

SALLY MANN

A Thousand Crossings

For more than forty years, Sally Mann (American, born 1951) has made experimental, elegiac, and hauntingly beautiful photographs that explore the overarching themes of existence: memory, desire, death, the bonds of family, and nature's magisterial indifference to human endeavor. What unites this broad body of work is that it is all bred of a place, the American South. A native of Lexington, Virginia, Mann has long written about what it means to live in the South and be identified as a southerner. Using her deep love of her native land and her knowledge of its fraught history, she asks provocative questions — about history, identity, race, and religion — that reverberate across geographic and national boundaries. *Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings* explores how Mann's relationship with this land has shaped her work and how the legacy of the South — as both homeland and graveyard, refuge and battleground — continues to permeate American identity.

Organized into five sections — *Family*, *The Land*, *Last Measure*, *Abide with Me*, and *What Remains* — and including many works not previously published or publicly shown, the exhibition takes its title from a line written by the poet John Glenday: “The soul makes a thousand crossings, the heart, just one.” Signaling Mann's devotion to the South, the title also alludes to her awareness of the complexity of its layered, interwoven history.

The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts.

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Family

The place is important; the time is summer. It's any summer, but the place is home and the people here are my family.

Sally Mann, 1992

From 1985 to 1994 Sally Mann photographed her three children, Emmett, Jessie, and Virginia, at the family's summer cabin in the Shenandoah Valley. The pictures she created evoke the freedom and tranquility of unhurried days spent exploring the river and fields that surround the family's rustic sanctuary. Instead of employing the small format cameras typical of most family snapshots, Mann primarily used a large 8 × 10 inch camera, which positions her in the tradition of fine art photography. Rather than depicting the sentimental aspects of childhood, however, she captured its daily activities and mishaps, as well as its psychic complexity. In her portrayal, we witness not only beauty, sensuality, and tenderness, but also anger, shame, confusion, distress, and the perennial struggle between attachment and independence.

Quietly observing her children at play and at rest, Mann transformed the intimate and the everyday into extraordinary moments — Jessie on the cusp of a dive or Emmett floating on the river. Many of the photographs, however, are the fruit of careful planning and tightly controlled execution. Collaborating closely with her children to stage dramatic tableaux, Mann sometimes directed them to assume poses and at other times followed their lead. The resulting photographs merge fact with fantasy, “but,” as Mann wrote, “most are of ordinary things every mother has seen.”

In 1992, Mann published sixty of these pictures in a book titled *Immediate Family*. The inclusion of photographs of nude children and the exploration of childhood's challenges raised difficult questions concerning parental authority, artistic freedom, and the distinction between public and private images. However, it was widely acclaimed for its truthful and at times startling depiction of the process of growing up, and stands today as one of the most celebrated portrayals of family life.

The Land

Since my place and its story were givens, it remained for me to find those metaphors: encoded, half-forgotten clues within the southern landscape.

Sally Mann, 2015

In the early 1990s, Mann slowly turned from photographing her family to recording the landscape behind them: she was, she said, “ambushed by the landscapes.” She began by photographing the rolling hills, rivers, and forests near her home, creating pictures that exude a deep sense of familiarity, the result of years of looking and thinking. Later in the decade when she ventured farther south — to Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi — her photographs often allude to a larger national history of war, death, suffering, and injustice as she sought to show how the land held the scars of the past.

Last Measure

It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us — that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion — that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain.

Abraham Lincoln, 1863

Lexington, Virginia, the final resting place of both Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee, is a city steeped in the past, the history of slavery, and the Civil War. With nearly a third of the war's battles fought in Virginia, the commonwealth had an outsized role in the conflict. Considering the impact of history on her native land, Mann asked, "Does the earth remember? Do these fields, upon which unspeakable carnage occurred, where unknowable numbers of bodies are buried, bear witness in some way? And if they do, with what voice do they speak? Is there a numinous presence of death in these now placid battlefields, these places of stilled time?"

Between 2000 and 2003 she sought to answer these questions in a series of photographs of the "scrubby . . . orphan corners" of battlefields at Antietam, Cold Harbor, Fredericksburg, Manassas, and the Wilderness, among others — all within easy striking distance of Lexington. Like so many Civil War photographers, she used the nineteenth-century collodion wet plate process (see nearby text) to create her negatives. But unlike her predecessors, she readily embraced the flaws — the scratches, pits, and peeling emulsion — caused by her handling of the collodion, as they added metaphorical resonance to her pictures. These imperfections allowed her to suggest how death "sculpted this ravishing landscape and will hold title to it for all time."

Collodion Wet Plate

In the late 1990s, Mann began to make collodion wet plate negatives. This nineteenth-century process requires photographers to coat a glass plate with a syrupy substance called collodion. The coated plate is then dipped into a solution of silver salts, which combine with the salts in the collodion to make it light sensitive. The plate is then loaded into the camera for exposure and developed before the collodion dries. The resulting negative can be used to make positive prints on any kind of photographic paper, including Mann's preferred gelatin silver paper. Although most nineteenth-century photographers worked hard to create perfect negatives, Mann realized that it was actually the flaws — such as specks of dust or pools of chemicals — that she liked. Chance now became a determining element in her creative process, and she found herself praying to “the angel of uncertainty,” believing that “aesthetic luck... is just the ability to exploit accidents.”

Abide with Me

I've been coming to terms with the history into which I was born, the people within that history, and the land on which I live, since before I could tie my shoes. Even then, I felt shame and some inchoate sense of accountability; the past haunted me from what seemed like the far side of time.

Now, in this present, there is an urgent cry rising, one that compels me again and again to try to reconcile my love for this place with its brutal history.

Sally Mann, 2017

In the early 2000s Mann embarked on a period of self-examination to consider how race, history, and the social structure of Virginia had shaped not only the landscape but also her own childhood and adolescence. Striving to reach across “the seemingly untraversable divide between the races,” she wanted to address the “rivers of blood” African Americans had poured into this land, as well as the courage they had displayed and the journeys they had taken as they sought to escape slavery. She did this by creating four groups of photographs. Two address physical and spiritual pathways: the rivers and swamps that had offered slaves potential escape routes to freedom; and the churches that promised a spiritual path to deliverance. Two other groups depict African Americans themselves: men who modeled for Mann; and Virginia “Gee-Gee” Carter, who had worked for Mann’s family for fifty years and been a defining presence in her life. Mann titled the series as a whole *Abide with Me*, observing that while the word “abide” means to accept and remain steadfast, it frequently is used in the negative (I cannot abide) to suggest the inability to tolerate. *Abide with Me* also draws on the Christian hymn of the same title, a prayer to God to remain present throughout life’s trials as well as in death.

Virginia “Gee-Gee” Carter

Mann was largely raised by Virginia Carter, whom she affectionately called Gee-Gee. As an adult, Mann struggled with the “fundamental paradox of the South: that a white elite, determined to segregate the two races in public, based their stunningly intimate domestic arrangements on an erasure of that segregation in private.” She also came to understand that while her family had worked hard in support of the civil rights movement, they had benefited from a social and legal structure that perpetuated the subjugation of African Americans, including her beloved Gee-Gee. Haunted by the “stunningly unexamined” way they conducted their lives, she asked: “What were any of us thinking? Why did we never ask the questions? That’s the mystery of it — our blindness and our silence.”

In the early 2000s Mann sought to understand more fully the life of this woman whom she described as “the best mother a child could want.” The granddaughter of a former slave and daughter of a woman who had most likely been raped by a white man, Carter died in 1994 at age one hundred. Mann reached out to Carter’s children and grandchildren, collecting snapshots of her with both her own family and with Mann’s. Mann also looked back at her own pictures of this “powerful, proud, and composed” woman.

Virginia "Gee-Gee" Carter taught Mann difficult lessons about Mann's own conduct within the harsh reality of race relations in the South in the 1950s and 1960s. As a teenager, Mann picked up a disabled young black man along the highway and gave him a ride into Lexington, unaware that she could be endangering him by allowing him to be seen alone with a white woman. When she got home, she recounted the episode:

I went on, and Gee-Gee was listening, but then she was turning her body toward me with an ominous heaviness, as if a Henry Moore sculpture were being rotated 180 degrees. She had biscuit dough stuck to her hands, but above those hands was that wide face, shiny with sweat and . . . was it anger? Anger, at me?

No, perhaps it was fear but there was also anger, and it was taking over her features in a way I had never seen before.

With her hands in the air, the way a surgeon holds them to push the paddle faucets when he is prepped for action, she pressed me back against the wall with her floury forearms, and said in a voice I'd never heard, low and afraid, "Don't you ever pick up a colored boy again, no matter what, no matter who. You hear me?"

Despite having been so affected as a child by stories of Emmett Till's murder, it was many years before I realized that it was unclear just which of us Gee-Gee was most worried about.

Men

As Mann began to explore the racial segregation that had marked her childhood, she realized that these divisions had effectively prevented her from getting to know African American men. Seeking to acknowledge in “an oblique way” the men in her youth whom she “never really saw, never really knew,” she hired, beginning in 2006, African American law students, kitchen workers, or laborers to model for her. The project gained steam three years later when Mann learned of a performance, *Fondly Do We Hope . . . Fervently Do We Pray*, created by the artistic director, choreographer, and dancer Bill T. Jones in honor of the bicentennial of Abraham Lincoln’s birth. Lamenting the histories of racism and slavery that have subjected the African American body to so much stereotyping, exploitation, and violence, Jones noted that nevertheless “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.”

Inspired by this idea, Mann focused on her model’s faces and bodies. She sought to make pictures that simultaneously acknowledge this division and invite connection, opening “a doorway that leads from an immutable past to a future that neither Gee-Gee nor I would ever have imagined.” Hoping to create photographs that attend to the nuances of individual men but are also “aesthetically resonant in some universal way,” she reflected on the histories of oppression and struggle that continue to impact the experience of many African Americans and people of color. Deliberately ambiguous, these beautiful and challenging photographs seem to slip in and out of time, using nineteenth-century processes to question contemporary issues.

Rivers and Swamps

In 2008, as Mann began to look at the landscape as a story of oppression and the struggle for freedom, she photographed in the Great Dismal Swamp and along the nearby Blackwater and Nottoway Rivers in Southampton County, Virginia. Although these sites had offered a means of escape for slaves, many had also found death there. Nat Turner had lived near those rivers when he led a slave rebellion in 1831, with brutal consequences: more than fifty white Virginians were killed; and fifty-six African Americans were executed, including Turner, who was hanged, flayed, and beheaded, while over one hundred more died at the hands of vigilantes.

Mann made these photographs as tintypes (collodion positives on lacquered metal sheets), creating pictures of a dark, impenetrable world. In several she used the mirroring of trees, vines, and brush to intertwine reality and reflection so that they are nearly impossible to distinguish. Others appear fogged, as if clouded by oppressive humidity, steam, or smoke, while many feature tumultuous skies, with shattered trees and desolate bogs. Conveying the region's tangled and ravaged geography as inextricably linked to its dark and complex history, Mann presented these swamps and rivers as threatening worlds that only the most desperate and brave would dare to enter.

Although many of the photographs were made in the Dismal Swamp, Mann titled all of them *Blackwater*, a term that refers to both the Blackwater River itself and a type of slow-moving channel that flows through forested wetlands or swamps. As the vegetation decays, tannins leach into the water, making it acidic and dark.

Churches

In the years immediately after the Civil War numerous all-black congregations were established throughout Virginia. They became central to African American life, providing not only spiritual nourishment but also support for businesses and places for educational, social, and political activities.

When Mann began to photograph rural churches in 2008, she happened upon a guidebook that directed her to many near Lexington that had been founded in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Some were still active while others had long since been abandoned. She photographed them with her 8 × 10 inch view camera and high-contrast Ortho film, frequently presenting them as abstract shapes, alive with the spirit that inspired their creation. Acknowledging the complexity of their history, she depicted some at one with nature, surrounded by bushes and trees that recall the “hush” or “brush arbors” where slaves worshiped in the antebellum South; others vibrate with an inner energy, their windows sparkling and their paint glowing. Printed on expired photographic papers that Mann liked for their unpredictability, they take on a variety of colors from light orange to cool silver.

Mann has vivid memories of going as a young girl to Virginia “Gee-Gee” Carter’s church with her: Carter sang with “quavering, deep anguish and fervor,” and “when the entire congregation was in full throat, I felt as if a great wave had picked me up and was rolling me over. I went with it, tumbling like a pale piece of ocean glass, washing up outside the heavy doors at the end of the service. Blinking in the sudden sunshine of Main Street, I reached for Gee-Gee’s hand.”

What Remains

Mann once remarked that death was “the sculptor of the ravishing landscape” she saw every day on her farm; it was also the sculptor of several series of photographs she made in the early 2000s that reflect on mortality, aging, life’s fragility, and her family. Together these pictures show Mann’s belief that only by looking death in the face can we fully savor life. Loss, she has said, “is designed to be the catalyst for the more intense appreciation of the here and now.”

In 2004, she completed a series of enigmatic portraits of her children, who were by then young adults. Titled *Faces* and made at close range with exposure times of up to three minutes, these large-scale, softly focused pictures unnervingly recall nineteenth-century postmortem photographs. Two years later, she made several haunting self-portraits that allude to the experiences of disintegration, pain, and aging. She also trained her camera on her husband, Larry, who suffers from late-onset muscular dystrophy. Although she had photographed him regularly since they met in 1969, in the early 2000s she began to document the physical changes wrought on his body in a series she titled *Proud Flesh*—a term used for the scar tissue that forms over a horse’s wounds. While Mann mainly selects descriptive titles, those she chooses for the pictures of Larry often draw upon literary and artistic sources, ranging from Greek mythology, classical art, and the Bible, to her favorite authors, including T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Eudora Welty. All of these works evoke the unstable nature of memory, the body’s vulnerability to the ravages of time, and the ineffable divide between matter and spirit.

When she published several of these photographs, she included an excerpt from a poem by Pound:

*What thou lovest well remains,
the rest is dross
What thou lov’st well shall not be
reft from thee.*

[DEX 52]

Blowing Bubbles

1987

gelatin silver print

High Museum of Art, Atlanta,
Purchase with funds from Lucinda W. Bunnan
for the Bunnan Collection

With its discarded toys and bubbles floating through an empty picture frame, this photograph presents childhood as at once magical and fleeting. While Jessie delights in producing the shimmering globes, Virginia faces us with an anxious expression. If the doll on the railing suggests the innocence of childhood, the pair of abandoned shoes at her feet hints at its inevitable end.

[DEX 14]

The Ditch

1987

gelatin silver print

The Art Institute of Chicago,
Gift of Sally Mann and Edwynn Houk Gallery

The power of Mann's family photographs frequently resides in the ways she imbued transient moments of child's play with complex narrative and metaphorical meanings. In *The Ditch*, Emmett pushes his body through a narrow channel, tunneling through claustrophobic earth toward the river beyond, as if enacting the drama of birth. By using a lens designed for a smaller camera, Mann gave the edges a sense of swirling movement.

[DEX 13]

Easter Dress

1986

gelatin silver print

Patricia and David Schulte

This seemingly haphazard composition suggests that the picture was snapped on the fly. However, it was rehearsed and shot multiple times until Mann achieved the desired tension between the peripheral figures, who all face in different directions, and Jessie, who looks directly at the camera and displays the white Easter dress originally worn by Mann herself and made by Jessie's great-grandmother and namesake.

[DEX 1]

The Alligator's Approach

1988

gelatin silver print

National Gallery of Art, Washington,
Corcoran Collection (Gift of David M. Malcolm
in memory of Peter T. Malcolm)

Evoking every parent's fear of lurking, unseen threats, the plastic alligator on the river's edge seems to stalk an oblivious child. In crafting pictures that allude to perils, injury, and even death, Mann explored the anxieties of parenthood: "The more I look at the life of the children, the more enigmatic and fraught with danger and loss their lives become. Photographing my children in those quirky, often emotionally charged moments has helped me to acknowledge and resolve some of the inherent contradictions between the idea or image of motherhood and the reality."

[DEX 8]

Fish Heads

1991

silver dye bleach print

Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
Purchase, Ronald A. Kurtz Gift, 1991 (1991.1123)

[DEX 136]

Bean's Bottom

1991

silver dye bleach print

Private collection

[DEX 53]

River Dance

1991

silver dye bleach print

Courtesy Gagosian

[color photo text]

Mann made most of the family pictures using a large format camera with black-and-white film, but starting around 1990, she also began to use a handheld 2¼ inch camera with color film. Taking advantage of the camera's portability, she worked quickly and intuitively, capturing spontaneous scenes, such as *Bloody Nose*, that exploit the dramatic potential of color to convey emotion and startle viewers.

[DEX 55]

Bloody Nose

1991

silver dye bleach print

Private collection

[DEX 137]

Trumpet Flowers

1991

silver dye bleach print

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York,
Gift, The Bohen Foundation, 2001

[DEX 4]

Jessie at Six

1988

gelatin silver print

National Gallery of Art, Washington,
Corcoran Collection (Gift of David M. Malcolm
in memory of Peter T. Malcolm)

With the intense summertime heat and humidity, the hours spent in the river, and the isolation of the cabin, Mann's children frequently swam and played unclothed. This unstructured childhood was not unlike her own: "Like my children today, I wore no clothes until kindergarten interfered with my feral life, a life of freedom not only from clothes but from constraints of any kind, limited only by the boundaries of our property and the pack of boxers (12 in all) that were my nursemaids."

[DEX 25]

On the Maury

1992

gelatin silver print

Private collection

The Maury River, the site of exploration, amusement, and physical daring, played a central role in the lives of Sally Mann and her family. It also assumes a significant position in her photographs, signifying themes of passage, time, and death. Here, the river propels the family downstream, seemingly into the future and away from the camera's reach. The harmony of the image, with the unspoiled scenery enveloping the canoe, reinforces the sense of the family's connection to the landscape.

[DEX 175]

Last Light

1990

gelatin silver print

Joseph M. Cohen Family Collection

Mann often drew inspiration from earlier artists, including the pioneering early twentieth-century photographer Gertrude Käsebier, celebrated for powerful and tender pictures that convey the bonds between parents and



children. In this photograph of Virginia cradled between her father's knees, Mann also expressed the warmth and physical closeness between parent and child. Yet its deliberately ambiguous title, coupled with Larry's delicate touch on Virginia's neck, as if checking her pulse, raises a disquieting thought: is her young life slipping away?

Gertrude Käsebier, *Mother and Child*, 1899, The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Mina Turner. Photo The Art Institute of Chicago / Art Resource, NY

[DEX 7]

Jessie Bites

1985

gelatin silver print

Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
Purchase, Ronald A. Kurtz Gift, 1987 (1987.1122)

This photograph seems to document the raw aftermath of a clash between a defiant Jessie adorned with war paint and an unseen adult whose arm bears fresh teeth marks. But Mann made the marks on her own arm and she and Jessie expertly re-created her sullen expression for the camera. Through this artifice, the picture convincingly expresses a fundamental childhood struggle between the need for independence and the desire for connection.

[DEX 18]

The Last Time Emmett Modeled Nude

1987

gelatin silver print

Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy,
Andover, Massachusetts, Museum purchase

The title of this photograph was prompted by Emmett's announcement that this was the last time he would model in "the freezing river" after seven failed attempts to get the picture right. However, the title also refers to the inescapable and poignant transitions of childhood. Made at the end of the day, the photograph captures the dwindling light that filters through the dark trees and pools around Emmett, who gazes warily at the camera and spreads his palms flat, creating gentle ripples that break the water's surface. But just as he cannot staunch the flow of the river, the photograph cannot stop the passage of time.

[DEX 110]

Larry Shaving

1991

gelatin silver print

Alessandro F. Uzielli

This image conveys the casual and leisurely nature of life at the family cabin as well as the comfort that exists between family members. Jessie later recalled: “Mom, Emmett, Virginia and I — we’re all . . . actors on a stage . . . putting on a performance. But Dad *is* the stage. . . . He’s there to work between all these strong characters and keep everything together.”

[DEX 108]

Gorjus

1989

gelatin silver print

Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff

Knowing the kinds of scenes that intrigued their mother, Mann’s children sometimes suggested pictures to her. They also supported their mother’s work and recognized that the pictures were just that — pictures and not reality. As thirteen-year-old Jessie noted in 1994, she never connected herself to Mann’s photographs: “It’s a picture of me, but it’s not exactly me. It’s not that close to me, it’s not my feelings.” They also approved the selection of photographs that Mann published in *Immediate Family*.

[DEX 3]

Cherry Tomatoes

1991

gelatin silver print

National Gallery of Art, Washington,
Corcoran Collection (Gift of David M. Malcolm
in memory of Peter T. Malcolm)

[DEX 56]

Emmett Floating at Camp

1991

gelatin silver print

Private collection

[DEX III]

Emmett and the White Boy

1990

gelatin silver print

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York,
Gift, The Bohen Foundation, 2001

[DEX 5]

Jessie at Nine

1991

gelatin silver print

National Gallery of Art, Washington,
Corcoran Collection (Gift of David M. Malcolm
in memory of Peter T. Malcolm)

Some critics noted that one disconcerting aspect of Mann's photographs of her nude children was the chasm between the child's shame-free experience and the adult's knowledge of how fleeting that state of grace is. "The collision of the two perspectives," one explained, "may make us feel more helpless than the kids themselves: we see their frank physical enjoyment and at the same time the looming spectre of adult sexuality in the way we'd see a running figure and the hidden ravine in its path."

[DEX 57]

Picnic

1992

gelatin silver print

Courtesy of the New Orleans Museum of Art,
Collection of H. Russell Albright, M.D.

[DEX 12]

Virginia, Untitled
(Blue Hills)

1993

gelatin silver print

Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
Purchase, the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Gift,
through Joyce and Robert Menschel, 1998 (1998.49)

Using the soft vignetting of her lens to intensify both the sense of looking and her personal connection to the land, Mann created the impression in *Blue Hills* that she was standing on a rise, hand cupped against her forehead, surveying the vista unfurling before her eyes. By composing the scene out of bands of tone, not detail, she infused it with a sense of the sublime, as nature and her imagination transform the dense line of trees and undulating hills into an ocean of waves receding into the background.

[DEX 32]

Virginia, Untitled
(Upper Field)

1993

gelatin silver print

Alice and Richard G. Tilghman

Mann often photographed in the early morning or late afternoon when the light was suffused with humidity. “The landscape,” she wrote, then “appears to soften before your eyes and becomes seductively vague, as if inadequately summoned up by some shiftless creator casually neglectful of the detail.”

Virginia, Untitled
(Niall's River)

1994

gelatin silver print

National Gallery of Art, Washington,
Promised Gift of Stephen G. Stein Employee Benefit Trust

In the early 1990s Mann formed a close friendship with the artist Cy Twombly, a native of Lexington who returned there for several months each year. Inspired by his softly focused photographs of inconsequential things — flowers, the corner of his studio, light coming in a window — she too searched for scenes that were “uncompelling.” She discovered that views such as this one could be surprisingly seductive and noted: “These are the places and things most of us drive by unseeing, scenes of Southern dejection we’d contemplate only if our car broke down and left us by the verdant roadside.”

[DEX 15]

Deep South, Untitled
(Scarred Tree)

1998

gelatin silver print

National Gallery of Art, Washington,
Alfred H. Moses and Fern M. Schad Fund

Reflecting Mann's love of nineteenth-century photography, *Scarred Tree* pays homage to Gustave Le Gray's photograph *Beech Tree, Forest of Fontainebleau*. Like the French photographer, Mann made no attempt to picture the tree in its entirety. By focusing directly on the gash across its trunk — a wound that healed but remains visible — she portrayed it as a “silent witness” to another age, revealing the landscape as a vessel for memory.



Gustave Le Gray, *Beech Tree, Forest of Fontainebleau*, c. 1856,
National Gallery of Art, Washington, Patrons' Permanent Fund

[DEX 113]

Deep South, Untitled
(Fontainebleau)

1998

gelatin silver print

National Gallery of Art, Washington,
Promised Gift of Stephen G. Stein Employee Benefit Trust

[DEX 26]

Deep South, Untitled
(Stick)

1998

gelatin silver print

Courtesy of the New Orleans Museum of Art,
Collection of H. Russell Albright, M.D.

[DEX 6]

Deep South, Untitled
(Three Drips)

1998

gelatin silver print

National Gallery of Art, Washington,
Gift of the Collectors Committee and the
Sarah and William L Walton Fund

During the 1990s Mann was inspired by the work of the nineteenth-century photographer Michael Miley, whose pictures of the Virginia landscape revealed to her new ways of articulating light, form, and space, and showed her the potential of a less than perfect



negative. Although her earlier family pictures had required a technique so precise as to “out-Ansel the most meticulous Adams,” she now experimented boldly, using her 8 × 10 inch view camera with faulty antique lenses and high-contrast Ortho film to capture what she

called the “radical light of the American South.” Because the film could be developed while illuminated with a safelight, she was able to see the negative as it emerged in the developing solution. Mann also welcomed accidental chemical drips, such as those seen here, that intensify the sense of a scene evanescent before our eyes.

[DEX 23]

Deep South, Untitled
(*Valentine Windsor*)

1998

gelatin silver print

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond,
Gift of the Massey Charitable Trust (99.211)

When Mann traveled through Louisiana and Mississippi in the late 1990s, she realized that she had plunged into “the heart of the country, but it’s such a flawed heart.” The Deep South “was haunted 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.” Paying homage to them, *Valentine Windsor* depicts the ruins of Windsor Mansion, the largest antebellum Greek Revival house in Mississippi. Located on a plantation that covered 2,600 acres, it was built between 1859 and 1861 and destroyed by fire in 1890.

[DEX 107]

Deep South, Untitled
(Bridge on Tallahatchie)

1998

gelatin silver print

Markel Corporate Art Collection

In 1955 Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old African American from Chicago, was visiting family in Mississippi when he was kidnapped and brutally murdered after being falsely accused of flirting with a white woman. The perpetrators were acquitted. Haunted by the accounts of his death since her own childhood, Mann named her firstborn child Emmett. In 1998, seeking to get the earth “to give up its ghosts,” she retraced his presumed route on the evening of his death. *Bridge on Tallahatchie* depicts the Black Bayou Bridge in Glendora, Mississippi, where some believe Till’s naked, mutilated body was thrown into the river with a heavy fan from a cotton gin lashed around his waist. In the foreground a skeletal branch reaches in from the left like the scrawny-fingered hand of death, and just below it a seemingly careless chemical streak evokes a teardrop moving through the emulsion.

[DEX 177]

Deep South, Untitled
(Emmett Till River Bank)

1998

gelatin silver print

Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts,
Museum purchase with funds donated by Susan Esco Chandler
and Alfred D. Chandler and Joanie V. Ingraham
and Timothy A. Ingraham, 2017

Guided by a friend, Mann trekked through dense underbrush to the site where some believe Till's body was discovered. "Disappointed by the humdrum, backwashy scene," she wondered, "how could a place so weighted with historical pain appear to be so *ordinary*?" Positioning her camera almost directly in front of the opening in the brush, she focused on a gash in the earth and depicted a place as barren and devoid of humanity in 1998 as it had been in 1955. But she also shot into the sun, allowing it to flood the scene with light, in defiance of Kodak's rule and perhaps mindful of Martin Luther King's admonition: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

Deep South, Untitled
(*Concrete Grave*)

1998

gelatin silver print

Kate and Matt Cooper

Made near Money, Mississippi, *Concrete Grave* depicts an aboveground tomb in which concrete was poured directly over the deceased body—a common practice in the area, Mann was told. She herself described the picture as “emblematic of the plucky, undiminished South, a no-frills monument to the intractability of the overworked soil and the practical, impoverished, generous people who have long tried to wring a living from it.” Yet as it was made so close to the site of Emmett Till’s murder, this sealed, unmarked grave both recalls and contrasts with Till’s own open coffin, which laid bare the depravity of the crime committed against him.

[DEX 16]

Battlefields, Cold Harbor
(*Battle*)

2003

gelatin silver print

National Gallery of Art, Washington,
Gift of the Collectors Committee and the
Sarah and William L Walton Fund

Fought ten miles north of Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy, in the spring of 1864, the sprawling Battle of Cold Harbor “was not war,” as Confederate general Evander Law observed, “it was murder.” The slaughter was so terrible, the Union losses so great, Abraham Lincoln thought it could “almost be said that the ‘heavens are hung in black.’”

In *Cold Harbor* Mann conveyed the horrific nature of the battle not only by allowing the picture to fade into darkness at the edges, but also through the horizontal streaks (probably caused by dust on the collodion negative) that fly like bullets across it. Such an image asks us to acknowledge that even now we walk, as Mann wrote, “among the accretion of millions of remains,” among “the bones, lives, souls, hopes, joys and fears that devolve into the earth.”

[DEX 21]

Battlefields, Antietam
(*Trenches*)

2001

gelatin silver print

National Gallery of Art, Washington,
Promised Gift of Stephen G. Stein Employee Benefit Trust

[DEX 115]

Battlefields, Antietam
(*Black Sun*)

2001

gelatin silver print

Courtesy of Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York

The Battle of Antietam, fought near Sharpsburg, Maryland, on September 17, 1862, between Robert E. Lee's Confederate army and George B. McClellan's Union forces, was the bloodiest single day in American history. "The dead," as one Union surgeon reported, "were almost wholly unburied" more than one week later.

In this apocalyptic view, Mann positioned her camera close to the ground, as if to mimic the viewpoint of a dying soldier whose terrifying last vision is the sun itself shrouded in death. Using antique uncoated lenses, Mann welcomed the light leaks, fogging, and flares they produce.

[DEX 24]

Battlefields, Antietam
(Cornfield)

2001

gelatin silver print

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond,
The National Endowment for the Arts Fund
for American Art (2004.18)

In the time I am writing every stalk of corn in the northern and greater part of the field was cut as closely as could have been done with a knife, and the slain lay in rows precisely as they had stood in their ranks a few moments before.

Joseph Hooker, Union officer, 1862

Again and again, hour after hour, by charges and counter-charges, this portion of the field was lost and recovered, until the green corn that grew upon it looked as if it had been struck by a storm of bloody hail.

John Gordon, Confederate officer, 1904

[DEX 60]

Battlefields, Fredericksburg
(Cedar Trees)

2001

gelatin silver print

Waterman/Kislinger Family

To achieve the textural, almost gritty appearance of her battlefield photographs, Mann coated the surface with a varnish mixed with diatomaceous earth—the fossilized remains of tiny marine creatures.

[DEX 19]

Battlefields, Antietam
(Last Light)

2001

gelatin silver print

Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy,
Andover, Massachusetts, Museum purchase

[DEX 117]

Battlefields, Wilderness
(Solarized Trees)

2002

gelatin silver print

Ruth and Laura Compton

At the Battle of the Wilderness, fought in Virginia over three days in May 1864, densely wooded, nearly impenetrable terrain prompted hand-to-hand combat and the artillery fire felled men and trees alike. Drawing on a metaphor previously used by Civil War photographers to describe the shocking loss of life, Mann focused on a blasted young tree, severed long before its prime.



Possibly by Alexander Gardner, *The Wilderness Battlefield* (detail), 1865–1867, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gilman Collection, Purchase, The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Gift, through Joyce and Robert Menschel

[DEX 51]

Battlefields, Antietam
(Starry Night)

2001

gelatin silver print

Alan Kirshner and Deborah Mihaloff Art Collection

[DEX 119]

Battlefields, Manassas
(Veins)

2000

gelatin silver print

Private collection

[DEX 116]

Battlefields, Antietam
(Smoke)

2000

gelatin silver print

Private collection

[DEX 148 / DEX 37]

First Baptist Church of Natural Bridge

Hatton Pond Baptist

2008–2016

gelatin silver prints

Collection of the artist

Hatton Pond Baptist Church, founded in 1882, had served a thriving community for over a century. In 1994 Tommy Darcus, church deacon, recalled that “there was old-timey gospel singing. This singing was by lining. One person would start a song and then the people in the church would sing it. They didn’t believe in instruments. They believed in the instruments God had given them and that was their voices.”

[DEX 62 / DEX 158]

Marl Hill Baptist

Payne’s Chapel United Methodist

2008–2016

gelatin silver prints

Collection of the artist

Located in Vesuvius, Virginia, Marl Hill Baptist Church was constructed in 1914 and closed in the early 1950s. Payne’s Chapel was built in 1899 and closed in the late 1970s; the land, located in Mt. Solon, Virginia, was acquired in 1887 for \$25 from Mary M. Huggard, an African American who probably inherited it from a large landholder in the area.

[DEX 161 / DEX 35]

Oak Hill Baptist
Mt. Tabor United Methodist

2008–2016

gelatin silver prints

Collection of the artist

Founded in the late 1870s or early 1880s, Oak Hill Baptist Church in Middlebrook, Virginia, remains active today. Mt. Tabor United Methodist Church nestles near the edge of Round Hill, a traditionally African American community in New Hope, Virginia. It replaced a log structure built prior to 1850. Here, the church appears as an apparition, an effect achieved by overexposing the negative.

[DEX 64 / DEX 154 / DEX 63]

Morning Star Baptist

Mt. Airy Baptist

Morning Star Baptist

2008–2016

gelatin silver prints

Collection of the artist

Built sometime before 1884, Mt. Airy Baptist Church served the large population of African American landowners and tenants in Middlebrook, Virginia. Morning Star Baptist Church was quite likely established soon after and in 1908 acquired a parcel of land for \$1 in Crimora, Virginia.

[DEX 149 / DEX 40 / DEX 42]

(center)

First Baptist Church of Goshen
St. Paul United Methodist
St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal

2008–2016

gelatin silver prints

Collection of the artist

Located twenty miles north of Lexington, the First Baptist Church of Goshen is now abandoned.

[DEX 156 / DEX 152 / DEX 49]

(right)

Mt. Tabor United Methodist
Lawson Chapel United Methodist
Cedar Hill Baptist

2008–2016

gelatin silver prints

Collection of the artist

The congregation of Cedar Hill Baptist Church of Lexington came together right after the Civil War, meeting first in a log cabin and later under a large oak tree; the structure seen here was constructed in 1874.

[DEX 155 / DEX 150 / DEX 39]

Mt. Lebanon Baptist
First Baptist Church of Goshen, Rectory
Asbury United Methodist

2008—2016

gelatin silver prints

Collection of the artist

Asbury United Methodist Church, erected in Brownsburg, Virginia, in 1917, replaced an earlier church that had been destroyed by fire in 1914.

[DEX 38 / DEX 160 / DEX 153]

(center)

Beulah Baptist
St. Paul United Methodist
Marl Hill Baptist

2008—2016

gelatin silver prints

Collection of the artist

Recently renovated and continuing to thrive, the Beulah Baptist Church in Stuart's Draft, Virginia, was founded in 1890 on an acre of land purchased for \$15.

[DEX 46 / DEX 29 / DEX 44]

(right)

First Baptist Church of Goshen

Oak Hill Baptist

Lawson Chapel United Methodist

2008–2016

gelatin silver prints

Collection of the artist

[DEX 164]

The Two Virginias #3

1991

gelatin silver print

Private collection

Here Mann contrasted age and youth, with the tiny toes of Mann's younger daughter, Virginia, dangling as she perches on Virginia Carter's unseen lap. Mann also poignantly recalled Carter's difficulty in finding shoes for her size thirteen feet. She had worn Mann's father's discarded shoes, "razor-sliced to accommodate the corns on her toes," and her mother's discarded stockings, "whose gossamer runs enlarged into ladder-rungs as the day went on, the seams wobbling crazily."

[DEX 109]

The Two Virginias #4

1991

gelatin silver print

Collection of The Estée Lauder Companies Inc.

Here, Mann's daughter Virginia sleeps on the lap of her namesake, Virginia "Gee-Gee" Carter. Mann wove the picture together through the depiction of their upraised arms, frozen in midair as if they were jointly conducting an unseen orchestra in their dreams. By using selective focus, Mann drew attention to Carter's arthritic hand, conveying her pain and persistence, her trials and endurance.

[DEX 166]

The Two Virginias #1

1988

gelatin silver print

Private collection

[DEX 165]

The Two Virginias #2

1989

gelatin silver print

Private collection

[DEX 95]

Men, Janssen

2006–2015

gelatin silver print

Collection of the artist

When Janssen modeled for Mann in 2006 he was completing his legal studies at Washington and Lee University in Lexington. Looking at the “haunting” photograph that resulted from the session, he remarked: “There [are] moments where you see the tragedy . . . and then you also see the beauty . . . That’s what she was trying to show with the South . . . this history that we really should not be forgetting.”

[DEX 70]

Men, Ronald

2006–2015

gelatin silver print

Collection of the artist

“Bill T. Jones once said to me that he was ‘catching ghosts.’ Maybe,” explained Mann, “that’s what I’m trying to do in all of my work—to catch the ghosts or see the traces of all those who lived and died.”

[DEX 96]

Men, Stephen

2006–2015

gelatin silver print

Collection of the artist

[DEX 74]

Men, Anton

2006–2015

gelatin silver print

Collection of the artist

Reflecting on the experience of taking the photographs in this series, Mann said: “When I worked with these men, my goal was to establish such a level of trust as to suspend, if only for that short time, our racial past. But also I hoped to convince the total stranger before me that these pictures we were making would be . . . worth the risk he was taking in making himself so vulnerable.”

[DEX 80]

Blackwater 9

2008–2012

tintype

Collection of the artist

[DEX 79]

Blackwater 7

2008–2012

tintype

Collection of the artist

[DEX 86]

Blackwater 20

2008–2012

tintype

Collection of the artist

[DEX 87]

Blackwater 24

2008–2012

tintype

Collection of the artist

[DEX 78]

Blackwater 5

2008–2012

tintype

Collection of the artist

Although panthers, snakes, slave catchers, and disease felled many enslaved people who escaped to the Dismal Swamp, some managed to survive. Called Maroons, they established self-sufficient communities on small hillocks rising within the swamp and subsisted on fishing, hunting, cultivation, and barter, often with Native Americans who also lived there. The fierce independence of the Maroons stood in sharp rebuke to the false idea spread by slave owners that African Americans did not desire their freedom.

[DEX 90]

Blackwater 30

2008–2012

tintype

Collection of the artist

[DEX 85]

Blackwater 18

2008–2012

tintype

Collection of the artist

[DEX 88]

Blackwater 25

2008–2012

tintype

Collection of the artist

[DEX 89]

Blackwater 28

2008–2012

tintype

Collection of the artist

[DEX 75]

Blackwater 1

2008–2012

tintype

Collection of the artist

Mann added to the sense of horror by overexposing the tintypes and allowing their highlights to solarize and turn an unnatural, metallic gray.

[DEX 91]

Blackwater 32

2008–2012

tintype

Collection of the artist

[DEX 81]

Blackwater 13

2008–2012

tintype

Collection of the artist

[DEX 77]

Blackwater 4

2008–2012

tintype

Collection of the artist

[DEX 76]

Blackwater 3

2008–2012

tintype

Collection of the artist

Some of Mann's tintypes, such as this one, are edged with an eerie, wavering, incandescent blue line (probably caused by excessive collodion on the plates) that adds to their otherworldliness. It also may refer to the bluish-green sun that Turner saw during a solar eclipse a week before he began the uprising and that he interpreted as God's validation of his mission to free enslaved people.

[DEX 82]

Blackwater 15

2008–2012

tintype

Collection of the artist

[DEX 83]

Blackwater 16

2008–2012

tintype

Collection of the artist

[DEX 84]

Blackwater 17

2008–2012

tintype

Collection of the artist

[DEX 163]

Singer, DJ

2006–2015

gelatin silver print

Collection of the artist

Written by the Scottish Anglican poet Henry Francis Lyte in 1847, the lyrics of “Abide with Me” are most often sung to the English composer William Henry Monk’s “Eventide.”

*Abide with me! Fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens: Lord, with me abide!
When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me!*

[DEX 162]

The Quality of the Affection

2006

gelatin silver print

Private collection

The title of this photograph of Mann’s husband, Larry, is drawn from Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, a long, ambitious poem that Mann explored in her 1975 master’s thesis in creative writing. Reflecting on time, memory, and experience, Pound concluded:

*nothing matters but the quality
of the affection —
in the end — that has carved the trace in the mind*

[DEX 126]

Speak, Memory

2008

gelatin silver print

Courtesy Gagosian

Here Mann referenced Vladimir Nabokov's autobiography *Speak, Memory*, which addresses memory's changeability over time and life's fleeting nature: "The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness."

[DEX 17]

Untitled (Self-Portrait)

2006–2012

grid of nine ambrotypes

National Gallery of Art, Washington,
Alfred H. Moses and Fern M. Schad Fund

Mann made few self-portraits until 2006, when she suffered a grave riding accident. Unable to easily maneuver her large, heavy camera, she set it in a fixed position and photographed herself at very close range. Using a long exposure that registered slight movement as a blur, she created a series of fragmentary self-portraits that range in emotion from meditative to almost demonic. The bubbled, scratched, and scarred surfaces of the ambrotypes (collodion positives made directly on black glass) powerfully convey the experience of damage and disintegration while the variability among the plates suggests the mutability of the self.

[DEX 101]

Was Ever Love

2009

gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston,
Museum purchase funded by the
S.I. Morris Photography Endowment (2010.163)

[DEX 124]

Memory's Truth

2008

gelatin silver print

Courtesy Gagosian

Mann took this title from Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, which asserts that memory has its own kind of truth: "It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality."

[DEX 143]

Triptych

2004

gelatin silver prints

The Sir Elton John Photography Collection

Ethereal and indistinct, receding and dissolving, these larger-than-life faces express Mann's long-standing fascination with the fragility of physical being.

[DEX 121]

Jessie #25

2004

gelatin silver print

Courtesy of Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York

[DEX 122]

Virginia #6

2004

gelatin silver print

Courtesy of Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York

[DEX 129]

Time and the Bell

2008

gelatin silver print

Courtesy Gagosian

The title of this photograph was inspired by *Four Quartets*, T.S. Eliot's mournful ruminations on the passage of time, published in the midst of World War II:

*Time and the bell have buried the day,
The black cloud carries the sun away . . .
After the kingfisher's wing
Has answered light to light, and is silent, the light is still
At the still point of the turning world.*

[DEX 128]

Thinner

2005

gelatin silver print

Courtesy Gagosian

[DEX 123]

David

2005

gelatin silver print

Courtesy Gagosian

[DEX 102]

Semaphore

2003

gelatin silver print

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston,
Museum purchase (2010.264)

[DEX 27]

Hephaestus

2008

gelatin silver print

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond,
Kathleen Boone Samuels Memorial Fund (2009.335)

In this work, Mann connected Larry, who is both blacksmith and lawyer, with Hephaestus, the Greek god of metalworking who was expelled from Mount Olympus (the home of the gods) because of a physical deformity. While the cracking and abrasions on Larry's muscled torso convey the ravages of disease, the silvery, molten quality of the swirls alludes to the art of metalworking.

[DEX 125]

Ponder Heart

2009

gelatin silver print

National Gallery of Art, Washington,
Alfred H. Moses and Fern M. Schad Fund

Ponder Heart by the southern writer Eudora Welty tells the story of a generous man who loved people and "would give away everything he owned." During the long three-minute exposure of this photograph the beating of Larry's heart caused his hand, resting on his shoulder, to blur.

[DEX 130]

The Turn

2005

gelatin silver print

Private collection

[DEX 178]

MARK OSTERMAN

American, born 1955

“The Wet-Plate Process: A Working Guide”

self-published manual, 1996

Collection of Sally Mann

[DEX 173]

R. KIM RUSHING

American, born 1961

Sally with camera

c. 1998

Collection of Sally Mann

*Sally Mann: Collodion and the
Angel of Uncertainty*

9 minutes

Made possible by the HRH Foundation

Sally Mann and Bill T. Jones

6 minutes

Made possible by Heather and Jim Johnson
and Neil and Sayra Meyerhoff

Interview with Janssen Evelyn

4 minutes

Courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum

Bill T. Jones: Proof 1

2017

gelatin silver print

Collection of the artist

Bill T. Jones: Proof 3

2017

gelatin silver print

Collection of the artist

Bill T. Jones: Proof 5

2017

gelatin silver print

Collection of the artist

Homeland and Graveyard, Refuge and Battleground

For some twenty years, Mann has explored places that are central to Virginia's fraught history and are located within a few hundred miles of her home in Lexington. In the early 2000s, noting that more Civil War battles were fought in Virginia than in any other state, she photographed in Cold Harbor, Fredericksburg, Manassas, and the Wilderness. From 2008 to 2012 she expanded her investigation into whether the land bore traces of its tragic history, photographing in the Great Dismal Swamp. Long a haven for escaped slaves, it was also the presumed destination of Nat Turner, who staged his 1831 slave rebellion in nearby Southampton County. As a consequence of his revolt, the Virginia legislature enacted more stringent laws governing the lives of enslaved and emancipated blacks alike, further restricting their ability to worship freely. In the past decade, Mann has also photographed some of the nearby churches that were established by African Americans after the Civil War. Although often consisting of no more than a few dozen members, these churches provided spiritual sustenance and guidance for their communities, and became focal points for education, civil rights activism, and job training.