

The Family and the Land: Sally Mann Camilla Brown, Senior Curator, The Photographers' Gallery (June 2010)

'Time, memory, loss and love are my artistic concerns, but time, among all of them becomes the determinant.' *Sally Mann 2007*

In this quotation the photographer Sally Mann outlines the recurrent themes and concerns of her work which has included extensive use of her three children as subjects, alongside studies of the land around her home in Lexington, Virginia, and the American South at large. This exhibition at The Photographers' Gallery brings together a selection from five series of works spanning over twenty years. Mann's main subject is the personal and everyday, the local, but it also touches on the enduring questions of life and death and what is left behind when we are gone. Her practice pushes, and at times subverts, traditional photographic methods. Yet it is firmly rooted in photography, exploring its role as both an encapsulator and fabricator of memories. So often photographs are the gateway between ourselves and our collective past, and it is photographers like Mann who hold the key to this.

It is hard to look at Mann's work without a sense of being thrown back in time. This is partly due to her use of antique cameras and processes, but it goes further than that as the work itself seems to be in conversation with work from the past. One inspiration for her landscape series *Deep South (1996–98)* was her discovery of a caché of glass negatives by the 19th century photographer Michael Miley (1841–1918). Miley photographed in Mann's community in Lexington and in his work, she saw familiar places, such as a swimming hole located on the river that borders her farm. To see these local places in such old negatives proved a revelatory moment for Mann and was to lead to her now passionate interest in the wet-plate collodion technique she uses today.¹

An increasing number of contemporary artists, of which Mann is at the fore, are being drawn to use the wet-plate collodion process. The technique has been described as 'painting in light'² and seems to be the closest photography can get to painting. All aspects of the preparation and developing process are complicated, delicate and tactile. Mann has to do this on site using the back of her truck as a temporary darkroom. Working in the open air creates its own problems with dust and dirt constantly attracted to the wet and sticky surface of the negative as it is being produced. The humidity of the South is both a help and a hindrance, at times preventing the collodion from sticking well to the glass. The accidents all leave their marks, drips and stains across the prints, which are part of the appeal for Mann. She has often likened the serendipity of the process to 'an angel of uncertainty', something that she welcomes.

I used collodion with some of the photographs I shot in the Mississippi for Deep South. I wanted to capture the solitude and resonance of that landscape, of places where time seems stopped, lost, warped. That part of the South is a kind of netherworld. I was asking the land to give up its ghosts. Collodion is the ideal medium for such landscapes. It is contemplative, reverential and memorial.³

Mann has long been interested in how the land is shaped by the events, and particularly the deaths, that have happened on it. In a previous body of work she revisited the battlefields of the American Civil War.

*When the land subsumes the dead, they become the rich body of the earth, the dark matter of creation. As I walk the fields of this farm, beneath my feet shift the bones of incalculable bodies; death is the sculptor of the ravishing landscape, the terrible mother, the damp creator of life, by whom we are one day devoured.*⁴

Yet she is also drawn to the romantic beauty of the land which she knows and loves so much. As a farm owner Mann works on the land every day and is also a keen equestrian. She has an intimate connection to the land around her which has embedded itself deep in her psyche. She feels that this is a particularly Southern sensibility:

*Southerners live uneasily at the nexus between myth and reality, watching the mishmash amalgam of sorrow, humility, honor, graciousness, and renegade defiance play out against a backdrop of profligate physical beauty.*⁵

Some of Mann's landscape shots in *Deep South* (1996–98) become quite abstract, seeming to capture the soporific, almost dreamlike, atmosphere of the land around her. In several works, such as *Swamp Bones* (1996) and *Scarred Tree* (1996), natural objects take on an anthropomorphic aspect. The latter resembles an open war wound as the tree stands as defiant memorial to a violent mark that has been etched into it. Taken using the wet-plate collodion process this seems to refer to collodion's other use during the American Civil War, as a binder for war wounds.

The series that Mann began following these landscapes was *What Remains* (2000–04). Mann gained access to the University of Tennessee Forensic Anthropology Center where bodies are left outside so that their decomposition can be studied for scientific purposes. For Mann this represented a continuation of her preoccupation with the relationship between the body and the land:

*I think these body pictures are going to be absolutely pivotal to this death series. It rounds it out – you explore it from two different angles, what happens when death occurs on the landscape and then you explore it from the angle of what happens to the thing that has died.*⁶

It is powerful, hard-hitting work that muses on the subject of death. Disturbing for some, there is an alluring beauty that she has found in these decaying bodies. We are drawn into the images, seeing leathery patterns and marks on the surfaces, before we recognise what we are looking at. As the title suggests the work examines in detail what is left when we die – what traces we leave on the land as we pass. It also questions at what point a body becomes a corpse, and examines the process by which a person is absorbed into the land.

Again wet-plate collodion seemed the right technical approach for Mann to photograph this subject matter:

*To my mind, this series is the perfect marriage of subject and technique. The ragged edges of a collodion image appear to be torn, seized from the flow of time. Ordinary film would be too slick to capture the state of decomposition.*⁷

Artists have, of course, used dead bodies for their studies and work for hundreds of years. As Deanna Petherbridge in her book *The Quick and the Dead* (1997) states: "The [dead] body has been central to Western art for most of its history... Artist-anatomists [have] made a huge contribution to the newly emerging 'sciences' of body knowledge through their own dissection and drawings, foremost amongst them Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci."⁸ She also notes the resurgence of interest in this area among contemporary artists. In particular Andres Serrano (b. 1951) who dealt with these issues in his series *The Morgue* (1992). His work offers more immediate parallels to the anatomists' approach to depicting the body. He uses stark lighting and shows fragments of bodies. Often he focuses on the marks that happened either at the time of death or during the post-mortem process. There are the depictions of scars, punctures through the skin, and other signs of violation, that for some prolong the apparent suffering of these anonymous subjects. It is worth noting that Mann, unlike her more anatomically precise predecessors, does not interfere in any way with the bodies – she photographs them as they lie. Nor, as some have felt was the case with Serrano, does she portray them as victims. She treats her subjects with respect and dignity, whilst capturing in uncomfortable detail the process of decay.

There is, as in so much of Mann's work, an autobiographical link to this work. She refers to witnessing her father's death, which she felt he embraced fearlessly. He had had a life-long fascination with the artefacts of death, collecting and placing them around her childhood home. Interested in how different cultures portrayed and presented death, as a doctor, and atheist, he seemed to have a sanguine, pragmatic view of death:

... not for him the euphemisms of death – it was a dead body, not 'remains' nobody 'passed' there was no 'eternal rest.' People died and that was it. ⁹

This suggests that for Mann facing up to death, literally looking death in the face rather than hiding it away, might offer us a way to deal with our own eventual demise. Certainly a photograph of the deceased can offer great consolation and help in the grieving process.

Photography has long depicted the dead. In the Victorian era there are some very moving examples of photographs of recently deceased children, usually dressed in their Sunday best, taken in their homes as mementoes for relatives. Sometimes these children are shown with eyes closed – but other times they are open – and in the throes of rigor mortis. The relationship of photography to the death mask was noted in Alfred Döblin's foreword to August Sander's book *Face of our time* (first published in 1929). Photographs became memento mori and the photographing of the dead had a 'levelling' effect in which, unlike the living portrait, people took on a more uniform and less individually distinct appearance.

The final part of *What Remains* (2000–04) is *Faces* (2004), a series of very large portraits of Mann's three children Jessie, Emmett and Virginia. Printed at 137 _ 97cm these works engulf the viewer. In them Mann closes in on their faces alone looking out to camera, taken with long exposure times. To make them, each child, now of course young adults, had to lie down patiently beneath the camera in a fixed position whilst the photograph was taken.

They are haunting images and have a likeness to death masks. In some, this is particularly acute as their eyes are closed. Yet despite all these parallels with death masks the sitters are clearly and evidently very much alive.

There is a sense of their images being suspended in time and place hovering between one world and the next, trapped in the liquid fixing of the process. This is accentuated by the abstract marks and peelings around the edge, and across the surface, of the prints that take on an abstract and painterly effect. The rigid frame around them seems to constrict them as they move and apparently writhe resulting in blurred effects across the images. They have such a power and inner life to them that their stares, directed to us as viewers, are extremely arresting. They look at us as much as we look at them and the work is imbued with an energy and resonance that is both uplifting and celebratory. We are aware of the two dimensional print surface – yet the punctures recall Lucio Fontana's (1899–1968) famous *Spatial Concept* series in which he slashes through the canvas.

The 'levelling' effect Döblin mentions also seems present in these works. These shots, which are taken over such a prolonged exposure period of the face to the camera seem to hold the least amount of detail. It is much harder to identify the individual children in these images. However something else emerges from this – which is that family and genetic links become more rather than less apparent. The children look more similar to each other – as gender differences blur and each child blends and almost morphs into each other. You can see the family and genetic traits in a way that was not so clear in her earlier works.

Mann's best known works are the earlier portraits of her children in the series *Immediate Family* (1984–94). Even at this early stage of her career, Mann was using an 8 _ 10 inch format view camera and these photographs chronicle the formative years of her three children as they played around her home. They seem to tell a story about childhood – and one that, as the curator Val Williams has mentioned, is like: 'A fairy story with all the fatalism and superstition of ancient lore'.¹⁰ In some senses this relates back to Mann's Southern sensibility. However it is also concerned with how photography records and creates our memories of our past and our childhood. Mann often refers to this series as being about her view of childhood. It records our shared impulse to photograph the treasured moments of our children's early lives. It is through these photographs that we see them grow up in front of our eyes. Photographing our children is in part our attempt to preserve them forever in those halcyon days. Yet it also reflects on how unstable our memories are, as Eric Ormsby's poem *Childhood House* so eloquently describes (an extract from which appears in the book *Still Time: Sally Mann*, Aperture 1994). However much we may wish our early years to stay intact in our memories of them, they will over time fragment and decay.

Historically childhood and children are not an unusual subject for art, but the propensity to make them such a strong and recurrent theme seems to occur more often in the work of women artists than men. Artists like the pioneering Victorian photographers Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–79) and Lady Clementina Hawarden (1822–55) used their own and other people's children as the subjects for their images. An artist whose work seems more related to Mann's is the American Impressionist painter Mary Cassatt (1844–1926).

Cassatt loved using children as subjects in part due to their lack of 'arrière pensée' (a mental reservation; hidden motive). Although she valued their lack of self-awareness, she

did reveal their emerging personalities and characters. It is the spirited nature of her observations that is recalled in Mann's work. Both artists study and observe children undressed. For Cassatt this seems to have been a much less loaded decision than it has been for Mann. There is a big difference between how photographs are read as opposed to paintings. In her paintings, an artist like Cassatt reveals elements of a child's body, but does not necessarily lay bare all the crevices and folds of their flesh. Instead she places a 'filter' over her depictions that is not afforded in the photographic process. As an ubiquitous and modern visual language, photography operates in the wider world in ways that more traditional visual languages do not. This has any number of ramifications when an artist chooses to depict children, the main being the potential for the work to be taken out of context. Unfortunately this has tainted these images with inappropriate associations, which has coloured the way some people see them.

Yet Mann and Cassatt are showing children in a similar way. Neither cast them as ingénues nor as knowing sexualised protagonists. Mann – whose first series *Twelve* looked at adolescence in young girls – declined to photograph her children once they reached adolescence. *Immediate Family* ends when the children move into this complex phase of sexual awareness and tension, which also happens to be a difficult time for parents and children, even in the best of circumstances.

The disarming quality of both these artists' work is the way that they appear so natural and unauthored, encouraging us to forget how carefully constructed the works are. Mann has worked for years with her children so they have become used to her camera and working methods. They are never shown caught unawares or off-guard. They know they are being photographed and are complicit in that process. Mann and her children consider this work as an ongoing collaboration, rather than the more traditional dynamic between model and artist, and of course it is vital that Mann is also their mother. As a body of work this seems to be more about the relationship between the mother and child.

And so, to return to Mann's opening quote, all the work in this exhibition speaks in different ways about time, memory and loss. But it also talks of love. Whether it is her love of her children or of the landscape around her home. Even when she photographs the unknown dead, the work is tender and contemplative, offering anonymous mementoes of lives that have ended. It is also work that is about photography's role, both past and present, to record and preserve our memories. In many ways her children are so lucky to have their mother's photographs of their early years to look back on.

When asked how she would advise younger artists to choose their subjects she suggests they photograph; 'the things that are close to you, [they] are the things that you can photograph the best, and unless you photograph what you love, you are not going to make good art'.¹¹

1. Introduced in 1851, the wet-plate collodion process is a method of making photographic negatives using a glass plate coated with chemicals. The plate is sensitised in a silver nitrate solution and exposed to light while still wet, which gives the photographer about 5 minutes to make the exposure. For more information on the process go to www.collodion.org

2. France Scully Osterman in a demonstration of the wet-plate collodion process at a workshop at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London 18 May 2010
3. *Photography's Antiquarian Avant-garde: The new wave in old processes*, Lyle Rexner, Harry N Abrams inc Publishers, New York 2002 pp 80
4. *What Remains, Sally Mann*, Bulfinch, 2003 book pp6
5. *Deep South: Sally Mann*, Bulfinch Press, Italy, 2009 pp7
6. *What Remains: The life and work of Sally Mann*, Director Steven Cantor, Zeitgeist Films, 2005
7. Ibid 3 pp 80
8. *The Quick and the Dead: Artists and Anatomy*, Deanna Petherbridge and Ludmilla Jordanova, National Touring exhibitions, Hayward Gallery and Arts Council Collection publications The South Bank Centre, London 1997 pp 7–8
9. *What Remains, Sally Mann*, Bulfinch, 2003 book pp5
10. Immediate Family, *Portfolio Magazine*, no. 17 Summer 1993 pp 15
11. Ibid 6