

ART REVIEW

## Sally Mann's Haunted South

By Vicki Goldberg

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Sally Mann, born in a hospital that had once been Stonewall Jackson's home, has lived in Virginia most of her life and always proclaimed her Southern-ness in her photographs and in her engaging and boisterous memoir, "Hold Still." She says that what makes her work Southern is her obsession with place, family, the past, her love of Southern light, and her willingness to experiment with levels of romance beyond what most late-20th-century artists could tolerate. Add to that romanticism the influence of Southern writers and you get a tinge of gothic. A streak of expressionism also comes into the mix, powered by the will to express feelings strongly and the capacity to make those visible.



"Blackwater 9," from 2008-2012. Ms. Mann conjures nature's menace at a swamp where escaped slaves took temporary refuge in this tintype, a homage to 19th-century photographers and techniques. Sally Mann

All of that Southern-ness, all those obsessions, and all her strengths are on view in a deftly chosen and admirably displayed exhibition in Washington covering most of her 40-plus-year career: "Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings," at the National Gallery of Art. There, 108 images — 47 of them never before exhibited — and an excellent catalog provide a provocative tour through the photographer's accomplishments. It is also a record of exploration — into the past, into the country's history and photography's, stamped with a powerful vision.

The exhibition focuses first on Ms. Mann's preoccupation with family relations when her children were young and she adroitly registered the endemic conflicts and convolutions in the process of growing up. From there she set out to discover the Virginia land she lived on and nearby Southern states.



"Jessie Bites," 1985. Jessie Mann, angry in war paint, still clings to her mother's bitten arm. Sally Mann/Metropolitan Museum of Art

The work grows visibly more profound in content — in some instances anguished — as it makes a foray into Southern history. At length she returns to her children, ever more liable to time's assaults, to her own close brush with death in a riding accident, and to the sad progress of her husband's late-onset muscular dystrophy. If the delicate progress along life's journey is most evident in children, Ms. Mann took a larger path into racial history, and memories of the past that linger in current consciousness.

Her work was never solely about surface, but as it went on it went deeper and faced darkness ever more daringly. The exhibition convincingly illustrates her exceptional sensibility, dauntless exploration of techniques, consummate skill as a printer, and willingness to tackle the complexities of life and death. (Her rare tendency to overdo her romantic expressionism also raises its head.) Not everything equals her best, but her best brims with passion.



"Emmett Floating at Camp," from 1991. Emmett Mann looking helpless for a moment. Sally Mann

The show was organized by Sarah Greenough, senior curator and head of the department of photographs from the National Gallery of Art, and Sarah Kennel, a curator of photography at the Peabody Essex Museum.

Ms. Mann burst into the national consciousness with her fourth book, "Immediate Family," in 1992 — for all the wrong reasons. (It was reissued in 2015.) At a time when the country was virtually hysterical about child abuse and about nudity of any sort (remember the Mapplethorpe trial?), her pictures of her three young children who were sometimes nude on their isolated farmland created a child-porn/bad-mother uproar, though the

photos were about the children's interplay with one another and their parents during a hot summer by the river. Many photographers understood, and were influenced.



Sally Mann's "Jessie #25," from 2004. An extreme close-up of the photographer's daughter, now grown up — an intimation of mortality.  
Sally Mann/Stephen G. Stein Employee Benefit Trust

The show has few nude images but emphasizes such complicated matters as the fleeting duration of innocence, the childhood vacillation between dependence and independence, and the recurrent fears of danger that haunt parenthood. "Jessie Bites" foregrounds the child's anger as well as her need of the maternal support provided by an unenthusiastic adult arm with bite marks. "Emmett Floating at Camp," an unpublished image from 1991 of her child floating in a great gray nowhere, turns out to be uncannily prescient and devastatingly sad, for Emmett ultimately became schizophrenic and committed suicide in 2016.

As the children grew, Ms. Mann next went in search of the South itself, propelled by the idea that the landscape's "profligate beauty" set the scene for the odd mix of defeat, defiance and graciousness that marks the region's character. In a section called "The Land," she uses antique lenses, encouraging the kind of mistakes that would have horrified earlier photographers.



"Hephaestus," from 2008. Sally Mann's poignant image of her husband, Larry, symbolizes both his illness and his skill as a blacksmith. Sally Mann/Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

The land lies dazzled under the Southern light or slumbers in humidity, the sky is a damaged dome cut off by vignetting (black shading across corners), or it may be a cosmos of its own. She sees light as the great lover lavishing caresses on the land, or the great obliterator that overwhelms the earth's solidity, or the great designer reconfiguring common notions about what should hold our attention.

And she considers the land's sumptuous beauty deceptive, for she is certain that death lingers underfoot, the deaths of slaves who tilled and built the land. "I have had a fascination with death that I think might be considered genetic," she has said, adding, "My father had the same affliction, I guess." Her family's house was full of images of the way various cultures portrayed death, and perhaps by osmosis, she became obsessed by the subject from childhood on. As she wrote: "Death is the sculptor of the ravishing landscape, the terrible mother, the damp creator of life, by whom we are one day devoured."



"Deep South, Untitled (Fontainebleau)," from 1998. The Louisiana landscape, ancient, luxurious, defined by light. Sally Mann/National Gallery of Art, Washington

This preoccupation coincides with her belated realization that racism infected the entire South, even those who considered themselves virtuously opposed to it, something that suddenly struck her when she went north to boarding school. As a child she was already troubled by the brutal murder of Emmett Till, a black teenager from Chicago who was kidnapped, mutilated and killed in Mississippi in 1955; she later named her firstborn after him.

But she had not questioned why Virginia Carter, her beloved black nanny known as Gee-Gee, had to eat in the car when traveling with the family. Once fully aware, she went looking for markers of Till's death. Neither her photograph of the bridge where he was allegedly thrown into the water nor the unprepossessing bit of shore where his body was retrieved looks like a witness to murder, despite a thin white streak like a teardrop near the bridge. Photographs are mute objects, and many only speak when spoken to. Once titled, these two photographs call up a hideous history, remind us of the land's indifference, and roil the mind.



"Deep South, Untitled (Bridge on Tallahatchie)." Ms. Mann went in search of the markers of a murder that had disturbed her from childhood. This 1998 photograph shows the bridge in Mississippi from which Emmett Till's weighted body is believed to have been thrown. Sally Mann/Markel Corporate Art Collection

She ventured farther, into Civil War battlefields. A gallery is filled with very large, immensely dark pictures: an angry, oppressive, demanding display. Using collodion negatives, a 19th-century medium, and antique lenses, she coaxed chance and accidents into her prints, reinforcing the sense of history and mimicking the random effects of war. Several powerful images of Antietam, site of the bloodiest day in American history, are virtually as dark as death itself. In one, half of a pitch-black sun looms on the horizon while a second sun, fuller but less distinct, ominously gathers force in the sky. In another, a curtain of heaving black cloud, laced with what might be lightning, descends. In these images the blind force of slaughter mingles with mourning.

A group of photographs of the Great Dismal Swamp, where escaped slaves sought refuge on the way north and many died, are also strong and harrowing. They were created as tintypes, a period technique, and relatively small. The foliage, atmosphere and reflections are as clotted and impenetrable as emblems of evil. I'd have liked to see them larger, for they are fierce vistas without redemption, the landscape of hell masquerading as art.



“Battlefields, Antietam (Black Sun),” 2001. Using collodion negatives and antique lenses, Ms. Mann created an image permeated by the horrendous tally of destruction at Antietam, in Maryland, where some 23,000 soldiers were killed or wounded. Sally Mann/Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York

Ms. Mann also made serious, melancholy portraits of black men, taken, as she recounts in “Hold Still,” in an attempt to remedy the unsettled feelings she has about her early blithe ignorance of racism and to find out who the black men were that she never really saw back then.

She has asked more than once if the land has a memory. Well, no. We endow it with one when we memorialize it in cemeteries, monuments, roadside markers, national battlefield parks. But history moves on; grass grows over it.



“Deep South, Untitled (#9),” 1998. The ruins of the Civil War-era Windsor mansion, graced by a heart-shaped leaf in the center. Sally Mann/Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Personal intimations of mortality fill the exhibition’s last room: greatly enlarged faces of her three grown children, so close up none has hair, all hard to identify one from the other. One has closed eyes, one seems to be in the process of disappearing. We have come full circle and ended in the same place: her children, the inexorability of time, and the parental fear that harm should come to them — as indeed it did later with Emmett’s death.

And there are respectful, caring pictures, part of a series on the ravages of disease on her husband’s body — a thin arm, a no longer muscular torso. Under the title “Hephaestus,” for the deformed god of metalworking, an intricate cascade of what might be liquid metal slashes across the torso of this man who is both a lawyer and a blacksmith. These pictures are testimony to a marriage that has obviously been one of trust and love, as well as a vivid indication of how Ms. Mann has turned her fears into art.

"Deep South, Untitled (Scarred Tree)," 1998. Ms. Mann has said that the land has a memory. This tree's scar recalls a botched attempt to cut it down.  
Sally Mann/National Gallery of Art, Washington, Alfred H. Moses and Fern M. Schad Fund

At the end there is a short color video of Ms. Mann with a brief survey of the rolling green land where she has lived much of her life. My eyes and mind were so drenched in black landscapes that the full visual spectrum momentarily stunned me and I thought there was something wrong. Photography has many ways to change the way we see.

There is a kind of heroism in staring straight at the vexed meanings of landscape, the complexities of family, memory and life itself, as well as the face of death and the carnage of history. There may be nothing heroic about an obsession with death, but when it produces high-caliber art the issue is effectively closed. After all, death is obsessed with us, and it will have the last word.

Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings

Through May 28 at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, and then traveling to the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Mass., the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles and to other museums; [nga.gov](http://nga.gov).

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