

## Sally Mann

Sally Mann has been quoted as saying, "Art's role... is almost nefarious. It's to challenge expectation. To push a little bit, whether that's aesthetically, politically, or culturally (McQuaid, p.1)."

Sally Mann is an artist who became well-known for the controversial photographs of her three children, Jessie, Emmet, and Virginia. She was born in 1951 in West Virginia and still lives there with her husband today (Price, P.1). Mann's inspiration for her photographs has always come from her surroundings. Whether photographing the majesty of West Virginia or capturing the innocence of her children in film Mann does not seek out interesting subjects, they seem to come to her. Which, is not to say that Mann does not put a significant amount of thought into her art. She captures both spontaneous portraits and orchestrates pre-planned sittings. In fact, Mann often sketches out her ideas for photographs before shooting. This leads viewers to assume that Mann considers the symbolism of her work, adding depth to each image. Mann also prefers to work with antique black and white film cameras because she values the imperfections that are inherent in older photography methods. Each photograph Mann takes has a character and a style that is distinctly Sally Mann.

*Damaged Child* was created in 1984 and was Sally Mann's first portrait of any of her children. Mann was inspired when her daughter came home from a friend's house covered in gnat bites, giving her a swollen face (Woodward, p.3). The portrait was at first spontaneous, but Mann had her daughter pose in the same position the next day. It became an obsession for Mann, when she realized that she had perfect subjects to photograph living in her own house. It was also extremely controversial, because viewers of the piece worried about the girl. Was she abused? Did her mother hit her for the sake of the photograph? It is hard for the public to look at a photograph entitled, *Damaged Child* and not be concerned about abuse, especially when it seems actual child abuse is all too common in our society (Woodward, p.3).

The colorful portrait of Sally Mann's son Emmet is alarming because the boy in the photograph appears to have blood pouring out from his nose and mouth, which then becomes smeared over his chest and drips in blotches on his forearm and hands. The boy's face is cut off at the bottom of his nose so that you can't see his eyes. His mouth is open as if he were in complete disbelief. The picture seems to have been posed simply for the shock value. The blood is, in fact, raspberry juice (Pyle). The notion that Mann would have her son smear raspberry juice over his nose and chest implies that Mann really did want to give people something to complain about. Mann loves to explore the boundaries of what is and what is not acceptable when it comes to portraying children. It seems that all of her work in portraiture was created in order to ask people to debate this idea.

*Squirrel Season* is a black and white photograph of a boy holding some strange mole-like

creatures, which are assumed to be squirrels due to the title. The animals seem stiff and lifeless. The child's facial expression is hard to gauge. Is he disgusted by what he's holding? He could be fascinated. Perhaps he considers the 'squirrels' to be his treasures. It is an interesting contrast for a child to hold corpses. Children relate to death in different ways that adults do, because often the concept is strange to them. The idea captures their imagination but it is likely that the concept is not quite as terrifying because many young children are not aware of their own mortality.

The beauty of *The Last Time Emmet Modeled Nude* lies in smooth lines of the water and defiant stare of the subject at the center of the photograph. The water reflects the surrounding area except where the adolescent boy has blurred his own reflection. The water fails to capture the boy's face, just as Mann fails to capture an image of the boy after this photograph. Hence, its title *The Last Time Emmet Modeled Nude*.

Mann's color photograph of her daughter with raspberries on her fingers is both charming and slightly off putting. The girl is posed in the center of the frame and looks off to the side, she has a raspberry on each of her fingers and holds her berry-laden hand up nonchalantly. In the foreground a hand from another person is structured right underneath the girl. The hand's fingers curl up and are slightly blurred as if they were in motion. The image becomes slightly uncomfortable when thinking of it in relation to the scene in *Lolita* where an older man spies on a young girl eating raspberries off her fingers in front of an open refrigerator and falls in love with her. Mann admits in an interview with the Boston Globe that she has read *Lolita* at least twice<sup>1</sup>. It's hard to believe that Mann could be oblivious to the controversy in her photographs. Perhaps Mann posed her daughter in this manner as a direct response to that scene in *Lolita* in order to incite a strong reaction from the viewer.

*The Wet Bed* is a black and white portrait of Sally Mann's daughter splayed out on a bed, at first it seems to give the viewer a glimpse of a peaceful nap time. Upon closer inspection a large stain (presumably urine) sits adjacent to the little girl. The placement of the stain is interesting because it looks as if the liquid was seeping out of the girl's side. There are many possibilities as to what this could represent. Is Mann reminding the viewer of the child's messy birth? The white, clinical bed looks as if it could easily fit in a maternity ward. The naked child's flailing limbs make her look like an over-sized newborn. Perhaps the girl was posed next to the stain to remind the viewer that she may one day also give birth, liquid and life both seeping from her womb. The photograph frames the small child in the center. She and the bed are a lonely block of white that seems to float in darkness. Has she been abandoned, perhaps as punishment for soiling the sheets? Any adult laying naked on a bed next to a stain of questionable origin would, undoubtedly, be mortified. The beauty of this image is that the child does not seem embarrassed or ashamed. The photograph captures her unblemished innocence.

*Night Blooming Cereus* is a black and white photograph of a child with a flower (a night blooming cereus to be specific) around her neck. The photograph is almost completely symmetrical, the two flowers reflect each other laying on the child's chest, covering her nipples. The child's face is cropped above the mouth, almost as if Mann was protecting the identity of her subject. It is more likely, however, that Mann simply wanted to focus on the beauty in the imperfections of the white petals and the contrast of colors of the skin against the flowers. The child in this photograph seems to form the background of the image and the body becomes more

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<sup>1</sup>McQuaid

of a landscape than a portrait. The small child looks strong in comparison to the flower around her neck, although the plant is large and seems as if it might have been relatively uncomfortable to wear. The plant is a burden to the girl. It restricts her movement and covers her chest exactly where society will force her to cover herself later in life.

*The Ditch* is an extremely interesting photograph. Sally Mann's son, Emmet, lays on his back with his knees folded under him in what looks like a very uncomfortable position. He is positioned in the narrowest part of a ditch and the ditch widens into a pool of water just in front of his knees. He is surrounded by several people, all of whose faces are hidden from the viewer. In fact, the only face that can be seen in its entirety is the little boy's in the background, and even his face is out of focus. It appears that the group was enjoying a swim, because some of the boys are wearing swim trunks and other people in the photograph are wrapped in towels. Emmet is the central figure in the portrait and everyone faces towards him causing the viewer's eye to settle on his body as the focal point. Everyone, except Emmet seem closed off and reserved, but the little boy splays out in the center of everything, clearly he has no qualms about being the center of attention, which is a good quality for any model to have.

*Flour Paste* was taken in 1987 and is a black and white image. The portrait exhibits the legs of Mann's daughter Jessie. The legs are cut off at mid thigh and at the toes, so that the knees and calves are the focal point. The skin looks painfully cracked and severely dry, almost as if the legs were burned. This image is alarming. Why is no one helping this little girl? Anyone looking at the photograph with no background knowledge would not be able to ascertain if the subject were alive or dead. The legs could easily be sticking out of a freezer at the morgue. The white background echoes the ghostly feeling of this portrait.

*Drying Morels* is a charming photograph, because it captures a moment of domestic tranquility. The photograph is not only a portrait of Mann's daughter in the upper left hand corner, but a portrait of the place itself. Mann has said that each photograph of hers reflects the environment. West Virginia is a central character in this photograph. Mann has also said that she only photographs her children in the summer time because the most action occurs during the warmer months. It is an interesting convention of portraiture to place the person slightly out of the center of the picture. Perhaps Mann did this to make the viewer find the subject. To place the girl within the context of her environment gives the child more importance. She is not just a little girl, she is a little girl in West Virginia participating in summertime activities.

Sally Mann's portrait of her daughter *The Alligators Approach* is composed in a way that leads the viewer's eye straight to little girl at its center. The diagonal line of a wooden plank guides the eye away from the left side of the photograph, likewise the tree in the center of the photograph gives importance to the center of the piece. This image is interesting because it combines Mann's love of her home state, West Virginia and her affection for her children. The stillness of the environment around the little girl reminds us that this is only a moment in time captured in film, it is not a complete portrait of the essence of the child. Although, it is a very striking moment in time. The little girl is nude and sits facing the viewer, with her back against a plastic folding chair. Mann's children were often unwilling to be her models. In this image one might wonder whether the girl was complaining about having to sit still. Regardless, the photograph remains a valuable portrait and a chronicle of a brief, yet beautiful time.

*Last Light* is an eerie photograph of a young girl between the legs of what looks to be a middle aged man or woman. The girl's head is tilted by the adult's hand and a strange liquid which looks like it could easily be blood drips from the girl's neck. Many viewers of this piece were outraged, because the liquid looks so much like blood. In reality, the liquid is raspberry

juice. Mann has used raspberry juice more than once in her photographs whether intentional or not, the red liquid insights an emotional reaction from the viewer. Mann may have chosen to pose her daughter in this manner in order to create a response from the viewer. Art that gives the viewer an emotional reaction, seems much more meaningful and its understandable that an artist would try to prompt this sort of interaction with the photograph. The girl in the photograph looks limp and obedient to the adult who looms above her. This portrait conveys the cooperative nature of the Mann children who were not always willing sitters, but were very supportive of Immediate Family's publication. Today, all three children remain supportive of their mother's art and proud of the photographs that feature them as the prominent subjects.

*Jesse at 5* seems to be the quintessential Sally Mann photograph. The photograph is composed with three girls in a straight line, with Jesse at the center. The two girls on either side of Jesse are wearing clothes and seem pushed into the background. Jesse gazes at the viewer, almost defiantly. She is not wearing a shirt and her white skin contrasts the darker scene around her. She looks as if she just turned to face the camera, because her hip is pushed out and only one shoulder faces the viewer directly. The pearl necklace around her neck seems like typical jewelry five year olds love to wear, although it makes her look more mature than her five years. In fact, the combination of the pearl necklace and the rebellious stare give the viewer the impression that this girl is much older than five. The image could be a commentary on the controversy of Mann's work. The girl is topless and posing in a way that might be perceived by some to be morally questionable. The photograph is almost a challenge. It's so beautiful that it's hard to imagine any person could criticize it or call it pornographic.

Mann has few colored photographs, but in the case of the portrait of her daughters playing a card game, color is essential in enhancing the scene. The main focus of the photograph is Mann's daughter, Jesse who stands naked with one hip out, reaching her hand across the table to play with the bright red cards. The girl in the lower right hand corner of the image focuses her attention on Jesse so that the viewer's eye comes to rest on her again and again. The beauty of the girl lays in her own innocence and comfort with her body. She does not make eye contact with the viewer, her pose is one of disinterest. She may not have realized that her portrait was being taken while she was playing. Mann says that her children often walked around the house in the nude, because it came natural to them. Just as Mann would have walked around her home naked when she was a girl growing up in West Virginia. The own artist's childhood is reflected in the way she captures moments in her children's lives.

Sally Mann's photograph *Tobacco Spit* features a man in overalls holding a little girl beside a truck. The contrast of the dark, possibly dirty working class man and the tiny, bright, white girl is apparent. These two people seem to be complete opposites. The comparison between both persons create a dynamic portrait. The man is older, tired, and filthy compared to tiny person in his arms. His sad expression causes the viewer to think that perhaps he feels that the best days of his life are already behind him. The girl stares at the viewer with a blank expression that conveys some surprise at having to stay still. She does not look happy to be held. Her skin is white and ethereal without any of the scars or battle wounds of age. She seems frustrated that this older person is holding her back. Its possible that the old man holds her because he wants to protect her or because he's jealous of her youth. The man could be a symbol for adults everywhere, while the girl represents childhood. As a culture, we celebrate and love children because they remind us of our own fleeting youth. These photographs allow us to hold on to pieces of childhood.

Photography has evolved as a form of portraiture that is more adept at capturing a sitter's

likeness than a painting, but portraiture is not purely about capturing likeness. In Portraiture by Shearer West the author writes. "Portraits are not just likenesses but works of art that engage with ideas of identity as they are perceived, represented, and understood in different times and places (11)." Each photograph of Mann's explores concepts of identity, especially the developing identities of her children within their environment. For this reason, Mann's photograph's can be considered portraits.