

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Gagosian Gallery, New York

By Ariella Budick

Published: October 5 2009 18:13 | Last updated: October 5 2009 18:13

In Sally Mann's latest photographs, headless torsos and blistered limbs thrust into the frame like fragments of ancient statues. They look like corpses, but they are actually the traces of someone still buoyant and breathing. Mann's partial portraits of her husband anticipate mortality – they taste it, savour it, are consumed with it.

Best known for the edenic, provocative pictures of her children published in the bestseller *Immediate Family*, Mann previously cast her spouse, Larry, to the periphery. Now the man who has been at her side for nearly 40 years is at the centre of her work, entrusting himself to his wife's intermittently brutal eye.

The effect is stunning and distressing. Mann describes the pictures, now on view at the Gagosian Gallery and in a new book called *Proud Flesh*, as "one big caress", and the tenderness is palpable. But there is a corrosive element too, a relentless resolve to face her own demons, whatever the cost to those she loves.

Larry has muscular dystrophy; his strength is gradually wasting away. Mann can't bring herself to display her husband's illness to the lens, even though, as she has said, "he knew what the deal was when he committed to the pictures". The wounds she bares are not his – instead, she lets the streaks, specks and cracking on the surface of her prints stand in for the lacerations of time and illness.

Mann uses the collodion wet-plate process, discovered in 1851. A cumbersome technique, it involves coating glass negatives with a syrupy solution and then dipping them in silver nitrate before exposure. In the hands of the 19th-century masters of the medium, the process produced impeccably clear prints. Mann, however, is purposely sloppy, allowing specks of dust or gusts of wind to play their role.

The prints would reduce a perfectionist to sobs, and Mann sometimes isn't sure if she should frame or junk them. In "Hephaestus", for instance, Larry's sinewed torso is overlaid by a lace-like filigree that runs from neck to groin, suggesting an x-ray into his body's inner coils.

In "Languor of the Life", Larry is seen from behind. His arms and legs are not visible – all that remains is his wide, bony back and the pear-shaped buttocks puddling on a stool. The title refers to a poem by Emily Dickinson: "There is a Languor of the Life/ More imminent than Pain –/ 'Tis Pain's Successor – When the Soul/ Has suffered all it can" – Mann is half in love with death, and she keeps calling out its many names.

The nude pictures of her husband are frankly un-erotic. It's hard to think of a precedent for Mann's combination of tenderness and clinical distance. Lucian Freud might, in the name of realism, render a fellow human as an amalgam of pustular blobs, but he lacks the ardour and intimacy that sanctifies Mann's pictures.

It has been nearly 20 years since Mann published *Immediate Family* and was pilloried for exposing her children naked before the public eye. The intervening era of blog-fuelled exhibitionism has blunted those criticisms, but Mann's new photos show what was alarming about that work – the haunting ever-presence of damage and doom.

In one photo from 1990, her little girl prances outdoors, wearing nothing but some streaks of mud and a slender chain around her neck. Her eyes are closed, her face slack, and a thin tree trunk reaches up behind her tousled head, resembling a rope that could be knotted to her ornamental noose. She doesn't literally look like she is been hanged, but an intangible gust of violence blows across the scene. In *Proud Flesh*, the

hum of mortality has grown louder, the body bears the certainty of its own dissolution, and Mann claims her place as photography's pre-eminent poet of fragility.