

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Sally Mann: Proud Flesh

by Lyle Rexer

Gagosian Gallery

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Several years ago in conversation, Sally Mann said that once she adopted the wet collodion process for taking photographs, she became aware of making “graven images.” This exhibition is her most vivid demonstration of the truth of that idea.



"Hephaestus" (2008). Gelatin silver print. 15 Ã—
13 1/2 inches (38.1 Ã— 34.3 cm). Ed. of 5. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery.

The wet collodion process was invented in 1851 and offered a method for creating more precise and detailed negatives than those made on paper. A glass plate was covered with a solution of silver and chemicals, exposed still wet, then developed. If the plate itself were slightly overexposed and backed with a dark color, it could read as an instant

positive—called an ambrotype. Mann has experimented with both of these approaches, and the images she has made for this exhibition suggest why she now works only with glass plates.

Her subject is mortality and our innate resistance to it, epitomized in more than 30 photographs of her husband, nude, taken over a period of years since he was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy. It is a wasting disease, selectively attacking the nerves and muscles of particular areas of the body, and the pictures chart its progress to date. Some of them look almost like clinical studies, isolating the impact on the legs and lower body with an impersonal detachment. Some are just the opposite, a loving and anguished witness.

What they are not, it seems to me, is intimate, not in the way most people mean. In an age of the snapshot aesthetic, of the off-hand self-chronicling that dominates the Internet and many galleries, these photographs appear as slow and indisposable as pieces of Greek sculpture. The torsos, arms, and legs that populate these images reference a rich and now ignored tradition of beaux-arts photographic treatments. No contemporary photographer I know of is more steeped in the history of photography than Mann, but no critics have commented on this because her subjects (her immediate family) and technique tend to overwhelm their attention. In any case, the camera has given Mann a purchase on reality, a means to explore its pleasures and terrors without being caught up in them. T. S. Eliot once called poetry an escape from personality rather than an expression of it, and something like that is going on here. Mann has taken another series of pictures of herself and her husband, a record of their quotidian existence, and these really are intimate, but they have never been exhibited.

Graven images—graven in two senses. The collodion “skin” of the negative, with all its flaws, is prominent in these prints (further distancing them from an intimate or transparent visibility). It conveys a physical sense that the images were inscribed by light—products of what the inventors first called their medium: heliography. We are constantly aware that these photographs are objects, made things, not simply cultural

data that an “artist” has bracketed for our attention. Their making is less a matter of handwork than of collaboration, with light itself.

The skin of the negatives is also distressed, even damaged. Mann has courted darkroom accidents since her early work in such series as “Immediate Family.” Again, the nature and treatment of her subjects largely blinded viewers to her willingness to follow some of the lessons of Robert Frank, to break rules, shoot into the sun, use unorthodox framing, let darkness and obscurity take over. With “Proud Flesh,” the damage and decay evident on the negative surface mirrors the same process taking place within the picture, within the flesh of its subject. I can’t help thinking of Kafka’s story “In the Penal Colony,” which tells of a machine that inscribes words on the bodies of prisoners until they die. Although it is a political fable, it is also about the sacrifices inherent in writing, as a terrible self-inscription, and for Mann it seems that at this stage of her life photographs must somehow participate in what they depict or their truth is unearned, a false seeming. No matter how successful or famous those photographs might be.

Graven, of the grave—don’t all photographs (according to Roland Barthes) carry the same knowledge, the implication in their unchanging present of the this-has-been? Isn’t it perfectly redundant to make a photographic record of mortality’s slow and inevitable victory, and to double it in a dead method? No, because this profound and stately pageant is not about the body or one man’s body but about a gaze transfixed by light, a light so strong it seems to bring the body into being in some images and in others to obliterate it. The lover’s gaze, the artist’s gaze is mobilized by light and blinded by it. The radiance lies outside the tragic discourse of time that binds photographer, subject and medium. It lies outside photography and makes it possible. It is the sign of redemption.