

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

BY SEBASTIAN SMEE

Sally Mann came to international prominence — and notoriety — in the early 1990s. Photographs she took of her three young children whiling away the summers on a verdant riverside property outside Lexington, Va., were published in “Immediate Family.” That book — half family album, half delirious art spell — offered a read on family dynamics that had the aura of a dream and the psychological complexity of a novel.

Shot with an 8-by-10 camera and masterfully printed, Mann's photographs were beautiful, although never cloying, and impossible to reduce to clean readings. But one of the deeper things they captured was the ineluctable pain — even in idyllic circumstances — of growing up.

A selection of these family pictures is on view in “Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings” at the National Gallery of Art, a much-anticipated overview of Mann's long engagement with the South. (The show was co-organized by the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Mass., where it will travel this summer before moving on to Los Angeles, Houston, Paris and Atlanta.)

In number, the photos are not enough to convey the gamut of emotions that accumulate over the pages of “Immediate Family.” But it is a pleasure to see them in the context of Mann's ongoing career. The exhibition shows, besides much else, that the family pictures were no fluke.

Mann, 66, is a throwback. For decades now, she has been making photographs using enormous cameras and glass plates doused in sticky collodion and then dipped into silver nitrate. She exposes these to reflected light through a broken, moldy old lens and develops them in darkrooms according to a set of esoteric instructions, the finer details of



SALLY MANN/THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO/ART RESOURCE

which she takes a sorcerer's delight in ignoring. Chance effects, alchemical voodoo and poetic suggestion are all part of Mann's artful approach.

So it's not easy to compare what she does with most of what counts as contemporary art. But it happens, once in a while, that an artist will come along and make work that looks almost perversely out of time, as though caught up in some warped romance with the past, which nonetheless looks greater than almost everything around it.

Mann's distinctly Southern sensibility is drenched in nostalgia. At the same time, a reality principle is always pushing through. Her abiding sense of mortality and awakening political conscience lift her quixotic enterprise into an urgently felt poetic realm that only seems out of time.

"We are spinning a story of what it is to grow up. It is a complicated story."

Photographer Sally Mann

That said, Mann does have a special way of tumbling into trouble. Drawn repeatedly to fraught subjects, she seems constitutionally incapable of playing it safe. Behind all her photographs lies the force of her huge, contradictory personality: romantic, ruthless, tender, tenacious, heartfelt, hubristic.

Her family pictures, which included images of her prepubescent children in various states of undress, were caught up in the culture wars of the late 1980s and '90s, when artists who pushed against social orthodoxies came under sustained attack.

Mann's subsequent work, which includes portraits of young African American men, as well as photos of places that carry memories of atrocious violence, feels vulnerable in a different way.

In particular, Mann's 1998 photographs of the bridge in Mississippi from which Emmett Till's murdered body is thought to have been thrown, and of the site where his corpse may have been drawn from the Tallahatchie River, are uncomfortable (and probably more so for an African American than for a white Australian

like me).

Readers of Mann's 2015 memoir, "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 generation, 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 college. 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 honest, 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 absence: unspeakable and in many ways unapproachable. The pictures 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 peculiar 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 resulting 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 simply 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, often 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



SALLY MANN/PRIVATE COLLECTION

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 saying things can sometimes seem like the only way to hold everything together. The big themes get overlooked in this atmosphere. They feel too dangerous. But the repressed will return. It



SALLY MANN/MARKEL CORPORATE ART 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.

always returns.

I am more ambivalent about Mann's obsession with storytelling. Sarah Greenough (who organized the show with Sarah Kennel) 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 necessarily 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 roadblock of real things. Faces, bodies, landscapes and church buildings emerge from her best photographs mute, inviolate and inaccessible to the wishful thinking of "story time."

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

Yet they are, finally, just landscapes. Spend time in the darkened gallery, and what comes through is a blessed, bosky silence and the furtive suggestion (more wishful thinking, alas) of a story not yet told, an ideal not yet betrayed, a promise not yet broken.

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 awareness. They have a weathered, submarine quality that blurs the barrier 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 adulthood from schizophrenia). Rather, a kind of self-mourning available to every person who struggles to reconcile themselves to their own lost innocence.

That, probably, would account for all of us.

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