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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Series: My best shoot

Photographer Sally Mann's best shoot

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'These pictures of Larry were like one big caress' ... Sally Mann's *Was Ever Love* (2009). Photograph courtesy of the Gagosian Gallery

This was a project my husband Larry and I talked about for six years, maybe eight. The further I got into it, the more exciting it became. Every new picture opened the door to another, which doesn't happen often. I knew I was done when I had explored every inch of Larry's body: feet, arms, hands, legs, butt, back, head.

Larry has a regular job, and we have a 450-acre farm to take care of, with 15 buildings to maintain, so I could rarely pin him down. I've got a little stove to heat my studio, really

primitive. We'd come in, stoke the fire, then decide whether to do lying down, sitting or standing. If he'd been sitting all day, he'd stand. If he'd been working in the fields, he'd lie down. Simple.

Larry was excited about the work from the beginning. We've been married almost 40 years, and he has muscular dystrophy. It's fairly pronounced now, but the pictures don't show it much; it's not something I wanted to emphasise. He is a big, strong man, but his bicep is now the size of his forearm, or smaller. It's got so I don't want to show it, out of consideration for him. It's weird: I never said, "It's going to be obvious you're losing muscle mass." But he knows me; he knows I don't flinch, and he knew what the deal was when he committed to the pictures.



Hephaestus (2008)

I used a 19th-century "wet plate" process called collodion. It's so tetchy and finicky. If you get a little particle of dust in there, or a slight breeze in your darkroom, you get stripes or marks. Although I do my best, I'm not very good at developing: the way the pictures turn out, all the imperfections, is completely accidental. However, I do pray for those serendipitous effects. With the "Hephaestus" picture, I have no idea what caused the cracking; I almost threw it away, but there was something about it. It's named after a Greek god – an easy choice, since Larry was a blacksmith, too, and is also lame. He looks so godlike, yet metallic and shiny.

No one's done anything like this before – and I think only a woman could have done it. Pictures of women taken by men tend to have a sexual element; with these, there's a

tenderness. Men usually like to appear strong and powerful, particularly if they're going to take their clothes off; and most homoerotic pictures show men as sex objects, looking very potent. I don't think Larry looks impotent, but he definitely looks vulnerable.

It's not a stretch to compare these with the more famous pictures of my children. I adore the subjects. But these were much less deliberate. I worked almost by feel, whereas photographing the children was like herding cats. I had limited time with the kids; the pictures with Larry were like one big caress.

Born: Lexington, Virginia, America, in 1951.

Studied: "I'm pretty much self-taught. I took a workshop with Ansel Adams once. It wasn't that intensive – more about going up to Yosemite and drinking wine."

Inspirations: "Everybody. Who hasn't inspired me?"

High point: "A trip I took to Mississippi and Louisiana for my Deep South project. That, and these works, are what I'm most excited about."

Dream subject: "A project I'm working on – a conceptual thing about slavery in Virginia, the most slave-centric of the southern states."

Top tip: "A quote from author Dorothy Allison: 'I believe, absolutely, that if you do not break out in that sweat of fear when you write, then you have not gone far enough.'"