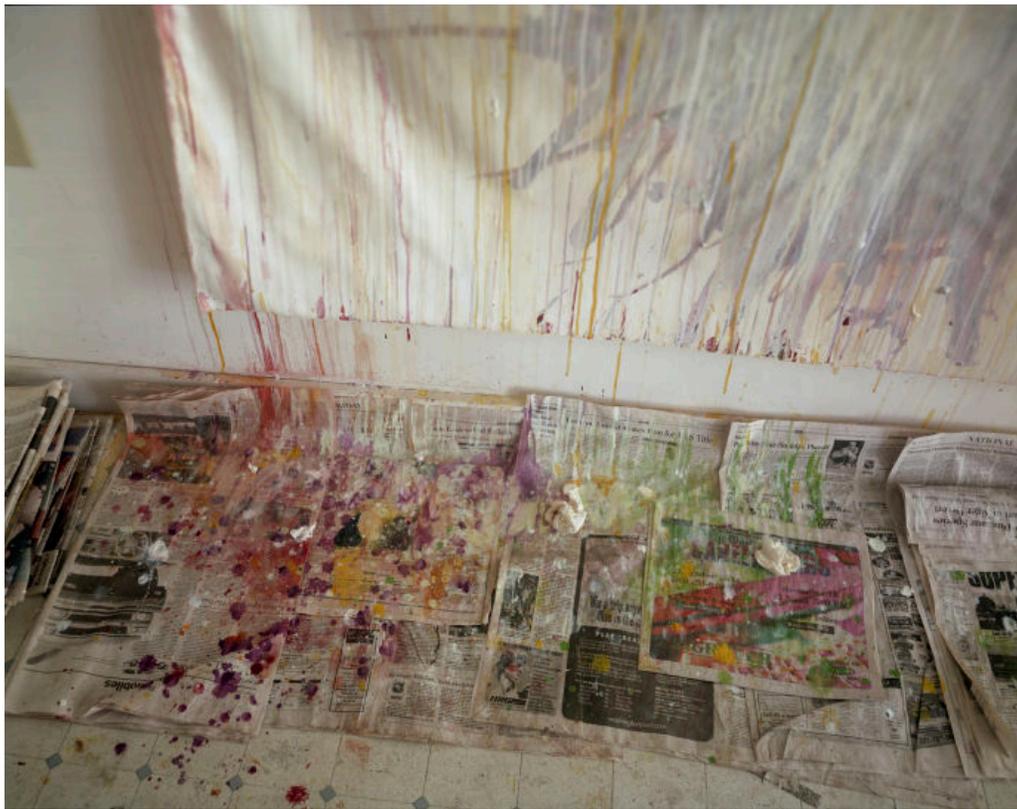


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Sally Mann's Loving Study of Cy Twombly's Last Years

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"Remembered Light, Untitled (Drips and Newspaper)," 1999
© SALLY MANN. COURTESY GAGOSIAN GALLERY

There are a number of things that set Southern artists apart from anyone else," Sally Mann says in a recent short film on her work. "Their love of the past, their susceptibilities to myth, their willingness to experiment with romanticism, their obsession with place, and their obsession with family." Family, of course, has been synonymous with Mann's art for more than two decades. No matter how many remarkable pictures she's made of other subjects—halcyon rural landscapes, somber Civil War battlefields, revolting studies of anonymous corpses—they will never eclipse the fame (or the infamy) of the black-and-white portraits she took of her own three young children, published in the 1992 book "Immediate Family." In those lush ballads of innocence—and more experience than some viewers could handle when the children were nude—Mann's gaze is languid and frank, and idylls of youth become feral and otherworldly.

There are the family members we're tied to by blood and there are others we choose—friends whose love feels like destiny. Mann and the painter Cy Twombly had one of those friendships; its roots reach deep, to before Mann was born. Her parents met Twombly when he was a teenager and they had just moved to Lexington, Virginia. They were among the first people to own his work, including a sculpture he gave them as a thank-you for dinner when he was a senior in high school.

Mann and Twombly shared an obsession with place. Both felt the tidal pull of their home town. Mann raised her children and lives to this day on the very farm where she grew up. Twombly moved to Italy in 1957, but in 1993 began returning to Lexington for months at a time, to work on his heroic, hermetic, mythopoetic paintings (which tick every box on Mann's Southern-artist checklist) and his more restrained sculptures. In 1999, Mann decided to photograph Twombly's Lexington studio, a surprisingly humble spot for a world-famous painter, a rented storefront on a main drag, next door to a pie-slinging restaurant. In her vivid memoir, "Hold Still," Mann writes that she was drawn to the subject "in part because of the coquettish quality of light peeking through tightly shuttered plate-glass window, and in so doing documented, almost by accident, the artistic extremes of Cy's productive last years." She continued the project for more than a decade. The last time she visited Twombly at work was in 2011; a month later, he died in Rome, at the age of eight-three.

Twombly disliked having his picture taken, and he remains outside the frame in all of Mann's photographs (though a pair of paint-splattered slippers appear at one point, like a Cheshire Cat's grin of his feet). Rather than portraits of an artist, Mann offers us something rarer: a window into the creative process itself. In this regard, her images recall Constantin Brancusi's brilliantly haphazard photographs of his own sculpture studio. As Mann reveals, Twombly's work space was similarly jam-packed with objects. Regarding one image of a disorganized flotilla of ghostly white sculptures, the eye takes a moment to register the sublime absurdity of a taxidermy deer head lying nose up on the floor.

For all the sly wit of some of these pictures, the knowledge that one of the titans of American art is now gone lends the series the ache of an elegy. Even the jauntiest still-life, a collection of pigment-soaked balled-up tissues, suggests a memorial floral bouquet. As full of incident and vitality as Mann's series is, it's also an exquisite reflection on absence.

Sally Mann's "Remembered Light: Cy Twombly in Lexington" is on view at the Gagolian gallery through October 29th. A new book of the same title, with essays by Simon Schama and Edmund de Waal, is out in October from Abrams Books.