

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The Serendipitous Moments of Sally Mann

By

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Four years ago, photographer Sally Mann got on her horse and rode out into the mountains surrounding her Virginia home. In the middle of the ride, Sally's horse had an aneurism. Flailing and thrashing, the horse fell to the ground, knocking Sally out on its way down. Then, the horse stood back up, raised its hoof, and stomped on Sally's back just before falling once more in a final death throe.

Luckily, Sally regained consciousness in time to pull herself to safety, but the accident resulted in a crushed vertebra. "Everyone thought I was dead," said Sally in a phone interview from her home in Lexington, Virginia. For Sally, horseback riding is a normal part of daily life on her farm, which rests at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains in

Virginia. “About half my time is spent on a horse,” she said. “The other half in the darkroom.”

But after the accident, confined to her bed with a broken back, Sally Mann could neither ride nor print. She could, however, take a picture or two, turning the camera on herself for the first time in years. The result is a group of self-portraits created by an artist not often associated with the introspective – In the last 30 years, she has only published two self-portraits. For Sally, the images of herself seemed practical; her essential tool—an 8x10 view camera, which weighs anywhere from 8 to 18 pounds—presented a problem with her broken back. “I couldn’t lift the camera,” said Sally. “So I just set the camera up in the same spot, and took portrait after portrait after portrait.”

And so she created two groups of ambrotype self-portraits. The ambrotype process, established in the mid-19th century, builds a positive image on a sheet of glass (in this case, black glass) using wet plate collodion. First one side of the glass plate is covered with a thin layer of collodion, and then it is dipped in a solution of silver nitrate. The plate must be exposed in the camera while wet, which gives the photographer a small window of time to take the picture, depending on the amount of light available. The plate is immediately developed and fixed.

Sally created these ambrotypes in two sizes, grouping them into separate grids. One grid holds eighteen large plates each 15 by 13 ½ inches, with six plates running across and three running down. The other grid contains seventy-five smaller plates, each at 10x8 inches, with fifteen rows and five columns. Each assembly creates a profound impact. It almost looks cinematic. All of the photographs have similar frames, but vary in angle, exposure, and chemical “chance,” but the antiquated aesthetic gives it a pre-cinematic tone.

One of the self-portraits second from the left on the top row of the 18-part grid strikes the eye most as an expression of mortality. Mummy-like, a scraggly hachure separates the nose and part of the cheek from the rest of the skin, where it looks as though a piece of flesh has been torn off. For Sally, these self-portraits are very much about her

near-death experience four years ago with the horse. “In a certain sense they really are a meditation on mortality,” she said. “There’s almost a dematerialization as you look at them.”

Unless you own the second edition of Christopher James’s *Book of Alternative Photographic Processes* (in which case, flip to page 484), you have not seen these remarkable self-portraits before. Now, you can see them live on the walls of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, where they serve as the bookend to an exhibition called *Sally Mann: The Flesh and the Spirit*.



*Photo by Sumner Hatch.*

Curated by the museum’s own John B. Ravenal, the exhibition, which runs through January 23, 2011, is, according to Mr. Ravenal “the most substantial exhibition of Sally Mann’s work in a museum.”

Ravenal has organized the exhibition thematically, focusing on “the body”, and its decay in fact. The show highlights Sally’s recent work, but also includes some photographs from earlier in her career (including polaroids and color photographs). A catalogue published by The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and Aperture Press accompanies the exhibition featuring a poetic essay by John B. Ravenal and two other academic texts.

The title of the exhibition is based on an Anne Bradstreet poem, *The Flesh and the Spirit*. In the poem, Bradstreet (1612-1672) a well-known Puritan voice, illustrates “two sisters”—Flesh and Spirit—whom she observes “...reason on”/ Things that are past and things to come./ One Flesh was call’d, who had her eye/ On worldly wealth and vanity;/ The other Spirit, who did rear/ Her thoughts unto a higher sphere.”

Bradstreet describes a common Puritan paradox: an internal conflict between the sinful and redeemed self. But she also describes something very relevant to Sally Mann. “Spirits” have been rising from the depths of Sally Mann’s work for some time, now as a result of some kind of collaboration between Mann as printer, Mann as model, and Mann as chemist. The wet-plate collodion technique, which originated in the mid-19th Century—brings clarity to an image (there is no grain); It also brings quite the mess—the fragility of a glass plate and all the sticky, time-sensitive steps involved form an environment liable to photographic mishap.

But, unlike her predecessors in the 19th and 20th centuries, Sally doesn’t mind these photographic disasters. In fact, she kind of likes it. She prides herself on what she calls “serendipitous moments,” where light leaks, collodion chemistry, or other such accidents occur in her photographic process and create distortions, scratches, chemical spills, even lost content. Mr. Ravenal—whose official title is the Sydney and Frances Lewis Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the VMFA—wrote of Sally’s accidents, “In keeping with her interest in the aesthetics of outdated and handmade photography, she has also assembled a collection of antique uncoated lenses, whose valued effects include soft focus, light leaks, diffraction, fogging, and flares.”

*Sally Mann: the Flesh and the Spirit* presents a crescendo of this technique. What you see when you enter—the young faces of the children—differs greatly from what you see when you leave—the fading bodies of Sally Mann degraded by these distortions in a “Dorian Grey-like thing,” as Sally noted. But the photographs of Sally Mann’s children in this exhibition do not come from *Immediate Family* the 1992 series, which once released a) sold millions of copies and caught the attention of gallerists worldwide and b) fell

victim to bad timing in the form of religious and right-winged movements against child pornography. (A quick note about *Immediate Family*: yes the children are nude, and no it is not pornography. In fact, *Immediate Family* is only pornography if you feel funny looking at it, in which case I'd advise you to seek professional help because you are a pedophile. *Immediate Family* is really just a collection of impeccable prints. And, did Munch ever get in trouble for painting a "Sick Child" naked? I'd feel much more violated if someone were to paint every contour of my body nude than if they were to capture a natural phenomenon already occurring between myself and a scene, or myself and a fleeting veil of light.)

In the exhibition, you will find *Family Color*, a lot of which seems (subject-matter-wise) just like *Immediate Family* but in color. "Orange Virginia" is the best of these color images, and the title describes precisely what you see. Mann's daughter, Virginia, glows of orange. Belly up, supported by a single grown-up arm, she looks as though she were floating or learning to swim. Her eyes are completely closed. There is a small temporary tattoo on her chest of a heart and arrow. The orange light illuminates her body against the blackened background. The edges of her hair hang loosely from her head fading softly into the dark.

Sally shot *Family Color* with a handheld Mamiya camera, a curious departure from her typical large format, 8x10 view camera. A medium-format camera, the Mamiya is typically used for snapshots or street scenes (it's a roll-film camera), while a large format view camera involves a large tripod, sheets of film, glass or plates, and a lengthy, almost holy ritual just in the preparation of a single photograph.

When I asked Sally about her decision to use a Mamiya for some of photographs of her children, she responded, "I never liked using it." And, when I asked Sally about her decision to shoot in color film, she said, "I didn't do that much in color, I did a few family pictures and the color bodies [in Matter Lent] but that is all I've done. I'm such a control freak that I like making my own prints."

It is true. Sally Mann enjoys the printing process, something separating her from most of her contemporaries. Few photographers print their own work these days, especially if they shoot in color. And, a giant color image seems to be the dominant force of most New York photography galleries. Many contemporary photographers who traditionally used the same 8x10 camera have switched over to digital photography, from Gregory Crewdson to Stephen Shore. Worried that she would consider making the same switch, I asked Sally what she thought of a digital camera. She said, no, "It doesn't have any spirit." She talked about an interview she saw recently in which someone described young photographers as "desperate for accidents," as digital is too predictable.

For Sally, who was named *Time* magazine's "America's Top Photographer" in 2001, the darkroom is as important (if not more important) than the camera. "I love printing, I just love it. I love figuring out how to make a good print." But more than that, Sally thinks she is better at printing than she is at photographing. "I'm horrible with exposures," she confessed over the phone, "I don't really use a light meter because I don't know how to use it." But she said, "I am a damn good printer."

Still hung up on the thought of Sally Mann without a light meter, I asked a Teaching Assistant over at the International Center of Photography if he thought Sally Mann used a light meter. He said yes. I asked why. He said, it would be "impossible to get those photos with that camera without a light meter." But then after a long pause, he referred to said, "but if she does not use a light meter, then she's even more of a genius than I thought."

Indeed, and going back to the exhibition, this is most evident, where the children will greet you both in color, and then in collodion in a plates from *What Remains* (2003). Here Virginia appears again in *Virginia #42*, this time her frame-cropped face pushes the 50x40 inch frame. Her skin looks as though it has been sprinkled with dark raindrops. Here, childlike freckles fade in and out of focus above languorous cupid-bowed lips. Two eyes divide the top of the frame in a half-moon. Her eyes are closed, but her expression is not vacant, only serene.

In a deleted scene of Steven Cantor's documentary, *What Remains: the Life and Work of Sally Mann*, Sally responded to what I assume was the question "so what does remain?" She said, "Love, what remains is love." And, quoting Ezra Pound's "What thou lovest well remains," she continued, "because I love my family I make the images I do." And thus there are the images from *Proud Flesh*, which are also included in the exhibition. Here Sally has placed her husband Larry Mann as the subject in a kind of play on art history. He is fully posed and nude (traditionally, gender roles have made for the opposite). These images are significant and special to both husband and wife who just celebrated their 40th wedding anniversary because Larry Mann has been diagnosed with Muscular Dystrophy, a slow, degenerative disease.

It's hard to say or even intrude with speculation whether his illness prompted Sally Mann to create these images—perhaps to remember or preserve—but they are beautiful. The poet C.D. Wright wrote of the photographic process between Sally and Larry Mann in her essay, which accompanied the original *Proud Flesh*. This time spent together doing this, photographing, being photographed. They postpone the ending. As if every second counted though not every second is on a par. They are on a continuum. No other body will do. He is not a figure. This is not a life study, but a chronicle of them.

Wright continues, "Tomorrow he goes into town, to lawyer." With these words echoing through my mind, I looked at the VMFA wall onto an image from *Proud Flesh* called *Memory's Truth*, 2008. In it a single arm remains the focus point of one of these plates. Ascending from a darkness of blur and chemistry, the arm has been wrapped in veins. Below it, a keyboard of knuckles rests atop a surface, maybe a floor. The scene is coated gently with a honeycomb-like wash.

Sally Mann often talks about the "problem of portraiture"; as a photographer, it's far too easy to exploit one's subject (think of Edward Steichen's portrait of J.P. Morgan. When J.P. Morgan gave Steichen only three minutes to complete the process, Morgan ended up with his chair in the shape of a dagger.) Sally draws the line "in the loss of dignity," and while she accepts that in *Proud Flesh*, "there are some [images] that are borderline

with Larry,” she also knows has faith that he is a brave man. “Whatever loss of dignity I’m portraying in the image is offset by your astonishment at his bravery,” she said. Larry doesn’t seem to mind posing for Sally at all. In an email he wrote of his role in the process:

The involvement in the pose, getting a sense of what Sally is seeing through the lens, requires imagination, energy and concentration. Not to mention the fact that some of these exposures were 3 or more minutes which means shallow breathing and fixing on something on the wall to maintain position. Once she pulled prints I was so impressed with what she was getting that there really was no concern about how the viewers might respond to the pictures. I knew this was powerful work. I was mostly fixed on what I thought the end result might be.

At the Virginia Museum, photography critic Vince Aletti spoke of *Proud Flesh* as “sort of real sympathy and a real understanding and a real sort of placing-yourself-in-that-other-body. And realizing it in such a rich way.” He continued, “But I think that’s part of what makes the work extraordinary.” Also on view are photographs from *Last Measure*, which Sally began capturing in 2001 after a convicted sex offender shot himself to death on her property while she was alone in her home. Sally, who had been alerted by the police, watched him die. Later, she wandered over to where he had died. All that remained was a small pool of blood, which she poked, and as she so beautifully described in Cantor’s documentary (which is on continual play throughout the exhibition), “the earth just took a sip of his blood.”

Two months later, Sally returned to the site, with the questions, “What does the earth do to a dead body? To what does a dead body do the earth?” Familiar with the landscape quality of the Civil War battlefields from an earlier series, Sally set out again, this time to capture the “essence of landscapes at once dreamily beautiful and haunted by the plain of slavery and racism”.

The results are extraordinary and although the theme of the Virginia exhibition is based around “the body”, these landscapes fit in beautifully In *Untitled 7*, the large trees look

as though they are emitting something that is splitting the heavens. The sky is dark and scratched by collodion chemicals. It looks very much like a body. The trees look like the alveoli of lungs and the sky like a sonogram of a woman's womb. There is a Proustian quality to Sally's landscapes. She photographs the land the way she photographs her husband or children: with love, care, and an almost existential instinct to preserve the past and the present, with the future in mind.