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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

VMFA show gives Mann chance to transcend controversy



Sally Mann sits among some of her photographs that will be part of a comprehensive show at the VMFA through Jan. 23.

Credit: LINDY KEAST RODMAN/TIMES-DISPATCH



"Ponder Heart," 2009, Gelatin silver contact print from 15 x 13 1/2 inch collodion wetplate negative. Credit: Sally Mann



"Untitled (Self-Portraits)," 2006-7, Ambrotypes (unique collodion wet-plate positives on black glass) with sandarac varnish. Credit: Sally Mann



"Windsor by Moonlight," 1998-2010, Gelatin silver print, 20 x 24 inches. Credit: Sally Mann



In the early 1990s, Sally Mann become nationally famous — or infamous in some eyes — when her "Immediate Family" series featured her three prepubescent children not as most people wanted children to appear, but as they were in reality whether swimming in the nude or displaying bloody nose and skinned knees.

By ROY PROCTOR | SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

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Ten years after then-Gov. Jim Gilmore denounced Sally Mann for showing "lewd pictures" at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, the state art museum is saluting Mann in blockbuster fashion.

"Sally Mann: The Flesh and the Spirit," which opened last weekend, showcases 90 photographic works by Mann and an 80-minute documentary film detailing her life and art in 10 connecting galleries.

"Long before I came to Virginia, I thought Sally was one of the truly great photographers in the world," says Alex Nyerges, the Virginia Museum's director since 2006. "She follows her own voice. Her pictures are imbued with an amazing degree of soul."

Is the irony in the exhibition's timing lost on Mann?

"I hadn't thought about it," Mann says. "I'm grateful the museum has given me a second chance."

Many might argue that the state should be grateful that its most illustrious photographer, by far, has given it a second chance.

Mann sits dwarfed amid giant photographs of her three adult children's faces -- at times, just portions of their faces -- in her exhibition. The photographs were created four years ago in the wet-collodion process that harks back to the mid-19th-century infancy of

photography. The process is cumbersome -- exposure time: three to six minutes -- but the results are haunting.

At 59, Mann keeps her slight build jockey trim. Her boots, jeans and sweatshirt denote rural life. Her graying hair, pulled back gently, suggests the farm woman in Grant Wood's "American Gothic," but there's nothing pinched, much less censorious, about Mann's eyes or lips.

Mann may look vulnerable, but she's open and frank, a dynamo as friendly in her demeanor as she is steely in her resolve. She comes across as unflinchingly in person as she does in her art devoted largely to capturing the essence of her three children and lawyer husband on the farm near Lexington that they call home.

A lot has happened since that May 2000 when Mann, at the end of a lecture to a packed house at the Virginia Museum, showed some intimate photographs of her family and incurred Gilmore's wrath over "outrageous displays" on state property in images he never saw but only heard about in a single letter from an irate Virginian.

The ensuing brouhaha made national headlines. Embarrassed museum officials quelled them and mollified Gilmore by drawing up a two-page set of guidelines that simply reaffirmed the Virginia Museum's commitment to artistic and curatorial freedom.

The next year, Time magazine dubbed Mann "America's Best Photographer." In 2006, Washington's Corcoran College of Art and Design made her an honorary doctor of fine arts.

All the while, galleries and museums ranging from Los Angeles to New York, Paris and Sydney were clamoring as never before to show her work. Collectors willing to pay upwards of \$50,000 for a single Mann print were clamoring, too.

The flap with Gilmore was not the first controversy in which Mann would be embroiled.

Nor would it be the last.

"Controversy probably has propelled my career," Mann acknowledges, "but it's been a double-edged sword. It has created a lot of name recognition, but you're forever saddled with the word 'controversial.' I can't be just photographer Sally Mann. I have to be controversial photographer Sally Mann.

"I'm grateful I'm still riling people up -- that's good -- but I don't do it on purpose. People can be controversial just for the sake of being controversial. That's a calculated controversy.

"My controversy was more naive than that. I didn't expect the controversy over the pictures of my children. I was just a mother photographing her children as they were growing up. I was exploring different subjects with them."

In the early 1990s, Mann had become nationally famous -- or infamous in some eyes -- when her "Immediate Family" series of black-and-white photographs of her three prepubescent children was roundly denounced by a noisy minority while being largely praised in curatorial, academic and critical circles.

Her offense?

She had the audacity to show her children not as most people wanted their children to appear but as her children actually were. They played and swam nude in the privacy of their farm and were just as often rewarded for their high spirits with bloody noses, black eyes and skinned knees.

Mann was accused of creating pornography, being a bad mother, abusing her children and providing an incitement to pedophiles.

Mann's elder daughter, Jessie, now 28 and establishing a career as a painter in New York City, would have begged to differ.

"I was very aware of the controversy at the time, and Mom and Dad did a very good job of talking to us about it," she recalled by phone from her Brooklyn apartment, which doubles as her studio.

"I was a very confident and independent child. I could understand what the big deal was, but I knew it was based on misinformation and an American puritanical way of thinking that wasn't relevant and that I did not accept personally. I fully grasped how silly it was.

"I had an art studio in my bedroom when I was about 7, and my knowledge of art history, even then, was much greater than any modesty I might have had [over being photographed naked]. I'm a big fan of my mother's work, and, watching her work day by day as I was growing up, I was informed by her aesthetic. She is a paragon of self-discipline. She taught me that you have to have confidence to keep going."

The Virginia Museum exhibition includes none of the "Immediate Family" pictures. It has opted, instead, to show "Family Color," a little-known series of equally revealing color photographs that Mann shot of her children at the same time.

Controversy flared again, but not nearly as heatedly, after Mann photographed dead bodies decaying in various outdoor settings and conditions at the University of Tennessee Forensic Anthropology Center.

When that series, called "Matter Lent," was shown at Washington's Corcoran Gallery of Art in 2004, the New York Times' photography critic dubbed it "a violation of the privacy and the decency of the dead." Three years later, a group in Helsinki, Finland, asked the police to determine whether the photographs constituted an offense against human dignity, but nothing came of it.

A selection of "Matter Lent" photographs are in the Virginia Museum array alongside never-before-seen color photographs that Mann took of the same subjects at the same time.

"In rejecting the artificiality and aversion that surrounds death, they serve as potent *momento mori* -- traditional reminders of death's inevitability that are also meant to sharpen appreciation of life," John Ravenal, the Virginia Museum's curator of modern and contemporary art, writes in the current show's catalog.

The "Matter Lent" and "Immediate Family" series exemplify Mann's abiding interest in the age-old themes of life, love, vulnerability, degeneration and death.

The exhibition includes a series, "Proud Flesh," that Mann created from 2003 to 2009 to trace the debilitating effects on her husband, Larry, of adult-onset muscular dystrophy, which was diagnosed in 1997.

"Photographing Larry has been an act of communion, exploration, veneration and cooperation," she says. "Larry's condition has given me a new awareness of mortality and life's fragility. We don't get to choose how we die."

She's also completing "a big body of work" called "Marital Trust," which involves her husband and her life with him. "I'm negotiating with several museums about it now," she says.

What if Mann, whom *Smithsonian Magazine* has called a "poet of the personal," had expressed the same intimate concerns over the years in paintings instead of photographs?

Would the outcry have been as great?

"There's an assumption of reality in a photograph," she says. "If it's a photograph depicting an event, you know it actually happened. In a certain sense, a photograph might be more threatening, but I would think the level of discomfort with a painting or a photograph would be about the same."

What sets Mann apart as a photographer?

"The boldness of her vision, her willingness to experiment with her medium, her passion and, finally, her commitment to powerful themes," Ravenal says.

Melissa Harris, editor of the national photographic-arts quarterly *Aperture*, sums up Mann's contribution this way via e-mail:

"Sally . . . consistently and fearlessly probes the most elemental experiences. Poetically playing with an array of unique process, hers is a sublime dance of form and content in which she is constantly teasing boundaries and brushing up against mores, the psyche, the tangible and intangible in her examination."