

The Washington Post
February 9, 2022

GAGOSIAN



A photograph that captures the profound ambivalence between children and parents

Sally Mann included this indelible photograph in her breakthrough book, “Immediate Family”

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Sally Mann/Gagosian)

Sally Mann has taken no end of indelible photographs — her strike rate is enviable. But what I love about “Jessie Bites,” from her great book “Immediate Family,” is the window it opens onto things that are ... whatever is the opposite of “indelible.” I’m not seeing “delible” in the dictionary. So let’s say “erasable,” “temporary,” “transient.”

Registering the transience of things — our own childhood, the childhoods of our children, the seasons, life itself — can be painful. The consolation, we’re often told, is that pain, too, can be transient. Like a bite mark.

Mann's photograph, taken in 1985, shows one of her three children, Jessie. The girl's relaxed left arm is looped under the arm of an adult, Mann herself, in a manner evoking the fond, unselfconscious dependence — the dependability — of family.

That impression is complicated, however, by the detail that gives the work its title: The adult's arm is imprinted with a bite mark. Both the proximity of Jessie and the extraordinary, aggrieved expression on her face (what a scowl! Naomi Watts, Kristen Stewart, eat your hearts out) suggest that she was responsible.

Her expression is not just fierce. It's watchful, suspicious. Devastating as it is, I imagine it as fleeting. That's the way kids' moods are, right? Three minutes after the moment of the photograph, Jessie, whose smudged and (thankfully) far from indelible body paint and feather boa suggest a great day of play — could be once again running wild, or else sleeping like a fallen warrior.

The photograph is gorgeous. It's intimate. Mann's 8-inch-by-10-inch view camera and rich printing capture the richly variegated tones of textured shirt, striped cushions, boa, hair and skin. Shadow encroaches on the picture's lower half. The captured moment appears spontaneous, but 8-by-10 view cameras are cumbersome. They make actual spontaneity all but impossible. So Mann and her children usually collaborated on pictures, staging fictions that suggest deeper meanings. (Mann, in this case, bit her own arm — but that's okay: artists are allowed to invent!) The human subjects in "Jessie Bites" are so close they are cropped, the camera pressed close to their skin. It is this that makes the bite marks, when you see them, briefly shocking, almost as if someone had sunk their teeth into the photograph itself.

The picture reminds me, in fact, of an encaustic painting by Jasper Johns called "Painting Bitten by a Man." It's just a small, gray, pasty thing with a bite taken out of it, leaving a shallow cavity striped by teeth marks. I don't know quite what connection my mind is making. But both works leave me wondering: Why would anyone bite a thing that is clearly not food?

Pure, animal aggression? The urge to make an impression? To see what it feels like? To test out authority? Maybe all those things. To children, parents are, in a sense, like paintings seen up close. So close that their contours, their meanings are impossible to discern.

A child's parents or guardians are fonts of love and protection. They're also tyrannical, self-appointed authorities and sources of incredible frustration. Children must do battle with them constantly as they undergo the necessary process of growing up and growing away.

Mann's photo is simple. Apart from being beautiful ("The world is beautiful before it is true," wrote the philosopher Gaston Bachelard), it reminds us that we are profoundly ambivalent creatures. "The people you love the most," as Edgar Degas once jotted in his journal, "are the

people you could hate the most.” All the emotion attached to this ambivalence — the love, the pain, the humor, the all-of-it — is fleeting, like a bite mark. But it’s also enduring, like a photograph.