

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Sally Mann makes haunting debut with *The Family and the Land* at Photographers' Gallery

By Celia White | 03 August 2010



(Above) Candy Cigarette (1989). From Immediate Family

***Exhibition: Sally Mann: The Family and the Land, Photographers' Gallery, London, until
September 19 2010***

The Family and the Land is the first UK solo exhibition for American artist Sally Mann. Having achieved critical acclaim during the 1990s for her large scale, high-definition photographs of her three young children, this show combines Mann's earlier work with her latest offerings in an exhibition that approaches medium and meaning with equal force.

From the sandy brown walls of the lower room of Photographers' Gallery peer the huge monochromatic visages of Mann's children, part of her 2004 Faces series.



Jessie #10 (2004).
From the series Faces

The prints are shadowed and imprecise; they are dirty. They are also incredibly beautiful. These effects are due to the process by which they are made: the antique wet-plate collodion technique, pioneered in the 1850s but largely abandoned by 1900.

The process involves sensitising a glass plate to light by covering it with a silver nitrate liquid; the plate is then placed "wet" into the camera and the photograph is taken.

As the exhibition wall text explains in a tone bordering on apologetic, this archaic and unpredictable process is responsible for the raw, unclean appearance of the final prints.



*Scarred Tree (1996). From the series
Deep South*

Yet one can clearly see how the streaky surfaces of these prints – their bared corners and gritty overlay – might constitute part of the "appeal" of this technique for Mann.

Behind these ghostly faces and their hints at human mortality, another form of transience is writ large: that of traditional darkroom photography, which is rapidly becoming extinct due to depleting silver resources and the uncanny perfection of today's Photoshopped digital imagery.

Meanwhile, the work in the upper galleries pursues a separate theme: the direct relationship of the body to the earth.



Virginia #42 (2004).
From the series Faces

The first room shows Immediate Family, Mann's most famous series of photographs which depict her children playing amid the luscious Virginian landscape.

Deep South, in the next room, sees Mann abandoning human subject matter in favour of pure landscape photography, again using the wet-plate collodion process in order to turn her camera towards the past: onto the American Civil War and its lasting impact on the land.

The photographs in both these series show points of extreme focus contrasted with a blurred, dream-like backdrop. In Deep South this provides a horror-film-like sense of both presence and absence: a Blair Witch-inspired nightmare with the camera's eye standing in for the viewer's.



At Warm Springs (1991). From the series Immediate Family

Yet this powerful body-earth narrative is only complete when we enter the show's final room. Entitled *What Remains*, each image in this space shows a human body decaying in a landscape setting.

"The body's just a carapace" claims Mann, and these photographs reveal the nature of that carapace, its precise form and texture, once it is no longer needed.

Some resemble cracked mud, others orange peel. Human bodies melt back into the earth, and it is only the use of monochrome rather than colour photography that prevents these images from being deeply disturbing.



Untitled WR Pa 59 (2001). From the series What Remains

What Remains complements a narrative that begins with the children's emergence from and naked interaction with the land, and concludes with a reunion between body and earth. The religious connotations of this are unintended yet not entirely coincidental.

Bluntly poetic, this exhibition reveals a truth that viewers cannot fail to confront: that our world precedes us, it holds us while we live, and when we die it consumes and succeeds us.

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