

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### The New York Times

#### Sally Mann on Her History, Frame by Frame

Randy Kennedy



*Of her memoir, Sally Mann, above in 2014, said, "I just got sucked into a whole vortex of the past." Cassandra Zeppieri*

The photographer Sally Mann describes her pictures as “silver poems of tone and undertow,” and they have always seemed designed to stop the passage of things that can barely be slowed: youth, memory, seasons, light, even decay. When she began her first attempt at a piece of sustained writing, “Hold Still,” her memoir published this week by Little Brown, she said she realized with great relief that she had followed the same impulse in her nonphotographic life, letting nary a scrap of paper escape her archival clutches.

“I don’t know what the instinct is, to save every report card, every half-sentence scribbled note, but my mother did it pretty effectively, and I’ve done it to a fare-thee-well,” she said, adding, “My poor kids.”

Ms. Mann’s kids — two daughters and a son, all now adults — have always loomed large in her celebrated 40-year career, as perhaps her most important subjects and the subject of a notorious dust-up in the early 1990s. Critics of her photography book “Immediate Family” (1992) accused her of exploiting the children by showing them naked and at prepubescent play, posed in ways that some read as sexualized.

With the hindsight of a couple of decades, the controversy seems overblown, one of several eruptions of the broader culture wars then raging. “Her work always seems to get appropriated for different cultural anxieties,” said Sarah Kennel, an associate curator of photography at the National Gallery of Art in Washington. “It may be because Sally’s really interested in photography’s ability to sustain lots of contradictory levels of meaning.”

The episode takes a judiciously modest proportion of the memoir — 67 of the book’s 482 pages address it directly. But Ms. Mann, whose family suffered for years from the blowback, finally gets to answer loudly and in no uncertain terms a question that has hung over the work: Would she do it again? “Yes, yes and yes,” she writes, “resoundingly, absolutely, we would do it all over knowing what we know now.”

She adds: “As critics, journalists and the curious public bore down on our family, we began to understand that our family recipe was not from the cookbook of mainstream America. The ingredients in our work were exotic and the instructions complex.”

The same might be said of the memoir, which Ms. Mann, 64, began writing five years ago when she was invited to deliver the Massey Lectures in the History of American Civilization at Harvard University, joining a group that includes Irving Howe, Eudora Welty and Toni Morrison.

Ms. Mann’s thoughts about art, photography, family and the South — she has always lived and worked in and around Lexington, Va. — took her on a much stranger and more intimate exploration of her life, as the daughter of an atheist, art-collecting Southern physician and a distant Boston-born mother. Her parents installed in their children, she writes, “an emotional thermostat with the dial turned down far enough to discourage even routine expressions of affection,” but Ms. Mann seemed to have wandered in from some other family, a half-feral, shamelessly romantic and willful one.

Sitting down on the Upper West Side during a recent visit to New York, she said that despite having earned a master’s degree in creative writing in 1975, she had never believed she could write the kind of book she did, which Dwight Garner, reviewing it in *The New York Times*, called “an instant classic among Southern memoirs of the last 50 years.” But she approached writing with the same intensity and discipline she has become known for in the taking and printing of pictures, an approach she describes as “some ungodly cross between a hummingbird and bulldozer.”

“I just got sucked into a whole vortex of the past,” she said, after retrieving a bottle of Bulleit bourbon from her suitcase and pouring two glasses. “Sometimes things would come in that wonderful raptus of inspiration — if that’s not too grandiose a phrase — and I’d get up and realize it had been hours and I was drenched in sweat.”

Ms. Mann gathered and saved a trove of family history stretching back more than a century, which she said she had come to realize “was for more than just good stories at a dinner party.” But you get the sense that she has also been hoarding language, passages and borrowed wisdom, magpie-like, most of her life in preparation for the book. She quotes Shelby Foote on the soul of the South (“too much Walter Scott and Dumas read too seriously”); W. S. Merwin on evanescence (“unrepeatable as a cloud”); William Carlos Williams on existential belonging (what he called “the local”); and the painter Cy Twombly, a son of Lexington to whom Ms.

Mann was close until his death in 2011, an encouragement, a heartfelt example of which he delivered the final time they saw each other (“You keep on working hard, sweetie.”)

Though her work is in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art, among many others, Ms. Mann speaks often about searing self-doubt. She said her deepest fear about publishing a memoir would be that people would glimpse who she really was. “I kept telling Michael Sand, my editor, ‘People are going to hate me when they read this; they’re going to think I’m a horrible person,’ ” said Ms. Mann, who in person blends a kind of Southern warmth with a gimlet-eyed intensity.

It was in part because of such fears, she said, that she generally left the living, including her children, out of the memoir (though not her husband of 43 years, Larry Mann, a lawyer and blacksmith). “I really tried not to talk about the kids now, other than where they work, what they do,” she said. Emmett owns a landscaping business; Jessie, a painter, is studying neurological rehabilitation; Virginia, the youngest, is a corporate lawyer in Manhattan. “People say, ‘Well how do they feel now?’ and I say: ‘Why don’t you call them up and ask them? It’s not my job.’ ”

As it happened, a call wasn’t necessary. Virginia, 30, dropped by that afternoon to see her mother and spoke of the pictures and the memoir, which will undoubtedly renew attention toward the family. “My basic feeling is that I’ve been blessed to have my life documented in two ways that are very eloquent and beautiful and well done,” she said. “I feel like I get the luxury of showing that side of myself — the side from the pictures — when I want to, but I don’t have to when I don’t want to.”

Of the taker of those pictures, she said, history might judge her as an artist but her children get to judge her as a mother: “Let’s just say she set the bar pretty high: ‘No day care for my kids.’ ”

Ms. Mann leaned over and reminded her daughter why she needed her at home: “Right, honey. Because I had the camera, and you were all working!”