

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### Sally Mann

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The male nude that is the subject of the thirty-three photographs in Sally Mann's "Proud Flesh" series, 2004–2009, on view in Gagosian's recent exhibition, is about as far from the ideal of ancient sculpture as it is possible to get. There are a few torsos, but their arms and legs are invariably cut off by the edge of the picture. Disturbingly, it's not clear that the missing limbs are implied. Like certain of Max Ernst's and René Magritte's limbless torsos, they are all skin, as if they were depictions of T. S. Eliot's "hollow men." In other words, Mann focuses on what psychoanalysts call part objects; there is no whole object, only fragments of a disintegrating object, and a peculiar kind of insubstantiality to all the flesh on display.

A further difference from ancient statuary is that the skin of Mann's figure is marred, not just because of the "flaws" generated by her photographic process—chemicals leave a textural residue on the image, suggestive of automatist accidents, which at times distracts from or even obscures the image—but also because it is marked by time, and fades into oblivion even as the photograph memorializes it. *Hephaestus*, 2008, the startling image that is the cover of the exhibition catalogue, suggests that the skin has been burned away by death, even as half of the body remains irradiated by light, which lends it a certain ghostly presence but does nothing to distract from the corrosive blur that invades it, death finalized by the black absence that replaces the head. As in other photographs, a table in the foreground—does it derive from the window ledge in front of the figures in many Renaissance portraits?—is much more solid and durable than the figure itself.

The devastating effect of these works is accentuated when one learns that the person depicted in Mann's images is her husband of forty years, who is now suffering from muscular dystrophy. Her photographs seem to anticipate his death; they are marked by impending loss. "Before me lay a man as naked and vulnerable as any wretch strung across the mythical, vulture-topped rock," she writes in a text accompanying the show, but any attempt to mythologize—or immortalize—him is bound to fail, because he is conspicuously mortal. Indeed, she recognizes that her husband's "trademark god-like nobility" is entirely absent from these images. That is, she "unflinchingly"—her word—faces the physical truth, de-idealizing the husband she clearly idealizes. The greatness of Mann's photographs comes out of this stoicism: They offer no solace, but relentlessly focus on the trauma of decay we must all face, the death that slowly but surely wastes our bodies.

The psychoanalyst Hanna Segal has noted that in classical tragedy the "beauty in the feeling of inner consistency and psychological truth in the depiction of those destructive forces . . . and their inevitable

Sally Mann,  
*Hephaestus*, 2008,  
black-and-white  
photograph,  
15 x 13½".



outcome” is one of the things that “counterbalanc[es]” the violence of the content. In Mann’s photographs, the nuanced interplay of hopeful light and morbid dark gives the photographs a certain improvised, informal beauty, but this is a kind of beauty that does not begin to counterbalance the devastation wrought on the body by disease. Instead, the images document and seemingly intensify its course. Indeed, Mann’s photographic process confers upon the photographs themselves a diseased, wasted look, as if the disease has also infected their surface, making them too seem tragically sick unto death.

—*Donald Kuspit*