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In 1859, the black abolitionist paper *Anglo-African Magazine* published an essay titled “A Statistical View of the Colored Population.” It focused on the nearly four million slaves in the United States, more than in any other nation at the time. After describing the forced migration of almost one million slaves from Virginia and Maryland into Louisiana and Mississippi, the article quotes from Walt Whitman’s 1856 “Poem of the Body” (which became “I Sing the Body Electric”) to describe a slave auction:

A man’s body at auction!

[...]

Whatever the bids of the bidders, they cannot be high enough for it,

For it the globe lay preparing quintillions of years, without one animal or plant,

For it the revolving cycles truly and steadily rolled.

[...]

This is not only one man—this is the father of those who shall be fathers in their turns

A century and a half later, Bill T. Jones used Whitman’s poem as inspiration for his 2009 dance about Abraham Lincoln, *Fondly Do We Hope ... Fervently Do We Pray*, made for the bicentennial of Lincoln’s birth. As Jones said of this work, “the body is the thing that ... connects us, the body is bought and sold, and the body is definitely the thing that will divide us. And slavery is the most horrible example of it.”

Sally Mann has also been inspired by Whitman’s poem. In her acclaimed memoir, *Hold Still* (2015), she pairs lines from “I Sing the Body Electric” with photographs of black men that are part of her ongoing series on the legacies of slavery. According to Mann, her idea of using Whitman came from Jones: “I borrowed the idea, using the poem as a template for my own exploration.” Whitman’s poem, she notes, “stands out for the intimately carnal language with which he describes the realities of a slave auction.”

Mann recognizes that “it’s the body that divides us, the body that gives value to the ‘product.’” Like Whitman, Jones, and *Anglo-African Magazine*, she also seeks the person inside the “product” or “property.”

Whitman’s poem is a rich template for Mann’s exploration of the legacies of slavery in another way: In 1855, in a third-person review of his own work, Whitman characterized the then untitled “I Sing the Body Electric” and the other poems in *Leaves of Grass* as “a daguerreotype of his inner being.” Whitman understood the intimate connections between poetry, photography, and politics. He exploited a slave auction for poetic and antislavery ends.

One might say the same of Mann. On one level, she “exploits” these black bodies, as she acknowledges, while also arguing, in *Hold Still*, that all photographic portraiture is exploitative on some level. She “exploited” the body of her husband in *Proud Flesh* (2009), and the bodies of her children in *Immediate Family* (1992). In their vulnerability and partial nakedness, Mann’s portraits of black men recall “a man’s body at auction.” But on another level, they become visual poems that connect the memories of slavery to the legacies of racism today, coupled with a desire for understanding, empathy, and reform. There is a lyrical aspect to these portraits, achieved partly from Mann’s use of a large-format, 8-by-10-inch view camera and the nineteenth-century wet-plate collodion process, which captures unusually subtle tonal ranges.

There are also, as in “Poem of the Body,” surprising, mysterious, or disturbing connections, from a negative flaw resembling a rope standing out against a disappearing leg to an arrangement of body parts inspired by Whitman’s words:

Head, neck, hair, ears, drop and tympan of the ears,

Eyes, eye-fringes, iris of the eye, eye-brows, and the waking or sleeping of the lids,

Mouth, tongue, lips, teeth, roof of the mouth, jaws, and the jaw-hinges,

Nose, nostrils of the nose, and the partition, Cheeks, temples, forehead, chin, throat, back of the neck, neck-slue,

[...]

Wrist and wrist-joints, hand, palm, knuckles, thumb, forefinger, finger-balls, finger-joints, finger-nails

The hazy light that permeates these images evokes the distance between past and present, viewer and subject, but it also encourages a spiritual, or even emotional, connection with these men, and with the past of Mann’s South, “haunted,” as she has said, “by the souls of the millions of African Americans who built that part of the country with their hands and with the sweat and blood of their backs.” The beauty in these images is shocking, sensuous, haunted, searing. It is also honest and empathetic, and it holds out the hope of transformation.

# Sally Mann

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