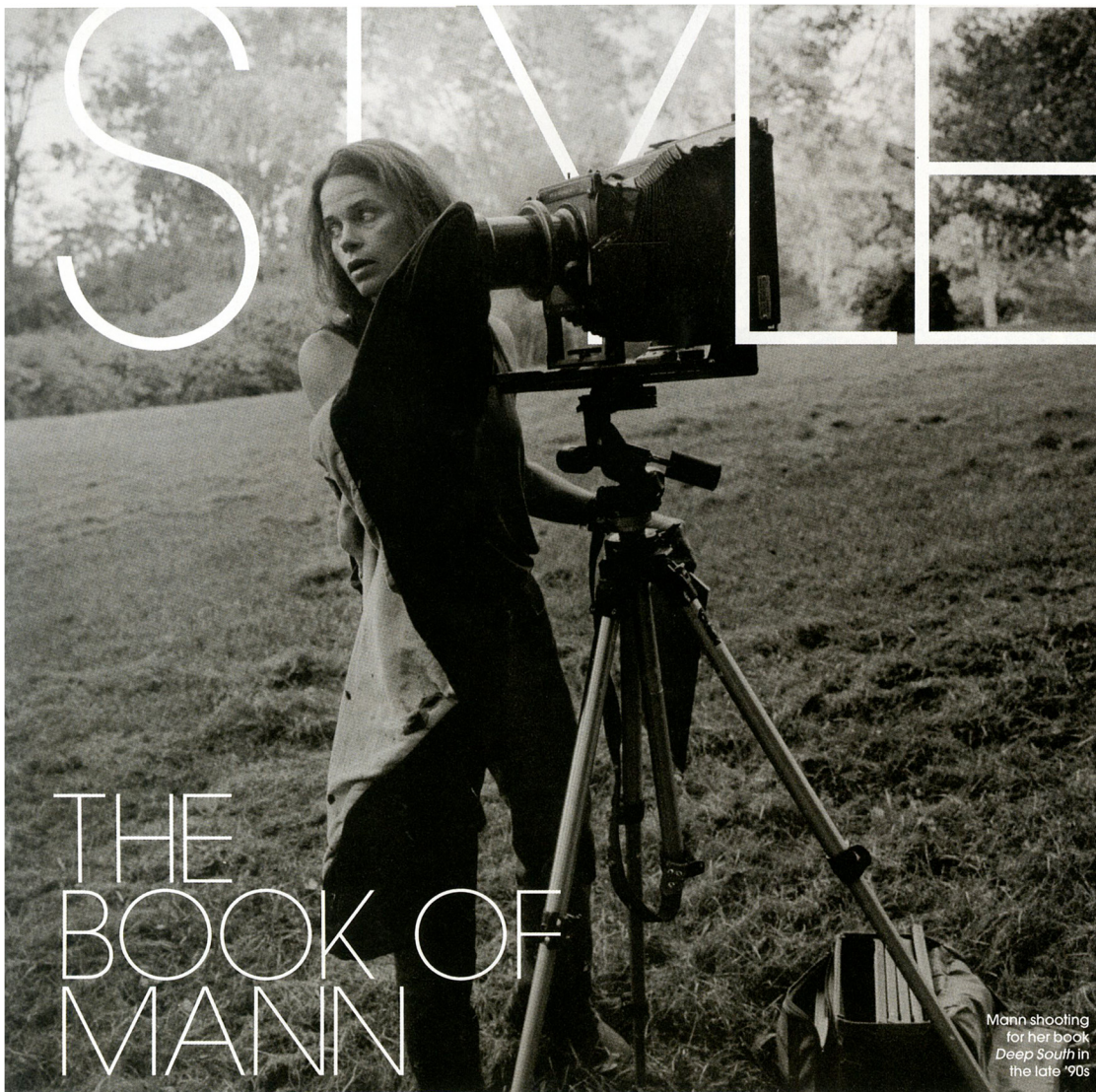


GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ELLE



In a sweeping memoir, photographer Sally Mann exposes the personal histories behind some of the twentieth century's most indelible—and controversial—images.
By Lisa Shea

"The fundamental thing about my personality is that I think I'm an imposter," renowned photographer and newly minted memoirist Sally Mann confides from her remote Rockbridge County, Virginia, farmstead, her phone reception straining against the thick walls of her old, wood-stove-heated studio. She's talking about art that pushes the envelope, family life,

marriage, mortality, and *Hold Still: A Memoir With Photographs* (Little, Brown)—and trying to factor being the genius creator of a bold autobiography with the everyday reality of abiding self-doubt. "I'm not a good photographer, not a good writer," Mann says. "I'm a pretty regular person whose insecurity is so pervasive that it makes me always feel vulnerable. I'm so open that I live like a recluse. I couldn't deal with a normal life."

Mann's belief that she's an insecure fraudster seems to have served her provocative, decades-long artistic endeavors to a fare-thee-well. She has published some 15 volumes (10 are currently in print) of her signature large-format black-and-white photos. Repped by the prestigious Gagosian Gallery in New York, her

work resides in the permanent collections of more than three dozen institutions, including New York's Metropolitan Museum and London's Victoria and Albert. In 1988, she emerged as one of America's most original and controversial photographers with the publication of *At Twelve*, with its languid trove of local girls captured on the cusp of adolescence. Four years later, *Immediate Family* appeared: 60 photos of her three mostly buck-naked children—Emmett, Jessie, and Virginia—in poses that were redolent, insolent, insouciant, and frank. It was hard to argue with the formal power and lapidary beauty of the work, but something uncensored—as if flushed from Eden—about the photos in both books ignited a cultural and moral firestorm about the nature of

Kim Rushing



Clockwise from left: An untitled still from *At Twelve* (1988); Mann's father, Dr. Robert S. Munger (1980); family and friends gathered for her father's memorial in 1988; Mann reviews prints, circa 1992



photography, motherhood, pornography, and childhood. In a debate that lasted a decade, *The New York Times* called the photos “disturbing”; *The Wall Street Journal* used the word *degenerate*. Mann says the controversy continues to haunt her family. With uncanny prehension, in her autobiography she asks back, “How can a sentient person of the modern age mistake photography for reality?”

Now in their thirties, Mann’s adult offspring are noticeably absent from *Hold Still*, their presence limited to a scattering of the photos that earned their mother overnight infamy. Says Mann matter-of-factly, “Everyone is going to wonder what happened to those poor art-abused children. They all turned out fine, thank you very much. I didn’t feel it was right to write about them at this time. I was trying to broaden the book away from just the family pictures.” She continues, “When I was immersed in motherhood and saw my children running naked every day, I found nothing unusual or unsettling about it, but can now, decades away from that time, understand how someone not so immersed might. Without the context of our very private farm and the protection of the cliffs and the river, the pictures would never have been taken, I’m sure of that. And that is why it was so understandably hard for some viewers to understand the work—they had to know about the context.”

Reflecting on the family photos and the many that have come after—among them the rural Southern landscapes; the portraits of young black men; and the “Body Farm” series of corpses under

study as they decompose above ground, as nature would have it, at the University of Tennessee Forensic Anthropology Center—Mann, still incandescent at 64, remarks, “I often find that the way I feel about work has subtly, and sometimes not so subtly, shifted.” About the landscapes, she comments, “I am not sure I would make such romantic pictures of the South if I were to travel down there again, but I was in the middle of trying to buy our farm from my brothers, and it was almost like a new romance with the farm. The halcyon, golden flush of first love overlay many of the resultant pictures.”

The seeds of her autobiography were sown in 2010 when Mann was invited to deliver the prestigious Massey Lectures at Harvard. “I spent an entire year writing those three lectures, the monkey at the typewriter,” she says. “I took it completely seriously. I knew they were good.” She developed the book to its near-500 pages by “following the photographs”—her own and her extended family’s, along with letters, drawings, journals, report cards, and the like—that she found in boxes in the attic. These serve as visual guy wires to the multiple, intersecting narratives of her “unsentimental” Boston-born, *Mayflower*-descended mother; her intellectually “expansive” Texas-born father, a country doctor from a wealthy entrepreneurial family; her own rural, horseback-riding, “less than [parentally] diligent” Virginia childhood—the African-American house-

keeper, Gee-Gee, figures prominently—and the scandal-scarred, upper-middle-class parents of her New England-born husband, Larry Mann, whom she met when she was 18 years old. It was crucial to Mann that she understand her heritage, “how those family stories factor in to who I am,” she says. “Some 60 years on, and I didn’t really know. It was a revelation to see those people in me now.”

Even with such a rich archive at her disposal, Mann, who has a master’s in creative writing from Hollins College, fretted about how different writing is from photography. “If I take enough pictures, I’m going to get a good one, and I know not to stop at a bad one,” she says. “With writing, you don’t have that element of serendipity. I’d just sit there day after day eating chocolate-covered almonds and drinking cups of tea, wondering: Can I really manhole this stuff out of myself? It’s a triumph of endurance.”

Mann has been photographing her husband of 44 years since they met. She describes “Marital Trust,” one ongoing body of work begun in the 1990s, as “a lot of intimate pictures, a lot of nudity, a portrait of a marriage.” In recent years, the 6’4” lawyer, who practices in nearby Lexington, has developed a form of muscular dystrophy. Even so, he has allowed his wife to photograph him—one series, “Proud Flesh,” appeared in 2009.

In this endeavor, once again, Mann is both a self-effacing seeker and a renegade visionary. The wife in her tells me, “A lot of my concern is for Larry. He’s so kind. He’d do anything for me.” But the photographer in her writes, “I can think of numberless male artists...who have photographed their lovers and spouses, but I am having trouble finding parallel examples among my sister photographers. The act of looking appraisingly at a man, studying his body and asking to photograph him, is a brazen venture for a woman.” ●



Clockwise from top left: Sally Mann; Ted Orlando; Sally Mann; Courtesy of Sally Mann