

Sally Mann and the Burden of Southern History

ROBERT WESTBROOK

Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs, by Sally Mann,
Back Bay Books.

I've been coming to terms with the history into which I was born, the people within that history, and the land on which I live, since before I could tie my shoes. Even then, I felt shame and some inchoate sense of accountability; the past haunted me from what seemed like the far side of time. Now, in this present, there is an urgent cry rising, one that compels me again and again to try to reconcile my love for this place with its brutal history.

—Sally Mann (2017)

PHOTOGRAPHER Sally Mann's adamant Southern identity and her obsessive concern for Southern history have often been noted, by herself and others. They fully inform the catalogue of her recent major exhibition, *A Thousand Crossings* (2018), which includes essays on these themes by the curator Sarah Greenough, the critic Hilton Als, and the Southern historian Drew Gilpin Faust. What is less evident and unremarked, even in these splendid essays, is the degree to which Mann has not only engaged the tortured Southern past but wrestled with the epistemological and ethical challenges of doing so. Few have reckoned more forthrightly with the difficulties that confront the imagination of historians generally and the white Southern historian in particular. She, more literally than most, would try to reenvision the Southern past.

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“It never occurred to me to leave home to make art,” Mann has said. That home is the South but, above all, Lexington, Virginia—the grave of the Confederacy—in Rockbridge County in the southern Shenandoah Valley. Both Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson—along with their favorite horses—found their final resting spots there. Lee was, after the Civil War, president of Washington and Lee University in the town, and Jackson had been on the antebellum faculty of the nearby Virginia Military Institute. Mann has more or less lived in Lexington since birth. She recounts her family history and the course of her career in remarkable fashion in her memoir *Hold Still* (2015).

Hold Still has won wide acclaim, but, as far as I know, none of its admirers has pointed out what a fine work of historical research and writing it is. By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, it was apparent to those who followed her work that Mann was engaged as a photographer in, among other things, trying to say something profound in her work about the Southern past. Invited to deliver the William E. Massey Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization at Harvard University in 2011, she turned to the story of her own family for inspiration and found there far more than she had bargained for. *Hold Still* builds on her Massey Lectures and merits a place alongside other important meditations on American history that these lectures have engendered.

In looking into her family’s story, Mann found that her stores of memory, particularly of her childhood, were largely empty. Happily, though, she had abundant archives to hand: boxes in her attic filled with documents—letters, journals, diaries, photographs, and more—not only from her own life but from those of her parents and earlier generations stretching back to the mid-nineteenth century. “For the hot half of the year,” she recalls, “I bent into the angle of the attic eave and sifted through this wholly unsuspected, revelatory, and peculiar new past.” Blessed with a family of packrats, Mann could turn from memory to history.

Mann provides a lovely metaphor, one of the loveliest I have encountered, for the historian’s sources:

When an animal, a rabbit, say, beds down in a protecting fence-row, the weight and warmth of his curled body leaves a mirroring mark upon the ground. The grasses often appear to have been woven into a birdlike nest, and perhaps were indeed caught and pulled around by the delicate claws as he turned in a circle before subsiding into rest. This soft bowl in the grasses, this body-formed evidence of hare, has a name, an obsolete but beautiful word: *meuse*. (Enticingly close to Muse, the daughter of Memory, and source of inspiration.) Each of us leaves evidence on the earth that in various ways bears our form.

The *meuses* Mann discovered were not only abundant but remarkable, bringing to light much that she had forgotten and much that she had never known.

Mann puts her evidence on display in *Hold Still*, and the delight that her research often brought her is palpable. It is hard not to share that delight, especially if one has rummaged in disappointment through archives far less revelatory than hers was. The most moving of these documents, I would say, is a page from the daily calendar of the first wife of her maternal grandfather, Arthur Evans. She died at twenty-nine on her birthday in November 1909. On that day, she neatly wrote, "I don't have any more birthdays."

One suspects that without her rich archives Mann would not have ventured a memoir, for she has a profound mistrust of what she calls "the treachery of memory" and a conviction that every recollection alters a memory so that "the exercise of our memory does not bring us closer to the past but draws us farther away." Given her vocation, Mann is perhaps surprisingly hard on the interaction of memory and photography, which she terms "the malignant twin to imperfect memory." Photographs, she says, "would seem to preserve our past and make it invulnerable to the distortions of repeated memorial superimpositions, but I think that is a fallacy: photographs supplant and corrupt the past, all the while creating their own memories."

Seeking truth or at least "something close to it," she turned to history. This is not to say that she does not often regard her sources, as any good historian would, with a critical, sometimes

skeptical, eye—including photographs, which she provides to her readers in abundance. For example, she has but one photograph of her great-great-grandfather Henry Munger, taken in Texas during Reconstruction. It is not flattering; it affords “the face of a sour, squint-eyed man.” But Mann warns against making too much of this one photograph: “I resist the impulse to make assumptions based on a fraction of a second snatched from time, perhaps the same second that a slight gassy sensation troubled his lower bowel.” She then went in search of further evidence and discovered what she needed to form a more rounded and genial picture of the man. But learning later that the photograph was cropped, she uncovers the whole photograph, which shows Munger being pulled in a rickshaw-like contraption by a dour, impassive black man, which, as she says, provides the historian with revealing evidence of racial hierarchy in the postbellum South. “Photographs economize the truth,” Mann observes, “they are always moments more or less illusorily abducted from time’s continuum.” Yet photographs such as that of her great-great-grandfather are the abducted traces without which history cannot be written. The threat of displacement that they may pose to memory has to be coupled with the truth that they may open to history.



Mann (née Munger) was born in 1951 in a hospital that had once been Stonewall Jackson’s home. Her parents numbered among Lexington’s eccentrics. They were atheists, liberals, and fervent lovers of art and literature. “Our family had no wood-sided station wagon, no country club membership, no television, no church, and no colonial house in the new subdivision,” she recalls. “We read the *New York Times* and used the sports pages to line the parakeet’s cage. I think my father came to believe long ago what Rhett Butler told Scarlett: reputation is something people with character can do without.”

Mann’s father, Robert Munger II, who grew up in Dallas, was a Lexington country doctor, called upon to make near-nightly visits to the homes of his patients. His practice when Sally was growing up much resembled that portrayed in W. Eugene Smith’s celebrated

Life magazine photo essay on “The Country Doctor,” published in 1948 (“that same look of haunted exhaustion,” Mann says). He was devoted to his patients, but his greatest passion was for art. He was an “outwardly calm, respectable medical doctor with the questing soul of an artist.” Born in 1911 and well-educated by his wealthy Texas parents, Munger graduated from Washington and Lee and then Tulane Medical School. But at the same time, he was developing deep and abiding aesthetic interests, cultivated especially by trips to Europe and beyond in the 1930s, where he developed a near-insatiable appetite for museums, libraries, architecture, music, photography, and more quotidian cultural forms. Torn between science and art, Munger chose a career in science, though he devoted considerable energy to an aesthetic avocation. He cultivated a large and impressive garden filled with exotic trees and shrubs from around the world and made whimsical, often outrageous, sculptures. Perhaps most notable among the latter was a block of cedar that he chiseled into a male torso with three branching penises. This he put in a corner of his garden where it would catch the eye of genteel ladies on a garden tour. He called it *Portnoy’s Triple Complaint*. As a father, Munger “terrified the living bejesus out of his children by his intelligence, his remoteness, and his magnetic righteousness.” Suffering from malignant cancer, he died in 1988 after taking an overdose of Seconal.

Mann uncovered a great deal in her attic archive about her father’s family, particularly her great grandfather, the first Robert Munger. He was, she learns, a little-known but nonetheless significant figure in Southern history. He was born in 1854 in a small Texas town west of Houston. His father was a farmer and also operated a local sawmill and cotton gin. An exceptionally hard-working and determined young man, he studied briefly at Trinity University in Tehuacana, Texas, but when he was twenty, his father called him home to assist with the family business. Assigned management of the cotton gin, he proved not only skilled but also inventive. He learned the ginning process from the ground up alongside his employees, many of them black, and quickly came to appreciate firsthand the debilitating effects of cotton dust in the factory. In 1878, he began to develop new machinery for

closed, mechanical ginning that would minimize such hazardous exposure. His invention, which made cotton production more profitable as well as more humane, was a huge success, one that revolutionized the industry and made him a very rich man. He built a factory in Dallas to manufacture the machinery, and then established a new headquarters in Birmingham, where he lived with his wife and four sons. He devoted much of the late years of his life to philanthropy (and an obsession with another recent invention, the automobile), and he distributed his largesse across the color line, winning the affection of white and black Alabamans alike. At his death in 1923, the *Birmingham News* dubbed him “one of the greatest philanthropists the South has ever produced.”

His grandson, Robert II, met his wife, Elizabeth Evans, in 1939 in Boston, where he was a medical resident and she was a lab technician at Massachusetts General Hospital. Mann’s mother’s family, she discovered, had numerous skeletons in its closet. Her grandfather, Arthur Evans, was a Welsh immigrant who, after the death of his first wife in 1909, met and married Jessie Adams, Mann’s grandmother, in Boston. A verified descendant of a passenger on the *Mayflower*, Jessie was a latter-day member of one of the more dissolute outcroppings of the Massachusetts Adams dynasty. Combing through the boxes of documents she inherited from her mother, Mann learned that her grandmother was a practitioner of “open marriage” *avant la lettre*. Banishing her husband to an attic bedroom, she had a fifteen-year sexual relationship with a wealthy neighbor, Henry Minot Gage. Gage largely supported the family even after he and Jessie broke up (he quickly found a successor), allowing them to live in otherwise inaccessible comfort. Mann attributes her mother’s emotional detachment to Elizabeth’s discovery of the affair at age sixteen, at which point her mother “stepped back,” as Elizabeth wrote in her journal, and “built up a shield” against passion.

Elizabeth Munger was no less out of place in Lexington than her husband was. She shared the *New York Times* with him, and she could often be found in her chair with a cigarette and a copy of the latest issue of the *Atlantic*. Rebuffed by penny-pinching local

officials, she raised funds for a regional library and bookmobile. She also ran the bookstore at Washington and Lee for years, and brought in writers such as Truman Capote, Howard Nemerov, Betty Friedan, Tom Wolfe, and James Dickey. Another local oddball, the artist Cy Twombly, was a family friend.

Born to two emotionally remote parents, Sally Munger was by all accounts a difficult and demanding (“near-feral”) child. She rarely wore clothing before the age of five, and was given, as her mother’s journal reports, to bouts of “towering rage.” Her distant and exasperated mother left her upbringing largely in the hands of the family’s black servant, Virginia Carter (dubbed “Gee-Gee” by one of Mann’s two older brothers). Her first love before her adolescence was horses (an abiding affection). With puberty, her thoughts turned to cars and boys. As she sums up the key elements of her teenage years: “bleached hair and blue eye shadow, tight pants with what little tatas I had pushing up out of my tank top above them, the many boyfriends, the precocious sexual behavior, the high school intrigues, the vulgar, sassy mouth, the very deliberate anti-intellectualism and provocation.”

But Sally was a good student; good enough to win admission at sixteen to Putney School in Vermont, where her two brothers had preceded her, and where her parents deposited her with relief. There she began to blossom into a talented artist, first as a writer and then as a photographer, taking her first pictures with an old Leica III camera her father gave her. She then remained in Vermont at Bennington College. Back from school as a freshman at Christmas in 1969, Sally met Larry Mann at the home of one of her boyfriends. Mann had a few months before impressed her father while helping him and the boyfriend clean up damage after a hurricane. Sally was no less impressed. The two were married six months later.

Larry Mann hailed from New Canaan, Connecticut, the affluent New York City exurb. His father was a doctor and his mother an abusive, status-anxious socialite. She beat young Larry and stabbed his forearm with a fork if he made the ghastly error in etiquette of placing his elbows on the dinner table. On 21 July 1977, his mother murdered his father in bed with a shotgun and then turned the

weapon on herself. Sally Mann's research suggests that he had cheated on his wife. And they both were guilty of running a substantial prescription-drug ring that provided them with the wherewithal to keep pace with their wealthier neighbors.

Sally and Larry Mann returned to Rockbridge County for good in the summer of 1973. They bought a cheap, trash-strewn piece of land on the wrong side of Lexington, and built a house upon it. She finished her undergraduate degree at Hollins College in 1974 and earned a Masters in creative writing there a year later. Larry worked as a blacksmith and then passed the Virginia bar and set up a local law firm. Sally took a job as a photographer for Washington and Lee University, and continued to develop her talent with the camera. By 1985 the couple had three children: Emmett, Jessie, and Virginia.

In 1960, Mann's father bought from a local veterinarian a 365-acre farm surrounded by the Maury River, which was near Lexington and named for another Confederate notable. Although he left the farming to tenants, Dr. Munger began building a cabin for his family in 1961 on the oxbow of the river. Sally "loved the farm from the day we got it," and it quickly assumed a central place in her identity. Her feelings for the place, she says, "were of the most vital, the sine qua non, the fight to the death, the lie down in front of the bulldozers, forgo all food and water, but never, ever lose the farm variety." Her father willed the farm to his three children, and after an apparently fierce struggle about which Mann is uncharacteristically vague, she and Larry purchased her brothers' shares in 1998. There they built a new home and her studio.

In 1985 Mann began taking pictures with a large view camera of her three children at the cabin on the Maury. In 1992 she published these extraordinary images in *Immediate Family*. This book propelled her into the spotlight of widespread recognition, appreciation, and sometimes controversy. In 2001 *Time* magazine named her "America's greatest photographer." I think she herself would dismiss the hyperbole in the title. But she is certainly among the finest ever.



Mann has been described, not always favorably, as aspiring to be “Faulkner with a lens,” and it was William Faulkner who provided her “awakening” to the burdens of Southern history. At Putney School, one of her teachers, a black man named Jeff Campbell, “placed *Absalom, Absalom* like a sacerdotal biscuit in my palm.” She says she never quite saw the world in the same way again. “Faulkner threw wide the door of my ignorant childhood, and the future, the heartbroken future filled with the hitherto unasked questions, strolled easefully in. It wounded me, then and there, with the great sadness and tragedy of our American life, with the truth of all that I had not seen, had not known, and had not asked.”

As the literary scholar Peter Conn has observed, “Faulkner’s gallery of idiots, con men, rapists, suicides, arsonists, and twisted souls, etched the lineaments of Southern identity in the acid of deviance, incest, violence, and death.” Not least in *Absalom, Absalom*. But this novel, a great work of American historical fiction (arguably the greatest), also stands out as Faulkner’s most telling meditation on the extraordinary challenges, including the treachery of memory, that face the historical imagination in trying to fashion a true story about the past. Although she does not explicitly say so, it seems likely it was Faulkner who set Mann on a course of grappling with these challenges facing historians in her own work.

Faulkner’s South was certainly on Mann’s mind as she headed south from Lexington and into Georgia, Mississippi, and Louisiana in 1998 to photograph the landscape of the Deep South. But so too was a profound affection for the regional landscape that had also first seized her imagination as she pined for Lexington amid Vermont winters at Putney. She then “wrote heartbroken love poems to the farm” with lines such as this: “With this sky, this soil, these seasons, /With the Southlands, I was born /and with them, I grew, and now I return to them /and to the past which composes them.” In sum, Mann was, and is, a deeply ambivalent Southerner. The Southern landscape she hoped to capture in 1998 was a place of “contradictions and juxtapositions,” reflected in nature and culture alike:

The gracious splendor of its lost world founded on a monstrous crime and the often retrograde, repellent politics of its modern one elucidated in an accent and vernacular that are lyrical like no other. A culture in which a spritely little blue-hair, while ringing the foot bell under the dining room rug for minted sweet tea to be served, can say, twinkling with pleasure at the memory, "Oh how I miss Jasper. I got that nigger from the warden at Parchman and kept him 'til he died." And this in a honeyed and melodious accent that for a moment sugarcoats the hateful words.

By 1998 the character of Mann's photographic practice had shifted dramatically. She had, since the publication of *Immediate Family* and its crystalline prints from film negatives, been experimenting with wet-plate collodion photography and a different set of expressive possibilities. Collodion had been the dominant technique of American photographers between the early 1850s and about 1880, but most of them had long discarded it. Mann had first been alerted to the persistent virtues of collodion in 1973 when she discovered in an attic at Washington and Lee a trove of glass-plate negatives made by Michael Miley, a returning Civil War veteran, in the late 1860s. Best known for his photographs of Robert E. Lee in retirement, Miley had also taken many pictures of the local landscape, including the farm that Robert Munger had bought. It was these landscapes that most impressed Mann. Then in 1997, visiting the home of two of her daughter Jessie's teachers, Mark and France Osterman, at the George School in Newtown, Pennsylvania, she was stunned by one of France's photographs printed from a collodion negative. "Oh fuck!" she reportedly exclaimed. "That's what I want to do!"

Collodion photographs are very difficult to make, but with the resolute work ethic inherited from her great-grandfather Munger, Mann set about learning to do so. The process involves a number of steps, some of them quite testing. First, the photographer cleans a sheet of glass (Mann prefers working with large 8 × 10 or 13.5 × 15 plates, which makes the task all the more demanding). Then she pours a solution of collodion and potassium bromide onto the glass plate and allows it to flow to every corner before draining away the

excess. Collodion is a sticky, adhesive, quick-drying substance that doctors and medics sometimes used to bind wounds in the nineteenth century. The coated plate then goes into a solution of silver nitrate in the darkroom, which makes it light sensitive. The sensitized plate is placed into a specially designed film holder and installed in a large view camera after the photographer has set up the shot she wants. The film is then exposed (Mann sometimes does not use a shutter on her camera, but simply exposes the plate by placing it in the camera and then ends the exposure by covering the lens with a dark cloth). The exposed plate is then taken to the darkroom where it is developed. The developing solution has to be flowed across the plate much as the collodion was. Development stops when the photographer pours water onto the plate. She next applies a “fixer” solution and then washes it off with water. The plate is then dried and varnished to protect the image. The plate can be printed on a number of types of photographic paper; Mann prefers silver gelatin prints.

Looking at Mann’s collodion photographs, including the most recent, one might think that she still has a long way to go before she masters the process. As the scholar and curator of photography Malcolm Daniel says, her negatives are “so flawed that any self-respecting nineteenth-century photographer would have wiped the glass clean and started over.” And they seem to get worse the more pictures she takes. But this apparent failure to master her art is only apparent. Mann is fully capable of making a clear, beautifully exact collodion print up to the standards of Miley and her nineteenth-century predecessors. But she does not want to do that. What Mann is after is not clarity but expressive effect, and much of that, she argues, is to be found in the accidents and the “flaws”—ragged edges, dust motes, sun flares, fogging, streaks, drips, and blurs.

It is this expressive power that Mann believed made collodion photography the perfect medium for the pictures she wanted to make of the Deep South. She had, she says, two ambitions for these photographs. First, to capture the distinctive beauty of the Southern natural environment, and second, to reveal the often ugly impress of Southern history on that landscape. In the first instance, it was particularly the



Fig. 1. Sally Mann, *Untitled (Swamp Bones)*, 1998.
Tea-toned gelatin silver print (40 × 50 inches). © Sally Mann.
Courtesy Gagosian.

special qualities of Southern light and air that she hoped to convey, for which she believed collodion plates could serve her well. “Profligate physical beauty is easy to find in the South, but what gins up the ecstasy is the right light, the resonant, beating heart of that light, unique to the South. The landscape appears to soften before your eyes and becomes seductively vague, as if inadequately summoned up by some shiftless creator neglectful of the details” (fig.1). And in the latter instance it was above all the marks of centuries of racial injustice that she sought out. “The pictures I wanted to take were about the rivers of blood, of tears, and of sweat that Africans poured into the dark soil of their thankless new home.” She wanted, that is, to give full rein to her ambivalence about her homeland. She wanted to get at “what it is

that makes [the South] at once so alluring and so repellent, like fruit on the verge of decay."

The "alluring" side of the project dominated it. Most of its photographs are dream-like visitations, "silver poems of tone and undertow" that do effectively capture Southern light and air and reflect Mann's passionate emotional attachment to the landscape. She admitted to a "susceptibility to myth, the love of this light which is all our own, and the readiness to experiment with dosages of romance that would be fatal to most twentieth-century artists." They are celebrations: "pictures so warm and ingratiatingly likeable, so unwearied by alienation, so lacking in the chilly elegance that frosted over art at the time, that I was certain that I'd be pilloried for them."

And by a few critics she was. *New Yorker* critic Hilton Als was particularly unsparing. It was he who labeled Mann a wannabe Faulkner, while at the same time wishing she had something of Flannery O'Connor's ironic, "pitiless" view of the South. Instead, he argued, Mann had capitulated to the "Southern gothic mode" and an obsession with "the South's picture-postcard 'terrible beauty.'" An admirer of Mann's earlier work, a disappointed Als longed "for her to remove just a little of the emotion from her picture-taking process, so that we can look at the South without tears or dogwood obscuring our view."

There is much to be said for this criticism. It bites particularly in the case of the photographs Mann made of the ruins of the Windsor mansion along the Mississippi (fig. 2). These twenty-three Corinthian columns are all that remains of what was once the largest Greek Revival mansion in Mississippi, the Big House on a twenty-six-hundred-acre cotton plantation built by slave labor between 1859 and 1861 (and destroyed in a fire in 1890). These ruins cast in the dusky light of Mann's collodion prints give off *Lost Cause*, *Gone with the Wind* vibrations that are far from pitiless.

Yet one must take account of the outlier in the *Deep South* series, which Als did not. This is a picture Mann took at the site on the bank of the Tallahatchie River where the body of Emmett Till was pulled ashore on 31 August 1955 (fig. 3). Till, a fourteen-year-old black boy from Chicago visiting relatives in the Mississippi Delta, had been



Fig. 2. Sally Mann, *Untitled (Valentine Windsor)*, 1998.
Tea-toned gelatin silver print (40 × 50 inches). © Sally Mann.
Courtesy Gagosian.

kidnapped, tortured, and murdered three days earlier by J. W. “Big” Milam and his half-brother Roy Bryant after Till allegedly insulted and whistled at Bryant’s young wife, Carolyn Bryant, at Bryant’s store in Money, Mississippi. Till was found floating in the river by a young fisherman, and law enforcement officials recovered his battered body and brought it ashore. He had a heavy cotton-gin fan tied around his neck with barbed wire, apparently an attempt to consign the body to the river bottom for good.

Till’s brutal murder, successfully brought to public attention by his mother and her Chicago allies, and the subsequent acquittal of Milam and Bryant by an all-white Mississippi jury were galvanizing events in the midfifties for the African American civil rights



Fig. 3. Sally Mann, *Untitled (Emmett Till Riverbank)*, 1998.
Tea-toned gelatin silver print (40 × 50 inches). © Sally Mann.
Courtesy Gagosian.

movement. Mann was well aware of the story and its significance, and she followed the trail of Till's ordeal. The photograph that Mann took on the Tallahatchie riverbank is unlike any other in the *Deep South* series, distinctive in its ugliness. The site itself was unremarkable, she recalls, little more than "unalluring scrub." And she worked to make it all the more unalluring, to try to convey something of the horror of the history that had transpired in this unexceptional place. Mann placed her camera directly before the spot where Till was brought ashore, focusing on the recessed ditch where the boat was beached. Abandoning the conventions of good photographic practice she shot directly into the sun, and as a consequence the light flooding onto the plate obscured any detail of the far shore, the river, or the brush

surrounding the focal gash. The gash itself darkens at the center, appearing to be one of those blood-sipping plots of ground that Mann would later memorialize in her Civil War battlefield photographs. The ditch is filled with swollen eruptions that recall the gruesomely battered head of Emmett Till observers saw at the open-casket funeral that his mother insisted upon so the world could see what his killers had done to him.

One can find other photographs of this site, taken with twenty-first century equipment, and comparing them with Mann's picture, one appreciates all the more the artistry with which in this one instance she did capture the blood that African Americans "poured into the dark soil of their thankless new home." This blood, of course, continues to flow, and, as the bullet-ridden marker at the Till site suggests, it is not likely to stop flowing any time soon.



We historians are morticians of a sort. We are, for the most part, in the business of coming to terms with the remains of the dead, as Mann does so capably in *Hold Still*. Though we do not much overtly think about it, death shadows all of our work.

Mann has overtly thought about it; some might say she has obsessed over it. "It's not that we southerners are exactly in love with death," she says, "but there is no question that, given our history, we're on a first-name basis with it. And such familiarity often lends southern art a tinge of sorrow, of finitude and mourning." She also attributes her absorbing concern with death to her father, and she makes a good case for the inheritance.

Another of Robert Munger's avocations during his years as a doctor was a massive scholarly study of the iconography of death across centuries of time and cultural space. After he died, his daughter worked through two large boxes of material he had collected and analyzed, including correspondence with museums, galleries, and libraries around the world and more than 450 representations of death. "Some of our best modern works of art," he wrote in 1950, "are those

in which world- or self-dissolution is present.” But, as he saw it, his research was in the service of life and a “will to endure.”

Surrounded by the various memento mori with which her father decorated their home, Sally inherited his “pedal-to-the-metal, obsessive, death-inflected art-passion.” She made this evident in a death-bed scene she drew at age six (her father is the deceased, she the mourner gripped by “misery, disbelief, and horror”), as well as in some of her most striking work collected in a 2004 exhibition, *What Remains*, at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington. She began this work in 1999 with a series of pictures of the bones of one of the family’s beloved greyhounds, Eva. There followed the horrifyingly beautiful photographs of corpses at the “Body Farm” of the University of Tennessee Forensic Anthropology Center in Knoxville made on assignment for the *New York Times Magazine*.

Out of these encounters with death, Mann has forged a sort of dust-to-dust naturalism. “When the land subsumes the dead,” she says, “they become the rich body of earth, the dark matter of creation . . . Death is the sculptor of the ravishing landscape, the terrible mother, the damp creator of life, by whom we are one day devoured.” Lived life flees the body, which is reabsorbed into the land, which then generates new life. What then remains of a lived human life after a body no longer contains it, after it has been reduced to oozing goo or less, like those on the Body Farm? Ezra Pound, Mann suggests, had the most persuasive answer:

What thou lovest well remains,
the rest is dross
What thou lov’st well shall not be reft from thee
What thou lov’st well is thy true heritage

Troubled by dreams of her father’s death while she was in Mexico in 1969, Mann wrote in her journal that his death “must assume the form of the lands, the lives, and of the ideas that he has loved. His death must become an integral part of my father and, thus, my past & future & self.” Death, as he had said, may be put in service of enduring life.



Of the Civil War, Walt Whitman said, “The real war will never get in the books.” Yet coming close to putting it there has long been an ambition of many American historians, despite Whitman’s well-worn warning. Mann joined the effort in 2001, forging a series of photographs of Civil War battlefields that constitute one of her most forthright efforts to put her camera in history’s service. Here again the mark of death on the landscape was on her mind.

And one death in particular. In early December 2000, an escaped nineteen-year-old convict, David Sensabaugh, found his way onto the Mann’s farm. Outside the window of her studio Mann witnessed the police pursuit. The man, armed with a pistol and facing capture, took his own life. After the scene cleared, Mann walked over to the place where he had died:

A dark pool of blood glistened on the frozen soil. I was tempted to touch its perfectly tensioned surface. Instead, as I stared, it shrank perceptibly, forming a brief meniscus before leveling off again, as if the earth had taken a delicate sip.

The landscape, as Mann saw it then, not only devoured the dead but was in the process itself transformed. “Death-inflected soil” was never the same once it had absorbed the dead.

In thinking as much, Mann was one with Whitman, who had made the same assertion about the bloody battlefields of the Civil War in “Pensive on Her Dead Gazing.” In his poem, Whitman has “the Mother of All” meditatively gazing on dead soldiers, Northern and Southern, and calling to the earth, streams, mountains, and woods to “absorb them well,” losing “not an atom.” She asks them to hold the dead “in trust for me faithfully” and then to give them back to her “many a year hence/In unseen essence and odor of surface and grass, centuries hence.” The Civil War dead, once on the land, are now in and of the land. Their bodies remain after all, transfigured. They are, as Mann puts it, “now the dark matter of death’s creation.”

If unseen and transfigured, could the “numinous presence of death” at Manassas, Antietam, and Cold Harbor that Whitman and

Mann alike sensed still somehow be registered on a photographic plate? Could the lost souls of the nation's bitterest conflict be recalled by art; can "their dumb demands for remembrance" be met? How might one do that? These were the questions that Mann took with her to the battlefields. The latter two questions, I would submit, are ones she shares with a legion of historians, though unlike most of them she attempted to address them by figuring out an answer to the first query.

Like millions of Americans I have walked the same battlefields that Mann photographed. Around the same time she was camping out at Antietam, my son Charlie and I looked across the bucolic vista that meets observers at the National Park Service Visitors Center there. Like many, I suppose, we struggled to pair that landscape with the horrors we knew to have happened there on 17 September 1862. The Park Service guides who work at these battlefields are generally remarkable storytellers, and they do their best to exercise one of the essential features of the historian's art and place a vivid image in the mind's eye of visitors. But it is a tough job. We know that the East and West Woods, the Cornfield, Bloody Lane, and Burnside's Bridge are landscapes that absorbed gallons of blood. But describing this carnage has tested the mettle of contemporary observers and historians alike.

The fighting at Antietam marked the bloodiest single day for American soldiers in the nation's history. A conservative estimate of the casualties—dead, wounded, and missing—in twelve hours of fighting there is 22,719. This includes roughly a quarter of the Union troops and 31 percent of the Confederate forces who saw action on the battlefield.

Limning this slaughter has called upon the talents of a host of fine historians. The traces of the battle upon which they have drawn for evidence include military reports, letters from soldiers, memoirs, and accounts of newspaper reporters embedded with the troops (as we would now say). And, for the first time in American military history, photographs.

We have no photographs of the battle as it was waged, but in the immediate aftermath Alexander Gardner and other associates of Mathew Brady's enterprise took pictures that shook Northern



Fig. 4. Sally Mann, *Cold Harbor (Battle)*, 2003.
Gelatin silver print, varnished (40 × 50 inches). © Sally Mann.
Courtesy Gagosian.

sensibilities at the time, and continue to shake us. We rely on them heavily to construe the death, if not the dying, that took place on this beautiful terrain in western Maryland.

Gardner and other Civil War photographers made their pictures on wet collodion plates, using large view cameras. Because collodion negatives have to be developed before the collodion dries, they arrived at the battlefields in wagons outfitted as portable darkrooms. These conditions prevailed no less for Mann. Hence she fashioned her Suburban SUV into a rolling darkroom, filled with volatile, potentially explosive chemicals. She also equipped her camera with antique uncoated lenses. As Faust nicely puts it, “she literally sees her subject through a nineteenth-century lens, the closest she can get to nineteenth-century eyes.”

In one instance, she set up her camera in the woods of Cold Harbor, a horrific June 1864 battle that marked the worst Union defeat of the war (“it was not war but it was murder,” one Southern general remarked) and Robert E. Lee’s last victory. Mann took a photograph in which, by way of opportune flaws, it appears her camera has found itself in the middle of a barrage of bullets such as those that met Northern troops when they launched one futile frontal attack after another on heavily defended Confederate fortifications (fig. 4). Not for the only time, her photograph helps us visualize a scene described by historians from the accounts of survivors. This image, for example, might have captured the scene lying between a Union charge and the trenches of Alabama troops in a northern salient of the battlefield described by the historian Ernest Furgurson. Here an assault

aimed at the Fourth Alabama broke against what [Colonel William Oates] called “the most destructive fire I ever saw.” The Alabamians threw up a wall of seemingly automatic fire—as fast as they emptied their single-shooters, they passed them back to [Captain Council Bryan’s] Georgians, who reloaded and handed them forward. Oates said, “I could see the dust fog out of a man’s clothing in two or three places at once where as many balls would strike him at the same moment. In two minutes not a man of them was standing. All who were not shot down had lain down for protection.”

Mann’s Antietam photographs are particularly remarkable. Two of them capture the battlefield first at sunset and then at nightfall (figs. 5 and 6). At the end of the day’s awful proceedings, as the historian Stephen Sears tells it, “the sun, a great blood-red disk in the smoky late-afternoon light, went down at last and the light faded and the bloodiest day of the Civil War—indeed of all American history—was finally done.” In Mann’s photograph, an ominous *black* sun sets in smoky late-afternoon light on the horizon in front of a fence line. The sky seems to boil with the evaporating heat of the day’s battle (to the point of burning the upper left edge of the negative). The field before the fence darkens steadily as it approaches the fence, along which most of the bodies probably lay. Mann knew her medium



Fig. 5. Sally Mann, *Antietam (Black Sun)*, 2001.
Gelatin silver print, varnished (40 × 50 inches). © Sally Mann.
Courtesy Gagosian.

well. Collodion plates are not panchromatic. They are highly sensitive to blue, violet, and ultraviolet, while green, yellow, orange, and red barely register at all and end up reading black. The sun setting on Antietam in her photograph was bound to be a black one.

Starry Night captures the battlefield a short time later, after the black sun has set. Mann's caption for this photograph suggests she is invoking a comparison with Jean-François Millet's *Starry Night*. But many of the supposed "stars" here, unlike those in Millet's painting, lie below the horizon. They might better be seen as sparks drifting upward from a campfire at the bottom of the frame or even blowing embers of a field overheated by cannon and musket fire. Or perhaps as the souls of the dead rising to their reward. In any case, the



Fig. 6. Sally Mann, *Antietam (Starry Night)*, 2001.
Gelatin silver print, varnished (40 × 50 inches). © Sally Mann.
Courtesy Gagosian.

photograph effectively imagines the somber aftermath of a bloody day. Again a strikingly similar picture from Sears: “the field did not remain silent. The din of armies at battle was replaced by the sound of armies of wounded, a mournful and unceasing dirge of pain. Within the opposing lines lanterns winked and bobbed like bright fireflies in the woodlots and fields as medical orderlies and stretcher-bearers searched for the injured.”

But I think for historians the most extraordinary of Mann’s Civil War photographs is that of the notorious Cornfield on the north end of the Antietam battlefield (fig. 7). Here is where the battle began in the early morning hours. Situated between two woodlots to its west (occupied by Confederate troops) and east (occupied by Union troops), the



Fig. 7. Sally Mann, *Antietam (Cornfield)*, 2001.
Gelatin silver print, varnished (40 × 50 inches). © Sally Mann.
Courtesy Gagosian.

cornfield on the Miller farm was the site of some of the most devastating fighting of the battle. Waves of Southern and Northern soldiers waded into the corn in alternating assaults, and bodies piled up steadily throughout the morning.

In Mann's photograph, the corn is clear on the left edge of the picture, but then it dissolves into a cloud of obliterating emulsion. Taking the shot from a low angle amid apparently broken cornstalks, Mann puts the viewer in the position of a dying or wounded soldier on the ground gazing into the hellish clouds of smoke created by cannon and musket fire—"the final vision for their closing eyes." The picture manages with uncanny accuracy to resonate with descriptions of fighting in the Cornfield offered by survivors and historians alike. Major

Rufus Dawes of the Sixth Wisconsin Infantry later recalled that as his outfit moved into the field, “the bullets began to clip through the corn, and spin through the soft furrows—thick, almost, as hail.” The historian Sears, drawing on eyewitness accounts, says the Cornfield was soon reduced to a “seething, smoking caldron” in which battle smoke was “so thick that hardly anything could be seen but waving flags.” In a matter of a few hours, “Bodies were in heaps amid the broken cornstalks near the turnpike; dead men were draped over the high post-and-rail fences, killed in the act of climbing in pursuit or retreat. . . . thousands of wounded lay helpless, still under fire and beyond immediate help.” General Joseph Hooker, who led Union troops into the firestorm, remarked of the Cornfield that “it was never my fortune to witness a more bloody, dismal battlefield.”

A soldier from Pennsylvania wrote in his diary after finding himself among the minority that survived the fighting in the Cornfield that “No tongue can tell, no mind conceive, no pen portray the horrible sights I witnessed this morning.” Yet we have to try. And Mann has given us an indelible impression.

Unlike Major Dawes, historians cannot witness the death and destruction in the Cornfield. We can only try to portray such horrible sights by relying on traces they left behind. And these traces are not themselves unmediated. We cannot see the Cornfield through Dawes’s eyes on the morning of 17 September 1862; we have to make do with the account of his experience that he fashioned into words in 1890. The diary of the Pennsylvania soldier is more immediate to his experience, less subject perhaps to the vagaries of memory, but even it is not the unmediated experience that the diarist had and about which he then wrote. A dead body might be said to be a relatively unmediated trace of Antietam, I suppose, but an Alexander Gardner photograph of that body is not.

Mann had no dead bodies to photograph when she visited Antietam in 2001. Yet she claims to have “found the physical remains of the war immediately perceptible,” and many of those of us who have walked these battlefields know what she means. But even if we credit such traces, they are now thoroughly mediated, absorbed into

the landscape and inaccessible to the camera. Her photographs of these battlefields are then doubly mediated, a “secondary source” as historians would say, no less than Sears’s books and those of other Civil War historians. And Mann as much as any photographer makes this constructed character of her pictures clear. She plays with the edges of her negatives and prints, as if to say, “Lest you have any doubt, this is a *photograph* that *I* have made to look like this.” They are not pieces of a past reality but a story about that reality undergirded by the evidence before her and propelled by her imagination.

Nonetheless, the manner Mann used so successfully to capture the horrific landscape of carnage at Antietam and elsewhere is more than a little spooky—especially given the role of serendipity in fashioning the accidents and flaws that often give the photographs their force. She has spoken lightly of the “angel of uncertainty” to whom she prays and who seems to visit the plates in her camera, and one wonders whether Whitman’s Mother of All might have had a hand in her pictures. Perhaps so.

Yet it must be said that however much luck (or special providence) Mann has enjoyed, her photographs are very much the product of her own skilled practice. The “indexical” elements of a photograph, the way it bears the impress of external reality as a feature of its making, should not mislead us into thinking that such indexical qualities are all there is to it or, in Mann’s case, much at all of what there is to it. Photographs are artifice, and Mann’s photographs call full attention to their artful qualities. This includes all the established elements of the photographer’s art: framing, angle of vision, exposure time, properties of the equipment one chooses to use, methods of developing the negative and printing from it, and the choice one makes of which prints to put on a gallery wall or in a book. It is true that there are in addition more adventitious elements in Mann’s photographs than most photographers would allow. But she has admitted that some apparent “flaws” are of her own intentional making, and, more important, the effects that are uncertain happen in large part because she does all she can to make her negatives available to them.

Serendipity is no stranger to literary art, including that of historians. As we try to describe, interpret, or explain the past that our sources suggest to us, we often reach for figurative language, and when we hit upon a telling metaphor or simile for an event such as the Cornfield slaughter—Sears’s “seething, smoking cauldron” or Richard Slotkin’s “meat grinder”—we are often hard pressed to say how it occurred to us. Such welcome language seems to arrive unbidden, a gift akin to the rippling emulsion on Mann’s negative—one for which we, like she, have prayed.

If figurative language is crucial to history as literary art, abstraction is pivotal to Mann’s history as photographic art. That is, her collodion photographs are self-conscious abstractions, and abstraction is her means of historical argument and interpretation. Her pictures reshape the natural world, including other human beings, for expressive purposes. It is the abstraction in *Antietam (Cornfield)* and *Emmett Till Riverbank* that imparts horror to the scenes. Abstraction is the way Mann “talks” about the past in her pictures and asserts her presence as a historian of sorts. By way of abstraction, Mann signals her modernist convictions, yet she is no formalist. Her pictures are powerful reenvisionings of concrete, particular places and people—sometimes barely recognizable but helpfully identified by their labels. She thoroughly disrupts the indexical elements of her photographs, but does so in the interest of conveying her judgments about the events that have happened, often long ago, in places that she at once loves and dreads.



The Southern history that Mann has experienced firsthand is the struggle for African American freedom since the end of World War II and the bitter white Southern opposition to it. Her parents were Southern liberals, that is, proponents of incremental, legal racial reform. Her mother founded a Lexington chapter of the League of Women Voters and waged a petition campaign against the poll tax in 1963. But the principal means by which the family resisted massive

resistance to African American equality was simply a full measure of decency in its relationships with local black men and women. One black woman told Sally that “You can’t know what it’s like being colored. But I want you to know something about Dr. Munger. He always treated us like we were no different from white people. He didn’t ever see color.”

In *Hold Still*, Mann reflects on her experiences with racial difference and discrimination in the fifties and sixties. Proud of her parents at the time for their liberalism, she now takes a much more ambivalent attitude toward it. But above all she painfully recounts her own blindnesses.

Mann’s reflections center naturally on the black woman with whom the family, and she in particular, had the closest relationship, their servant Gee-Gee. Virginia Carter was already in her late fifties when she took charge of newborn Sally. She was the granddaughter of a former slave, whose mother was raped at a young age, presumably by a white man. Her mother probably died in childbirth and she was raised by her mother’s sister. In her late teens she married Wesley Carter and bore him six children. Carter was an alcoholic, and he fell down the basement stairs one night and broke his neck. Left with six children and a public school system that would not permit them to attend classes after the seventh grade, Gee-Gee managed to send each of them to boarding schools in other states and eventually to college. She did so by working twelve hours a day for the Mungers and then returning home to iron linens for others.

Gee-Gee was hired shortly after the Mungers arrived in Lexington in the early forties. Transgressing local norms, Elizabeth Munger paid Carter more than the going wage, and in other respects the Mungers treated their help with scandalous courtesy—Gee-Gee was, for example, encouraged to ride in the front seat of the family car. Mann insists that Gee-Gee and she shared a deep emotional attachment. “I loved Gee-Gee the way other people love their parents, and no matter how many historical demons stalked that relationship, I know that Gee-Gee loved me back.”

Yet in retrospect Mann is astonished by all the things she did not know about Gee-Gee and did not make an effort to find out. Many of these reflect the deep imbrication of race and social class:

How did she get something as simple as her groceries? She had no car; she worked for us six days a week from eight in the morning until eight at night and her house was on top of grocery-less Diamond Hill. . . . What if her kids were sick? Or what if she was sick? (But of course she never was.) . . . And I guess she used the kids' bathroom; of course she did, but. . . when? . . . As far as I could tell, Gee-Gee herself never ate anything, save occasionally when she checked the seasoning from a pot on the stove. Otherwise, the only thing I ever saw pass her lips was ice water from a tin measuring cup that sweated on the counter.

When the family took Gee-Gee on trips with them in their car, she had to remain in the vehicle when they stopped at a restaurant to eat until they crossed the Pennsylvania state line. "What if she had to pee? Where did she go? Or did she just hold it?" Sally apparently thought nothing of it. "What were any of us thinking? Why did we never ask the questions? That's the mystery of it—our blindness and our silence."

Most painful of all for Mann to recall was an occasion when, in the absence of her parents, Gee-Gee arrived at Sally's school to pick her up and sign her first-grade report card. She remembers "being afraid that my classmates would think she was my mother. I can hardly bear to even write these words."

The past is inscribed not only on the land but also on the body. Long a photographer of the body, Mann turned, in part, to portraiture in order to confront the history of Southern racial politics in her own time, beginning with a remarkable series of photographs of the very elderly Gee-Gee (she died at one hundred in 1994) and Mann's youngest daughter Virginia, who was named after her. In one of these, designed perhaps to recall the bond between her mother and Gee-Gee, young Virginia reclines sleepily on the old woman's lap.



Fig. 8. Sally Mann, *The Two Virginias #4*, 1991.
Gelatin silver print (10 × 8 inches). © Sally Mann.
Courtesy Gagolian.



Fig. 9. Sally Mann, *The Two Virginias* #3, 1991.
Gelatin silver print (8 × 10 inches). © Sally Mann.
Courtesy Gagosian.

Gee-Gee, her hair now deeply whitened in her late nineties, watches over the little girl (fig. 8).

Mann even more effectively illustrated the wear and tear of Gee-Gee's history in a second photograph of the two Virginias that focuses on Gee-Gee's battered legs and feet as the soft, pristine white skin of young Virginia floats above them (fig. 9). Gee-Gee worked almost entirely on her feet for the Mungers, and they bore the brunt of her toil. Cursed with size thirteen feet and living in a town disinclined to meet the needs of black women, Gee-Gee could rarely find shoes that fit her. She would arrive for work in whatever ill-fitting pair she had managed to secure, but then quickly set them aside and, "after

wiggling her toes to restore the feeling,” replace them with a pair of Dr. Munger’s discarded shoes, “razor-sliced to accommodate the corns on her toes.” This photograph is a remarkable synecdoche of race and class in the postwar South.



Gee-Gee’s life was not the only black life that Mann understood but dimly as a child. The few black men whom she knew by name were no less, probably more, inscrutable—again she “never really saw, never really knew.” Here too Faulkner shook her into an awakening. Reading “The Bear” at Putney opened her eyes to the legacy of slavery in her homeland. “Don’t you see?” Faulkner wrote, “This whole land, the whole South, is cursed, and all of us who derive from it, whom it ever suckled, white and black both, lie under the curse.” In “doing my best to visually articulate my sense of the unsettled accounts left to us by that brooding curse,” as she put it, Mann launched a risky venture into portraits that impinge on the fraught territory of the relationship between white Southern women and black Southern men.

Fraught territory is nothing new for Mann. Her place on the American cultural landscape is still entangled with the controversy that erupted upon the publication of *Immediate Family* in the midst of the “culture wars” of our Second Gilded Age. Mann’s disconcerting portraits of young Emmett, Jessie, and Virginia in undress and disarray generated outrage among those who saw them as high-brow kiddie porn and compelling evidence of a collapse of civilized moral norms of family life.

The uproar generated by *Immediate Family* was in some respects a matter of timing. The year 1992 marked the open declaration in Patrick Buchanan’s speech at the Republican National Convention that summer of the “culture wars” that had been brewing for some time. Had Mann’s earlier book, *At Twelve* (1988), with its portraits of the simmering sexuality of girls on the cusp of adolescence, been published a few years later, it might well have been similarly denounced. But, on the other hand, nudity—not a prominent feature of *At*

Twelve—was the most explosive element in *Immediate Family* and Mann's other early-nineties photographs of her children. Had her 1994 portrait of a bare-breasted twelve-year-old Jessie before and after a radical haircut been a part of the earlier book, outrage probably would have been visited on Mann sooner than it was. And had she included in *Immediate Family* the ensemble in which she joined Jessie and Virginia as the nude and pissing *Three Graces* (1994), the hue and cry would have been even louder than it was. As Mann says, "All too often nudity, even that of children, is mistaken for sexuality." This is an important point, and in my view it is *At Twelve*, not *Immediate Family*, that features the more disturbing images of sexualized children. Indeed, the point of that book is to capture young girls moving rapidly toward adulthood as they become increasingly aware of, among other things, their sexuality—even though nudity in that book is confined to a single glimpse of part of an inadvertently exposed breast of one of Mann's subjects.

Enfolding the nudity in Mann's family photographs was, I think, something else about the pictures that many found at least as unsettling: their challenge to idealized visions of childhood. As Mann says,

I think they tapped into some below-the-surface cultural unease about what it is to be a child, bringing into the dialogue questions of innocence and threat and fear and sensuality and calling attention to the limitations of widely held views on childhood (and motherhood). . . . The image of the child is especially subject to [a] kind of perceptual dislocation; children are not just the innocents we expect them to be. They are also wise, angry, jaded, skeptical, mean, manipulative, brooding, and devilishly deceitful. . . . But in a culture so deeply invested in a cult of childhood innocence, we are understandably reluctant to acknowledge these discordant aspects, or, as I found out, even fictionalized depictions of them.

Mann returns to the controversy over *Immediate Family* in her memoir, and yet her reconsideration of it does less to put it to rest

than to open to view a set of difficult and unresolved ethical tensions in her portraiture with which she wrestles not entirely successfully and then extends to her recent work with black male subjects.

Critics of the *Immediate Family* pictures raised two sorts of moral questions: should such pictures have been taken by a mother of her children, and should such pictures of her children have been published by their mother. On the latter question, Mann admits to reservations. At the time, she reports, she was herself reluctant to publish the photographs until the children were older for fear of the adverse impact that doing so would have on them. But the children insisted, and after consulting a psychologist who assured her that they were alert to the implications of publication, she published the book. The children exercised a veto over any photographs that they did not want to be made public. Whether Mann should have accepted the psychologist's assessment remains open to question.

The virulence of the response of her critics, both public and private, to the photographs took Mann by surprise nonetheless. And publication did have an adverse effect on at least one of the children, Virginia: "It made her feel, for the first time, that there was something wrong not only with the pictures but with her body." What disturbed Virginia especially was an article in the *Wall Street Journal* by Raymond Sokolov attacking Mann and featuring (without permission) one of the nude pictures of Virginia with her eyes, nipples, and pubis covered with black bars. Six-year-old Virginia wrote to Sokolov: "Dear Sir, I don't like the way you crossed me out." Moreover, Mann reveals for the first time in *Hold Still*, the pictures attracted a stalker to the family, who harassed them for years. Mann now admits that publishing the images led "some people to try to tarnish the privacy and innocence that allowed the imagery to be made in the first place."

But on the former question, that of the ethics of taking the pictures in the first place, Mann is adamant in her own defense. The heart of her argument is that her two roles, that of an artist and that of a mother, were clearly distinct. The pictures though *of* familial space were not made *in* familial space but in the space of art. The children themselves understood this and participated actively in the making of

the images. They were, to all concerned, only pictures. When Mann put on her “photographer’s eyes” they supplanted her mother’s eyes. “Taking those pictures was an act separate from mothering, and the kids knew the difference. When I stepped behind the camera, and they stepped in front of it, I was a photographer and they were actors and we were making a photograph together,” she claims. When she looked through the lens, she was not the same person as the mother who “picked pinworms from itchy butts with the rounded ends of bobby pins, changed wet sheets in the middle of the night, combed out head-lice nits, and mopped up vomit.”

But on Mann’s own evidence and testimony, this distinction between the artist and the mother does not hold. (Nor, I suspect, was the distinction truly unblurred for the children.) On the one hand, she says that taking the photographs sometimes served a therapeutic function for her as a mother, permitting her some protection from the “manifold terrors of child rearing” by allowing her to face them squarely, “but at a remove—on paper, in a photograph.” On the other hand, in other contexts Mann acknowledges that the relationship between a portrait photographer and her subjects is inherently filled with moral tension. Writing of the many pictures she has taken of her husband Larry over the years of their marriage, Mann says that “Taking those pictures of him was ethically complex, freighted with issues of honesty, responsibility, power, and complicity. . . . To be able to take my pictures I have to look, all the time, at the people and places I care about. And I must do so with both warm ardor and cool appraisal, with the passions of both eye and heart, but in that ardent heart there must also be a splinter of ice.” The photographs of her children were, at least, no less ethically complex.



As Mann says, she is one of the few female artists who “have looked unflinchingly at men.” It takes some courage. As she says, “the act of looking appraisingly at a man, studying his body and asking to photograph him, is a brazen venture for a woman; for a male

photographer, these acts are commonplace, even expected.” Her photographs of Larry Mann taken since he contracted late-onset muscular dystrophy in 1994 are particularly moving.

But for a Southern white woman to photograph *black* male bodies is an even more brazen venture. That of course is because it transgresses what W. J. Cash termed the strictures of the “rape complex” that long governed Southern culture and retains considerable force to this day. It was not that long ago that black men (or boys) who looked appraisingly at white women were subject, like Emmett Till, to lynching. And no respectable white woman would openly fix her gaze on the body of a black man. Anything more than perfunctory, servile relationships between white women and black men were forbidden. The fate of white Southern civilization was said to rest on keeping the lust of black Mandingos at bay.

As a girl, Mann seems to have been oblivious to the rape complex until Gee-Gee uncharacteristically read her the riot act when she was fifteen after she had picked up a black teenager with a crutch limping along the highway and offered him a ride into Lexington. When she got home and told Gee-Gee, busy making biscuits, what she had done, the black woman “pressed me back against the wall with her floury forearms, and said in a voice I’d never heard, low and afraid, ‘Don’t you ever pick up a colored boy again, no matter what, no matter who. You hear me?’” Still laden with unasked questions, Mann thought that Gee-Gee’s concern was only for her.

Well aware as an adult that, as D. L. Hughley recently put it, “the most dangerous place for a black person to live is in a lot of white people’s imagination,” Mann nonetheless embarked in 2004 on an ambitious exploration of Virginia’s African American history, which included taking portraits in her studio of African American men whom she had persuaded to model for her. She sharply sketches the shaky psychological terrain that this project must confront:

Almost all of my models are strangers, most know nothing about me as a photographer, and each session is limited to about an hour. When they walk into my funky-ass studio, miles from

nowhere, they are guarded and suspicious; how could they not be? Who is this gray-haired old gumboil in her silverware—clothes covered with silver nitrate stains—and what kind of pictures does she want? Not some quasi-sexual-stud bullshit, they hope, but they always couch it more diplomatically. The historically dishonest and slippery social ground upon which our brief friendships struggle for a foothold makes every emotion, every gesture, suspect.

In addition to the shadow of the rape complex, Mann was, in an era of identity politics, up against what Als terms the “Who gets to speak for blackness?” question. How could I, she asks, “expect to introduce myself to a living stranger of another race, generation, and sex, then establish a relationship of trust, communicate my uncommunicable needs, reconcile four hundred years of racial conflict, and make a good picture all in one session?” Unsurprisingly, Mann has taken heat from those certain that little good can come of the effort. One group of critics accused her of imposing “a voyeuristic gaze” on black men and “using black male subjects as a cathartic tool, protecting her white Southern identity from self-examination.” Mann objectifies others in the name of empathy, the critics continue, and her photographs “toe the line of trauma-porn and exploitation,” say the editors at *Dirt*, an online arts discussion forum. She should stop photographing black folk and begin “directly confronting whiteness.”

Mann has directly addressed this sort of criticism, and it has called forth her most compelling reflections on the ethics of portrait photography. First, she asserts a universalism she identifies with Plato: “we each hold within ourselves ‘the other’ by virtue of our shared humanity.” In theory artists can “transcend their own identity and gain access to the unknown other through empathy and imagination.” Nonetheless, she does not blinker the “knotty problem” that inheres in portraits. “Exploitation,” she acknowledges, “lies at the root of every great portrait, and all of us know it. Even the simplest picture of another person is ethically complex, and the ambitious photographer, no matter how sincere, is compromised right from the get-go.”



Fig. 10. Sally Mann, *Ronald*, 2006–2015.
Gelatin silver print (50 × 40 inches). © Sally Mann.
Courtesy Gagosian.

As a consequence, “many, I daresay even most, good pictures of people come to one degree or another at the expense of the subject.” She makes every effort to protect the dignity of her subjects, and, as with her children and her husband, she invited and received the collaboration of her models in making the pictures. But still, “At the most basic level, making these images is exploitive, reductive, and fraught.”

So why make them? Because, Mann argues, a portrait can, if it is well made, counter the very exploitation involved in its making. “At a higher level, which portraiture at its best can achieve, the results can also be transformative expressions of love, affirmation, and hope. If transgression is at the very heart of photographic portraiture, then the ideal outcome—beauty, communion, honesty, and empathy—mitigates the offense.” Note “*mitigates*”—not “negates” or “removes.” In every difficult moral choice, as William James said, “some part of the ideal must be butchered.”

We historians should find a fellow traveler in Mann on this point. We have to share her universalist, Platonic claim; otherwise we could not do our work, which always entails gaining access to unknown people often very different from ourselves by means of empathy and imagination. I suspect that white historians of American slavery and black culture such as Kenneth Stampp, Eugene Genovese, Lawrence Levine, and Edward Baptist would venture much the same view as she does.

In some important respects, Mann’s *Men* project (begun in 2004) is an historical one. One might say that she is trying to see and photograph black men with abolitionist’s eyes. Her inspiration here is Whitman’s poem “I Sing the Body Electric,” which earned him the admiration of black abolitionists such as Sojourner Truth. Here Whitman, who had watched slave auctions, adopts the voice of the auctioneer, yet he points out the qualities in black bodies that are universal and makes a mockery of rendering them commodities:

Within there runs his blood. . . the same old blood the same red
running blood;
There swells and jets his heart. . . . There all passions and desires
all reachings and aspirations;

Do you think they are not there because they are not expressed
in parlors and lecture-rooms?

This is not only one man. . . . he is the father of those who shall
be fathers in their turns,
In him the start of populous states and rich republics,
Of him countless immortal lives with countless embodiments
and enjoyments.

The aim of the pictures is to counter the gaze of slavery and white supremacy with a portrait of black male bodies akin to Whitman's. To view slaves with abolitionist eyes was to see them as fellow human beings with "the same red running blood," and possessed of universally shared human emotions, desires, dreams, responsibilities, and hopes for a better future for their progeny, all of which transcended and resisted the contingency of their enslavement. Much like their slave ancestors, Mann's black male subjects assume postures that evince strength and suggest both painful circumstances and "reachings and aspirations" beyond them (fig. 10). Ronald reposes his finely muscled body quietly on a hard board, which bespeaks the end of a day of hard labor. At the same time, he seems to be traveling feet first toward a bright light of richer possibilities. Mann's "flawed" exposure places him on the threshold of the abolition of travail.

The work of an historian that Mann's photographs most brings to mind might be Walter Johnson's *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (1999). Although most of Johnson's book centers on a brilliant reconstruction and interpretation of the phenomenology of the slave market from the point of view of white buyers and sellers and the slaves themselves, he does briefly point up the central role that the market came to play for abolitionists by highlighting the dehumanization of human beings into a "person with a price." Slavery, Johnson teaches us, was a way of seeing, and while abolition freed African Americans from the horrors that followed upon life as chattel, blurred, race-inflected sight has remained a principal astigmatism afflicting white Americans, including Mann herself. Treatment is in order. As Mann puts it, her models are "helping me



Fig. 11. Sally Mann, *Blackwater 25* (2008–2012).
Tintype (15 × 13.5 inches). © Sally Mann.
Courtesy Gagosian.

find the human being within the stylized, memory-inflected, racially edged, and often-inaccurate historical burden I carry.” Her photographs provide the rest of us with a powerful corrective lens.

Mann’s photographs of black Virginians also take on historical resonance in the context of the complementary landscape photography

that she has done. These include two elements. First, she has made the *Blackwater* pictures, which are taken on the swampy Blackwater and Nottoway Rivers and the nearby Great Dismal Swamp in southeastern Virginia. These are the swamps to which many runaway slaves (maroons) fled and established free communities on hard-to-find higher ground in the forbidding environment. It is also Nat Turner country, the place he hoped to run to in 1832 if his slave revolt in Southampton County failed. It is, as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow said, a quagmire “where hardly a human foot could pass, or a human heart would dare” (fig. 11).

These swamp photographs—tintypes in which positive images are made on metal plates—are far from the dreamy, languid, romantic swamps of *Deep South*. They are nightmarish, near-apocalyptic scenes. Here, as Sarah Greenough says, Mann created “pictures of a dark, impenetrable, hellish world unlike anything she had done before.” These unlivable places evoke horror, on the one hand, and on the other, a respect for the courage and the determination for freedom that marked those who tried to live there.

The other set of African American themed landscapes that Mann photographed are of rural black churches, some still holding services and others not. In these pictures she draws on memories of one of her few substantial encounters with African American culture as a child, going to church with Gee-Gee:

At the door, church elders handed out cardboard fans with a white-faced Jesus on them. With the rest of the white-gloved female congregants, we worked the fans metronomically, to little effect. . . . When the congregation was in full throat, I felt as if a great wave had picked me up and was rolling me over. I went with it, tumbling like a pale piece of ocean glass, washing up outside the heavy doors at the end of the service. Blinking in the sudden sunshine of Main Street, I reached for Gee-Gee’s hand.

These photographs, as Hilton Als says, are “images of shelter built on complicated ground.” Sunshine figures in them prominently, as Mann allows bright daylight to flood the negatives, producing

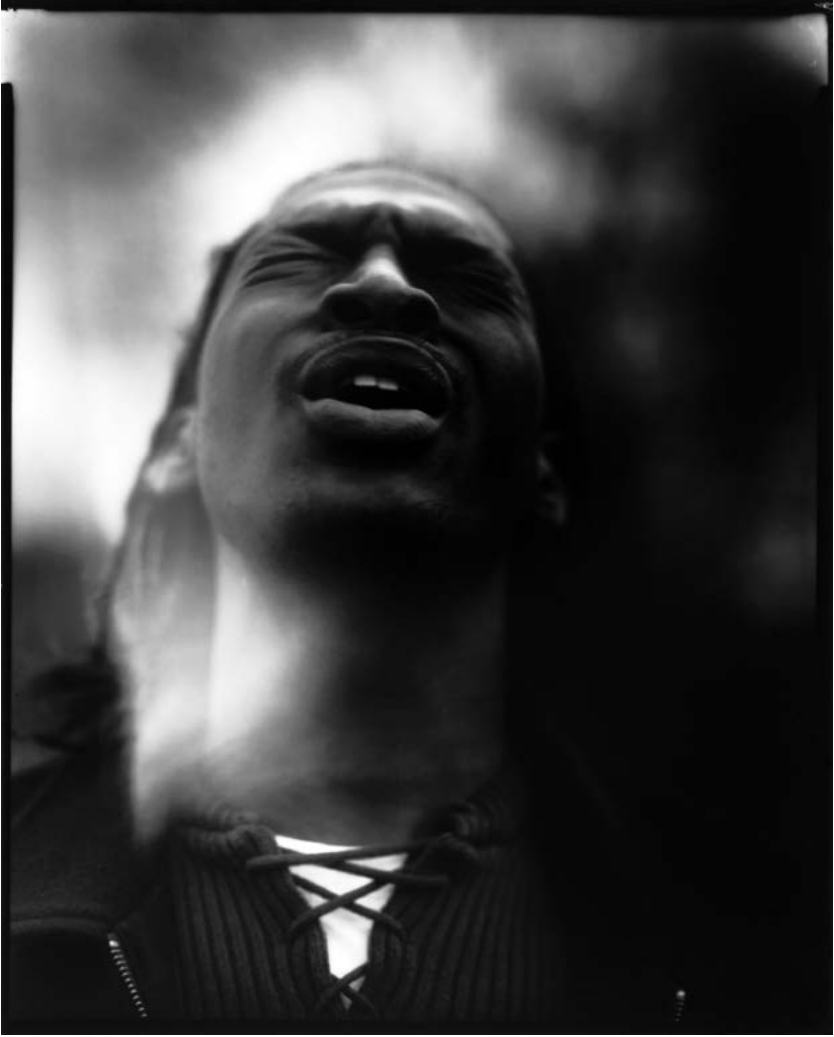


Fig. 12. Sally Mann, *Singer, D.J.* (2006–2015).
Gelatin silver print (50 × 40 inches). © Sally Mann.
Courtesy Gagosian.

effects of ethereal, spiritual release. Here we find places of refuge and insulation from threats outside their walls. Again Als: “Most of the colored people lining the pews didn’t aspire to be white, which is the color of power; they aspired to *survive*, which is the color of humanity. Faith was the shield, was the way, and the church was the meeting place where working-class black men, among others, didn’t have to live up to the degradation the white men thought should be their portion, all the better to emphasize his power.”

In sum, Mann’s African American projects, along with her photograph of Emmett Till’s trench and Gee-Gee’s feet, are a risky reckoning with a history that eluded her as a child but that now she regards as indispensable to grasping the meaning of the South. They are a tribute to the resilience of a brave people, in flight, in prayer, and in song (fig. 12).



To call Sally Mann a historian seems to be a category mistake. She is a visual artist. I am a historian. We are not about the same business.

But perhaps the mistake lies in the categories. Maybe our understanding of the historian’s craft (and that of the visual artist) is too often too narrow. Let me stipulate that historians aim to tell the provisional truth about the past, a past inaccessible in itself but available to us for reflection in the traces it has left behind. (I realize that this stipulation begs for philosophical argument that I cannot provide here.) The historian’s tool chest, we might say, should include any means we can devise to find those traces, get at that provisional truth, and convey it to our audiences. Mann, however unconventional her equipment, does a historian’s work. Her Antietam pictures should hang in its Visitors Center; her images of Emmett Till’s ditch and the legs of the two Virginias should have a place in the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Our insights as historians into the burden of Southern history would be much the stronger if we made ample room in them for her grasp of its weight.