

PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

At PEM, Sally Mann stays outside the comfort zone

By Cate McQuaid

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SALEM — It's a truism that art can make us uncomfortable, especially when it wades into themes we reflexively avoid. One body of work in "Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings" made me so uneasy my blinders went up, and it wasn't the infamous photos of her children that caused a stir during the culture wars of the 1990s.

In the 2000s, Mann photographed black men. These aren't exactly portraits — faces are hard to make out or not in the picture. Curators call this kind of work "interrogating the black body." Black men have been so objectified throughout American history that a black figure in art can become a screen for viewers' sticky feelings about race.

"A Thousand Crossings," a deep and tender examination of Mann's relationship to the American South, was organized by the Peabody Essex Museum and the National Gallery of Art, and is in Salem through Sept. 23.

In sorrowful prints such as "Men, Anton," the focus is shallow, the figure fuzzed, the light a soft glare. Consuming shadows fall around him. Emulsion blots and seethes, further obscuring him.



SALLY MANN

Sally Mann's "Semaphore" is among the images in "Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings" at Peabody Essex Museum.

I didn't know how to look at these pictures. The figures seemed part man, part symbol of oppression, and I wondered how Mann, a white woman, dared speak about that experience. What does a white woman see when she looks at a black man — named but obscured, so we cannot see who he is?

I huffed about this to myself, composing a review in my head: “Who is Mann to take these photos?”

Then I realized I was wrong. She isn't attempting to report anyone else's experience. She knows the gulf she peers across — that minefield is the true subject here — and she knows the risks. With these particular photos, Mann squints to see the men on the other side. The haze and shadows are a fog of time and recrimination not ready to lift.

The artist, born in 1951, first woke up to that damaged landscape growing up in Virginia. As a young woman, she gave a black man a ride, and when she got home, she proudly told Virginia “Gee-Gee” Carter, her parents' black help and a woman she considered her second mother, what she'd done.

Carter came at her, forearms covered in flour, and pushed her against the wall: “Don't you ever pick up a colored boy again, no matter what, no matter who,” she said.

Only years later did Mann realize that Carter knew the dire trouble a black man could get in if the wrong people saw him alone in a car with a white girl.

The series of photos of black men, relentlessly probing and curious, is typical of Mann. She settles in prickly places to witness and make sense of what she sees. Looking at her work through the lens of the Southern landscape, the exhibition's curators — Sarah Greenough of the National Gallery of Art and PEM's Sarah Kennel — explore how she coaxes landscapes to unveil their past.

Mann still lives in Lexington, Va., where she raised her children, and her family photographs are as steeped in the sultry Southern summer and the substance of the unspoken as her

landscapes of Civil War battlefields. The family photos, with their occasional depictions of the artist's children nude, ignited outrage among critics when they were published in the book "Immediate Family," in 1992. It was a time of moral indignation over art and, following the McMartin preschool sex-abuse trial (which ended with no convictions), high alert about child abuse.

The photos are not erotic, but they are arresting. Hurt, delight, cunning, resentment, and sensuality appear naked on the children's faces. Facing the depth of children's humanity is frightening. It's easier to picture them frozen in a saccharine ideal of innocence — but such photos are not art.

Many images, often staged, bump up against how dangerous it is to be alive in the world. Shooting "Bloody Nose," in which Mann's son Emmett glories in his blood-covered mouth and torso, or "The Ditch," in which he seems trapped in an earthen birth canal, was a mother's way of staving off disaster. Maybe if she imagined the worst, it would not happen.

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The artist photographed her kids in the 1980s and early 1990s. As they grew more independent, she turned her lens on the landscape. Her photographs became less about incident and story, and more about mood and the gravid silences held by places that have witnessed horrors.

Inspired by Civil War photographer Michael Miley, Mann uses old-school processes and equipment to capture those silences and carry the weight of the South's history. "Untitled (Scarred Tree)" was shot in Mississippi using an antique lens with no shutter, bound up with tape so light could pour in. Focused on a hard slash across the trunk, it's like a portrait of a wounded veteran.

Mann loves the mistakes, warts, and chanciness of collodion printing. "Deep South, Untitled (Emmett Till River Bank)," depicts the no-man's land where in 1955 Till's young body was pulled from the Tallahatchie River. He had been murdered after a white woman accused him of offending her.

In the image, blasted with soupy summer light, a lonely scar in the earth makes an eerie echo with “The Ditch,” where her own Emmett posed along a riverbank.

Photographers craft their art from the facts of the visual world. Toting her large-format camera around and laboring in the darkroom, Mann uses those facts as touchstones as she concocts the hot breath of history’s lingering whisper.

She coated images of Civil War battlefields with varnish made from diatomaceous earth, as if summoning them directly from soil where the fallen lay. They look rendered in deep charcoal: swirling skies and heat vapors, the ashy choke of smoke. In “Battlefields, Antietam (Starry Night),” the image tears like an old photo, and pops of light scatter across it, a fusillade fossilized in the thick air.

Mann does not valorize her subjects. She looks for the complicated wounds at their heart, the fugitive undercurrents that we politely turn away from. She approaches like a birdwatcher seeking a rare bird, and sits still with her camera, waiting for secrets to unfold.

Then she takes her gorgeous pictures. And in the way of secrets, they will often make us uncomfortable.

SALLY MANN: A Thousand Crossings

At Peabody Essex Museum, East India Square, Salem, through Sept. 23. 978-745-9500, www.pem.org

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