

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

VOGUE

■ nostalgia



**FAMILY TIME**  
SALLY MANN (IN THE ARMS OF HER HUSBAND, LARRY) WITH DAUGHTERS VIRGINIA (FAR LEFT) AND JESSIE AND SON EMMETT IN VOGUE, 1999.

# BIG Picture

SARAH KARNASIEWICZ looks back at a dream apprenticeship—with her idol, photographer Sally Mann—turned bittersweet.

**O**n a hazy afternoon at the end of May 1999, mere days after receiving my Yale diploma, I packed my scant possessions into the back of my battered blue Subaru station wagon and drove to Lexington, Virginia, to work for my idol, Sally Mann. Until I arrived on her doorstep, we'd never met—never even spoken on the phone. The arrangement materialized as magically and improbably as the images, aswirl in their chemical baths, I'd been laboring over in the undergrad darkroom. Somehow, during that panicky final semester, I persuaded a professor who was friendly with Sally to pass along my portfolio and a letter of appeal. To my boyfriend and parents, I called this my Hail Mary play—a one-in-a-million gambit I needed to try before joining my classmates on the well-trodden road to a gig as a gallery assistant and a shared walk-up on the Lower East Side.

I expected no response, and for a long time that was what I got. Until the day, a handful of weeks shy of commencement,

that I unlocked my P.O. box to find a wrinkled envelope addressed in pencil—and a silver print of a pockmarked landscape, folded in thirds, inside. Across the back loped a few scribbled lines, closing with “Come on down.”

I'd been following Sally's career since I was fifteen, when a teacher handed me a copy of *The New York Times Magazine* with *Jessie in the Wind*, an image from her Immediate Family series, on the cover. The photos, set against the bucolic backdrop of the family's isolated riverside cabin, rendered her kids both playful and pouty, graceful and dirty, damaged and strong. That the children also happened to be frequently naked prompted much public hand-wringing about issues of exploitation and desire (this was, after all, close on the heels of Jock Sturges's run-in with the FBI for his images of children au naturel, as well as the Mapplethorpe/NEA brouhaha). But it was not the whiff of taboo that kept me rapt and transfixed. Staring into the eyes of Jessie, Sally's older daughter, her gaze assured but wary, I felt a kind of kinship.

Immature though the results were, I'd been toting a camera around trying to train in on similar visions—to crystallize on film the everyday moments of childhood as they felt to me, full of both shadow and radiance. On weekends during my college years, I'd drive the winding rural routes home from my dorm and, between doing loads of laundry, prod my brother, Will, ten years my junior, into playacting shadowy tableaux in front of my Rollei, his body receding into sky and foliage. But the writing was on the wall: My surrogate was growing up—and, more alarmingly, so was I. I had to figure out what came next, and I hoped some time with Sally might light a path to it.

The Mann household was also in flux. Sally, knee-deep into an ambitious landscape series, had buried herself in prep for a big Manhattan show while still grappling with the afterburn of the family pictures, which for better or worse had thrust her otherwise private world into the limelight. Her husband, Larry, a soft-spoken blacksmith turned lawyer who played the role of anchoring yin to Sally's yang, had been diagnosed with muscular dystrophy not long before. The kids were in the full flush of young adulthood, pushing against expectations and stumbling, chins cocked, through the trials of high school and college. And after two and a half decades, the family was preparing to consign to the wrecking ball the house in Lexington they'd built plank by plank, leaving it behind for a new one on the farm along the Maury River that had featured in so many of Sally's most iconic images.

Into the middle of all this I arrived, eager and oblivious. I felt it was momentous just to stroll into Sally's home, the nexus of it all. But the family was welcoming, nonchalant even, and from the moment my finger lit on their doorbell, I was relieved to discover that the spirit I'd so admired in Sally's work—a wild beauty, exuberant and imperfect—wasn't mere artifice. In the kitchen, one wall gave way to a greenhouse mezzanine filled with hanging orchids and a coterie of finches, flashing purple and gold, some caged and others flying free. Alongside the mismatched collection of pottery mugs in the pantry—from which Sally and I would drink tea every morning before shutting off to our respective chores—I found a set of canning jars filled with moonshine. It felt like a place where things *happened*, a place bursting with plot and intrigue—and, though as yet unsure of what my own story might become, I thrilled to find myself with even a bit part in it.

**A**t first, every day was a discovery. A flawless technician of the old school, Sally has always done all of her own printing, and it quickly became clear to me that the darkroom was her domain alone. So, as June gave way to deep summer, I spent my days atop a stool in the attic studio, retouching errant dust specks on massive 40" x 50" prints with a fine-bristled brush, perspiring over the dry mounting press in triple-digit temperatures, crating up finals bound for the gallery. But also: cleaning those birdcages; grocery shopping; making midnight runs to the train station across the mountains to retrieve the kids. Sally herself, meanwhile, was hardly idle. Up with the sun every day, she would jog miles before the rest of us brushed our teeth, Walkman on her hip. (Who runs to the audiobook version of *Remembrance of Things Past*? Sally did.) Then she'd tiptoe into the house and bake a loaf of bread before breakfast. Weekends, to escape the brutal heat of town, I'd bump along the rutted dirt roads of the family's farm to join Sally and whatever assortment of family or friends might be in tow for a cooling dip and drinks at the rustic riverside cabin. Sitting on the sun-warmed porch, sipping one of Sally's patented ice-cold gin and tonics, looking out at the rippling water and buffed cliffs—that mythic landscape in all its otherworldly, unchanged glory—I sometimes had to pinch myself.

Come fall, though, after the New York show had opened, the job of packing the studio and moving a quarter-century of detritus came to the fore. Skilled tasks were replaced by less

precise exertions: hauling boxes, digging up trees, stacking a truck's worth of bricks. (It was not some sort of diet that helped me shed 20 pounds that year.) For weeks, thanks to Sally's determination to dye the long cement colonnade that fronted the new house the exact shade of dusty red as the clay soil on which it sat, one of my main duties involved hanging off a painter's ladder, my fingers stained and wind-bitten, smearing each column from top to bottom with buckets of mud.

## Had the impulse to turn away from her been my first real gesture of independence—or a spoiled, soft-bellied child's admission of defeat?

In her own way, however, Sally was teaching me plenty about what it took to make a life in art. An idealistic student, I'd always dismissed the cliché about artists being necessarily self-centered, but life with Sally had forced me to reexamine all this. Her dogged protection of both her vision and her time, along with the uncommon, beauty-filled world she had arranged for herself—I couldn't help admiring it, and had begun to think that that egoism was not a side effect of her success but a primary cause.

My own future as a photographer, however, felt ever more uncertain—and as the weeks outside the studio turned to months, I began to wonder if, in my devotion to Sally's needs, I wasn't shortchanging my own. On my off hours, back in my Subaru, I took to the bewitching back roads, driving curlicues across Rockbridge County, camera in tow. But try as I might, every place I came upon belonged to Sally: Each time I lifted my lens to my eye, I saw her compositions superimposed.

By February of the following year, the warmth of the holiday season had worn off, and we were all ensconced on the farm, Sally and company in the big new house, and me in a studio apartment off the garage. One morning, when Sally greeted me with a razor blade and directed me to scrape and wash the sticky labels off each of the home's newly installed windows, I cracked. By noon, I'd stormed silently back to my apartment and started to pack. Later, I marched up to Sally and Larry as they sat over their midday sandwiches and, citing the long winter of manual labor and little to no art-related work, abandoned my post—something I was fairly certain, in Sally's decade of "long-suffering assistants," as she half-jokingly referred to us, was a first.

What was I doing? I wasn't even close to sure, but thrumming with reckless elation, I simply knew I had to do it. (Sally, ever cool, was good enough to let my hasty exit pass without much comment.) When I arrived back home, I felt both exhilarated and confused. Had the impulse to turn away from her been my first real gesture of independence—a maiden step toward becoming the hero of my own life—or just a spoiled, soft-bellied child's admission of defeat? I still don't know.

A full decade had passed since my last conversation with Sally—and nearly as long since I hung up my camera and started making my living as a writer—when, a few months back, an advance copy of

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*Hold Still*, her generous and exhaustive new memoir, appeared in my mail.

Over the course of a week of late nights, I gulped the whole thing down, head bowed and mouth agog. I relished the trip down memory lane—the reminders of Sally’s affection for both her sleek black BMW and for decorating her house with scavenged skeletal remains. But that was mere surface decoration. What really blindsided me was how viscerally I felt my understanding of her whole writ-large story—not to mention my gratitude for my brief intersection with it—not just restored but magnified. I’d lionized Sally as a teenager, then left her impulsively. But returning to it all as a mother myself now, closing in on the age Sally was when we first met, I saw the contours of her images rearrange themselves. I’d thought the intimation of dread in her family pictures was just a nod to the murkiness of childhood, the Grimm’s version we all try to disguise. Now, though, those and all the others, too, appeared fraught, both variously and all at once, with loss, with fear, with love, maternal terror and maternal pride, and ballasted by the ephemerality of everything.

As soon as I finished the book I thumbed through it again, noting my many pencil marks and dog-eared pages. One vigorously underlined spot jumped out from the very first paragraphs: a passage in which Sally calls upon Joan Didion’s advice to “keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be.” Though I’ve always found that a blockbuster line, as sharp and smarting as a scalpel, here I took note simply because it was incomplete. Didion continues where Sally does not: “We forget all too soon the things we thought we could never forget.”

That year may have just been the start of my story, but like all prefaces, it shaped it. It reassured me that if you pay attention, the people who sit around your table, the trees that shade your windows, the roads with bends you know by heart can often be ripe with a possibility and beauty so poignant it will leave you breathless. And Sally, in her inimitable way, prodded me to chase those fragile, intoxicating moments of clarity—even as they are always receding. □