought a home on the Greek island of Crete — a summer retreat that touched his soul as deeply as Alabama.

Whitten had been making sculpture for seven years by then, mostly as a way to understand the African art he saw in museums and recognized as a vital inheritance. But in Crete, the work became more of a focus, as he absorbed classical mythology and culture first-hand and reconnected with nature. Spearfishing in the Aegean Sea brought him back to the love of fishing, hunting and the organic world he had known as a boy in Alabama.

"These objects constitute not only Whitten's truly original ways of making art, but also his intensely and fully cultivated worldview," says the show's Houston curator, Kanitra Fletcher.

The show also includes several of his 11 signature "Black Monolith" paintings, large and complex mixed-media works that pay homage to such exemplary black figures as Malcolm X, Ralph Ellison, Jacob Lawrence, Ornette Coleman and W.E.B. Du Bois.

"There are so many Black Monoliths in the history of African Americans," he once said. "Our history of survival in America is defined both by the heroic deeds of the collective and of the independent activists working in a variety of disciplines."

Titled after a rocky outcropping near his home on Crete, the paintings are inspired by mosaics Whitten studied in Egypt, Italy and other parts of the Mediterranean.

The entry wall of Whitten's show begins with his quote, "Art is the compass to the cosmos."

He applied that thought somewhat literally in later works that explore ideas about a techno-utopian society — works he meant to actually transmit information to forces of the universe, like gateways composed of many chaotic parts. In quantum mechanics, Whitten recognized relationships between matter and spirit.

"I am Quantum Man," he once said. "I am part of everything, and everything is part of me."

You don't have to be Southern to appreciate that.

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