

# Sally Mann, Mythbreaker

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When Marta Ponsa invited me to give a talk about Sally Mann's show *A Thousand and One Passages*, I was delighted. As of the day when I discovered the artist's work, I'd felt that the two of us were somehow close – almost 'sisters', if that doesn't sound too pretentious. Even at the superficial level of biography (and are our biographies really as superficial as all that?), we have much in common: our ethnic backgrounds (WASP), our age (she was born in May '51 and I in September '53), some aspects of our family background (whimsical yet authoritarian fathers to whom we felt close, intellectual and often absent mothers, both of whom encouraged us to think and act for ourselves); moreover, both Sally and I graduated from private high schools in New England. It's quite possible that in 1969 my field hockey team from High Mowing School (New Hampshire) played against hers from The Putney School (Vermont), and that she and I were involved in close combat on the same lawn... Then Sally went off to Bennington and I to Sarah Lawrence, two members of the 'Seven Sisters' – colleges long reserved to women, just as (and because) the Ivy League schools were to men. Here's how we got ourselves up back then...

"On the weekends I would head off with my date in his Chevelle or El Camino, my hair rat's-nested and lacquered into ringlets atop my heavily made-up face, eyelashes curled and matted with mascara, heavy black lines drawn across and well past my eyelid in a Cher-like Cleopatra imitation, lips shiny with cheap lipstick, Jungle Gardenia flowering at my throat, on my wrists, and between my A-cup breasts, which did their best to swell out of a padded bra."

- *Hold Still*, p. 29

Above and beyond these (perhaps) superficial resemblances, Sally Mann and I are alike in that we've always felt we had a double vocation. Sally is as passionate about literature as she is about photography, and I care as much about music as I do about literature. Mann says she has "always had to reconcile wanting to be a writer with wanting to be a



photographer.” “The two sensibilities, the visual and the verbal, have always been linked for me.” She loves for people to describe her work as “photographic writing”. And her literary talent is evident in everything she writes, including the titles she gives her photographs. “The inherent relationship between my writing and photography has never been clearer to me than it is now,” she writes in *Hold Still*, the book of memoirs she published in 2015. “The early poetic language and my later elegiac landscapes each served as primary, repeating threads running through my life, the warp and woof of memory and desire.”

In *Bad Girl: More Creative Writing Classes*, my own autobiographical book which dates from just the year before (2014), I wrote this to my literary alter-ego whose name is Dorrit : “Playing classical music will allow you to express your own emotions vicariously. It gives you fabulous release! Military marches, cooing doves, lyrical *élans*, wild dances, explosions, cries and whispers... The notes of the great composers move through your body and your soul, giving structure to your chaos. After twenty years of studying at the school of Bach Mozart Beethoven Schubert Chopin, you’ll be ready to write your first novel.”

“I had a vision of how I wanted to live. In 1969 my parents and I had visited Helen and Scott Nearing on their subsistence farm in Maine and I had made a heavily underscored mental note that this was exactly what I wanted for myself: a life of simplicity, pluck, seclusion, and soul-satisfying, ecological, sweat-of-the-brow, we’ll-vote-with-our-lives self-sufficiency. Seven years later, Larry and I were giving it a go.”

*Hold Still*, p. 77

Though our life paths diverged as we entered our twenties – in 1975 Sally completed her Master’s degree in Creative Writing, married Larry Mann and returned to her native Virginia whereas I, thanks to an indefinitely prolonged Junior Year Abroad, settled down in Paris for good –, we nonetheless continued making similar discoveries and undergoing similar transformations. In the long run, each in her own way, we both eventually became... mythbreakers.

# 1. The Myth of the Nymphet : At Twelve

Our first truly personal works revolved around the beautiful adolescent girls we'd just stopped being – and who, despite the innumerable and unfathomable male heads they turned, insisted on seeing and not only being seen.

In 1988 Mann published *At Twelve*, a series of carefully staged photos of girls at the cusp between childhood and adulthood, and dedicated the work to... her husband Larry. As for me, I published my first book *Jouer au papa et à l'amant* in 1979 (the title could be translated as *Fathers and Lovers*) and dedicated it... to my father. Here are the opening passages of the chapter entitled "On Puberty and Nymphets".

"The day is approaching. The great metamorphosis is about to take place. The little girl is on the verge of becoming a woman. The flower will burst into bloom, before long we'll be able to gather its pollen, taste its honey. The nubile girl has attained the stage of maximum ambiguity. She's on the edge – the outer edge of childhood, the threshold of adulthood. She hovers there, vacillating between two states of being. How old is she? How old?"

"And then one day you'll look at yourself in the mirror and the miracle will have happened. You'll have become a nymphet. You'll have been elected, selected, chosen among all girls for this honor... Of course, you mustn't show you're aware of it. You must seem innocent, carefree and light-hearted. Nothing matters more important than your ability to bewitch men. You're not really human. You never have problems with your geography homework. You never freak out and have a conniption fit. You have no mother, no father, no past and no future... For one or two short years, your looks will epitomize dangerous perfection... How lovely you are, little one. Please stay that way. Bask in the lights of the camera. We're going to take your picture, freeze this ephemeral moment when your sensuality is all the more arousing for being unaccomplished. My little flower..."

“They show their bodies but they themselves aren’t there. Is the soul innocent and the body corrupted – or, on the contrary, is the body pure and the mind impure ?”

“Beneath the surface lurks the terror of being worthless, the terror of being ugly, the terror of being loved only because your skin is so smooth, your body so slender and delicate.” “Do we really believe a thirteen-year-old girl thinks of herself in terms of nymphs, flowers and butterflies? The same metaphors are endlessly recycled – the bud on the verge of unfolding, the tiny colorful thing one must catch before it flutters away, the temptress feigning unawareness of her ambiguous body’s tremendous power.”

‘Once the work was out in the world’, writes Sally Mann of *Immediate Family*, ‘I was puzzled why that sensuous beauty should be signposted as controversial while at the same time magazine pages were filled with prurient images of young girls, all aimed at selling commercial products.’

*Hold Still*, p. 159

## 2. The Myth of the Heroic, Conquering, Active Man : *Proud Flesh*

Sally Mann and I are also alike in that we both take an intense professional interest in the male body. (In parentheses: I can’t help wondering what it is like for a woman to go through life with the name Mann.) Sally’s husband Larry Mann also has a double vocation – he’s at once a blacksmith and a lawyer, a man at the anvil and a man at the bar, two powerful symbols of male prerogative in all human societies. Yet as of the very first years of their marriage, Larry let Sally photograph him. Looking at *Héphaïstos*, it’s clear that he cooperated, allowing himself to be contemplated at length. Not many men let the woman they love dissect them visually like that.

As for me, a number of my projects in recent years have explored the male body: a CD-Book, *Le Mâle entendu* (roughly translated : *Misterunderstanding*), two short essays, *Sois fort* (*Be Strong*) and *Virilités vrillées* (*Disparaging Manhood*), – not to mention numerous passages in a novel (*Infrared*), whose main character is a female photographer.

“Kamal (...) knows how to stay still, fully awake and attentive, and give himself up to me as a cello gives itself up to the bow. Arching his back, he surrenders his face, shoulders, back and buttocks, waiting for me to play them, and I do – I play them, play with them. Most men are afraid to let go like this – whereas, with a little finesse, the wonders of passivity can be tasted in even the most violent throes of love-making. (...) This is when I take my picture. From deep inside the loving. The Canon’s part of my body. I myself am the ultrasensitive film – capturing invisible reality, capturing heat.”

Still more surprisingly and movingly, the public trust between Mann and her husband was continued and confirmed when the latter contracted early-onset muscular dystrophy and his body started losing its strength and beauty. The title *Thinner* is a heart-wrenching understatement. Larry’s muscles began to melt, his manliness to drain away... and Sally went on taking pictures of him with the same lucid, loving gaze. As one of the catalogue texts puts it, “Painfully honest yet tender, the pictures are ultimately a testament to the strength of their love and Larry’s unwavering support of her art.”

Whereas any number of male artists have documented the decline and death of their mothers, lovers or wives (Monet comes to mind), this is to my knowledge the first time in history that a man has supported his wife’s artistic endeavor to the extent of letting her record his failing health on film. Mann insists on seeing and saying, remaining present and perceiving, on the alert. Not on the prowl. Not in your face. Firmly at a remove from New-Age constructs purporting to show the suffering body surrounded by an ‘aura’ of immortality. No, Mann confronts and expresses mortality itself, which is what makes us so precious to one another. By magnifying our mortality, she renders it magnificent.

### 3. The Myth of the Perfect Mother and Blind Maternal Love : *Immediate Family & The Way It Looked*

Sally and Larry Mann had three children : Emmett was born in 1979, Jessie in 1981 and Virginia in 1985. After becoming a mother, this artist did something astonishingly innovative. Rather than 1° mutilating herself by giving up her art, 2° complaining about being torn between her art and motherhood, or 3° abandoning her kids (as my own mother did) in favor of her career, Sally Mann decided to associate her children with her artistic work.

“They have been involved in the creative process since infancy,” she writes. And, elsewhere : “Having children expanded the parameters beyond the decorative [and] opened up the tender as well as a political (in the broadest sense) side to my work.”

It's most unusual for a mother to say a thing like that, and more unusual still for her to say it through her art. Mann does so in a way that's neither cutesy (cf. Marie Cassat) nor bitinglly ironic (cf. Alice Neel's *Toxic Madonn*, or Egon Schiele's collapsed hooker-moms), reminiscent neither of Irina Ionesco's pornographic exploitation of her daughter nor the hyper-conceptual approach of some avant-garde creators in the Seventies, whose 'artwork' consisted in the relentlessly detailed description of every interaction with their baby during the first months of its life...

“Maybe at first I didn't see those things as art because, with young babies in the house, you remove your 'photography eyes,' as Linda Connor once called the sensibility that allows ecstatic vision. Maybe it was because the miraculous quotidian (oxymoronic as that phrase may seem) that is part of child rearing must often, for species survival, veil the intensely seeing eye.”

*Hold Still*, p. 107



‘Many... are intimate,’ Mann wrote of her *Immediate Family* photos, ‘some are fictions and some are fantastic, but most are of ordinary things every mother has seen – a wet bed, a bloody nose, candy cigarettes.’ Aware of the waves they might make, she decided to delay publication until her children had grown up. In the catalogue of *A Thousand and One Passages*, commissioner Sarah Kennel writes that “upon learning this, the children were angered that they had not been consulted and asked her to reconsider. After conferring with a psychologist who assured [the couple] that Emmett and Jessie were well adjusted and fully cognizant of the implications of the publication [...], Mann moved forward with [it].”

When the book came out in 1992, it provoked an outcry. People criticized Mann for having used and exploited her children’s bodies (to say nothing of the souls that inhabit them). “Underlying all these questions,” Kennel writes, “was a pervasive unease that Mann’s extraordinarily creative vision derived its power from a form of maternal omnipotence.” I must admit that I don’t quite understand what that sentence means, apart from the fact that a lot of people share the fantasy of the all-powerful mother.

“As strange as it sounds, I found something comforting about this disturbing picture [*Damaged Child*]. Looking at the still-damp contact print, and then looking at Jessie, completely recovered and twirling around the house in her pink tutu, I realized the image inoculated me to a possible reality that I might not henceforth have to suffer. Maybe this could be an escape from the manifold terrors of child rearing, an apotropaic protection: stare them straight in the face but at a remove – on paper, in a photograph.”

*Hold Still*, p. 114

What about the countless family albums in the world whose contents are the result of orders such as “Stand there! Look at me! SMILE! Don’t move! I told you to smile! Shit, you blinked!” and so on and so forth. How could we ever hope to discover and denounce the millions of mothers who manipulated their children to make photographs that never got published? In every family in the world, parents manipulate

the souls and bodies of their children. They order, push and slap their kids around. They criticize , humiliate and corner them, yell at them, train them like circus animals .... but because all this behavior takes place in private, we neither see it nor fuss about it. From this point of view, parents who are artists take far greater risks than those who are not.

(A small query in parentheses : is *Immediate Family* really about family? Not in my sense of word. With the exception of *Cherry Tomatoes*, in which father and daughter appear locked in a disturbingly erotic embrace, there is little interaction among the various subjects of these photographs; they are usually only juxtaposed.)

Mann's children have always seen their mother making photos. Of course the images in *Immediate Family* are prepared. "Sometimes I have an idea," writes Sally, "usually based on something I've seen them do... When it's convenient, I'll arrange the scene and let the kids work back into it... The final image more often than not is significantly affected by the children's interpretations or contributions." Some days they cooperate willingly, other days they balk, still other days they get fed up with posing, which is only natural, and tell their mother so, but always this Sally and her children seem to communicate "right up front" in an atmosphere of trust. And *that* is revolutionary.

It was not unreasonable when [Emmett] announced that it was the last time he would model in the freezing river (by then it was October), and for some reason I titled the picture 'The Last Time Emmett Models Nude,' although I knew the nudity was completely beside the point. That certainly came back to bite me in the ass.

*Hold Still*, p. 126-127

In 1990, when I started writing *Slow Emergencies*, my daughter was eight. I asked if I could borrow for my novel a few of her verbal gems she'd come up with as a toddler and she said yes. A dozen years later, she felt she'd been manipulated or 'used,' and regretted having given me that permission; more years later, I think it stopped being a problem. That's life, you know? Is there such a thing as a life where nothing hurts? *Should* there be?

Instead of denying the critical importance of maternal experience on pretext that women have always been assimilated and reduced to the maternal 'role', Sally Mann and I have always tried to explore the *ambivalence* of motherhood. 'Photographing my children in those quirky, often emotionally charged moments,' she writes, 'has helped me to acknowledge and resolve some of the inherent contradictions between the idea or image of motherhood and the reality.' Whereas all mothers have encountered those contradictions, few have expressed them and still fewer have used them as a major theme in their work.

Motherhood is far from being our only theme – strange how, there, too, some people insist on reducing us to that ! – but when we deal with it, we try to do so as honestly as possible.

Even at the time, anguishing over these opinions and predictions, I knew that the crucial question for me as a mother was not whether the pictures were going to be respected in twenty years, but (...) : 'I wonder how those poor, art-abused kids turned out.'

*Hold Still*, p. 139

"Lin is spying on her children. Standing at the high window of her dance-room, she stealthily parts the white tulle curtains an inch or two and watches Angela and Marina playing together in the sand-box.

These are her daughters' bodies. Scrunched in the sand, involved in some sort of female game. Tut-tut nose-lifting hair-smoothing lady friends filling tiny plastic plates and cups and pitchers with sand and snippets of grass and painstakingly plucked-apart pink-and-white clover blossoms. Inviting each other over for tea or dinner, tasting each other's cakes and cookies and roast chickens, screwing up their features in approval or distaste.

Seldom only very seldom does Lin force herself to sit at the edge of the sand-box with them and sip at the sticky little cups and lick her lips and raise her eyebrows – Ooh, Mrs. Smith, you put too much sugar in it!

Angela's blonde curls move closer to Marina's straight light-brown locks. The two heads are dry now, rinsed of womb muck and pressed dry with a towel, never again will my daughters be newborn babies but the dance is perpetually newborn, the dance does not grow so strangely and unpredictably, the dance does not get old, it uses my body to say what it has to say but it doesn't or change, I myself will die, that doesn't matter but how can I dance if my children are going to die"<sup>1</sup>

One day when he was seven, dashing across a street to meet his mother, Emmett Mann was hit by a car. Sally found her son unconscious in a pool of blood. The event was a terrible shock to her. *The death of a child is the worst thing that can happen to any parent, artist or non-artist.*

Mann tried to overcome her terror – apotropaically, as she put it – by reconstructing Emmett's wounds and taking photos of his face *The Way it Looked*. There is nothing cold-hearted about this – on the contrary, it shows that Sally Mann's art and her love are both so strong and genuine that she can't even imagine dropping one for the other. Her love says yes to everything, including the possibility of losing the one she loves.

The "apotropaic" series failed to calm Sally's terror. As she wrote to a friend, she feared that "by photographing my fears I might be *closer* to actually seeing them, not the other way around". And almost as if it that sentence had been prescient... thirty years later, Emmett, who suffered from mental illness, took his own life.

#### 4. The Myth of Christian Love that Healeth All and Repaireth All : *Abide with me*.

The photos of small Protestant churches from Sally's childhood that are part of *Abide With Me* could almost have been taken in my home province of Alberta. Throughout the Fifties and Sixties, my paternal grandfather gave sermons in a number of small-town churches exactly

1. Nancy Huston, *La Virevolte*, Actes Sud, collection Babel, 1994 ; Traduction anglaise Nancy Huston, *Slow Emergencies*, 1996

like that. I describe one in my Albertan novel *Plainsong*<sup>2</sup> : “First Anton Methodist was a stark spare structure filled with strictures and scriptures, the idea of pointing up to heaven incorporated into its roof and rafters – not a lovely lofty movement upwards, floating through arches and vaults and pillars and flying buttresses and gothic gargoyles, but an order – a finger sternly pointing to the sky: keep your eyes on heaven! stay on the straight and narrow! keep to the point !... At last the shrill small organ would pipe up and the closing hymn would go rolling across the plains like tumbleweed, prickly and full of emptiness.” Mann shows us these churches either over- or under-exposed, shadowed, off-center, extinguished... But there’s a crucial difference: unlike mine, her churches are African-American. She was born and raised in the former slave state of Virginia, where her parents’ liberal opinions made her family an object of hatred.

On 17 May 1954, Brown vs Board of Education ruled that “in the field of public education ‘separate but equal’ has no place.” Throughout the 1950s, in the United States, segregationists and anti-segregationists clashed violently, “with the gunshots constantly being fired at the house, crosses burned in the yard, bloody sheet on the mailbox, the farm animals mutilated and the constant threatening phone calls”. One of Sally’s brothers was jailed on seventeen different occasions for having taken part in anti-segregationist *sit-ins*. This gradually led Sally to realize that her world of privilege and possibility was built on (and by!) other people’s suffering... *Abide With Me* explores racism of the ordinary, everyday, smiling sort. Had I remained in Alberta, I hope that I (and my children) would have joined Canada’s indigenous people in protests against the spoliation, theft, deforesting, pollution, poisoning and massive destruction of the land caused by the petroleum facilities in the north of the province.

Paddon Sterling, the central protagonist of *Plainsong*, ends up giving his high school students a most iconoclastic History lesson, telling them... “How [Father Lacombe] had come here with the sole and firm and unanswerable intention of changing what the Indians believed into what he believed. How he was prepared to put all of his skills and wiles at the service of this intention. How he had learned the Indians’ languages only to force them to say things they had never intended to say. How he had taken advantage of their gullibility and superstition,

2. Nancy Huston, *Plainsong*, Steerforth, 1993 ; Traduction française Nancy Huston, *Cantique des Plaines*, Actes Sud, collection Babel, 1993.



their fascination with images and likeness, to teach them the Christian version of history (...). How the Indians had been strong and healthy until the white man came and had then received from him the gift of civilisation in the form of smallpox and measles and TB and scarlet fever and influenza, and how Father Lacombe and others of his ilk had made use of their vulnerability to convert them, giving them medical care in an ostentatious display of altruism, while telling them that those who died went to hell whereas those who recovered by the mercy of Christ were being given a last chance at salvation so they had better convert. (...) How Lacombe had sat there and watched the Blackfoot starve to death since the government, surmising that they would only learn how to farm if they had to, was sending them five dollars per person per month instead of the twelve promised in the treaty, sending them – now that buffalo hides were inexistent – cotton sacks with which to make their tents, sending them bacon instead of beef, sending them less flour, less and less flour, even less flour this year than the year before, until the adults started eating gophers and mice, and then dogs and horses, and then the carcasses of animals they found rotting in the prairie, while the children writhed on the ground after swallowing poisonous wild parsnip...”

Sally Mann was raised in large part by a woman named Virginia Carter, whom she affectionately called Gee-Gee. The granddaughter of a former slave whose mother had doubtless been raped by a white man, Gee-Gee looked after first Sally and her brothers, and later Sally’s own children ; when she died in 1994 she was a hundred years old.

It took Mann a long time to become aware of “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 gradually came to acknowledge that though her family had always supported the Civil Rights movement, this had not prevented them from taking advantage of social and legal arrangements that perpetuated the submission of African Americans, including her dear Gee-Gee. Nonplussed by the “incredible candor” with which they lived their lives, Mann exclaims : “What were any of us thinking ? Why did we never ask questions ? That’s the mystery of it – our blindness and our silence.”

## 5. The Myth of the United States as a Free, Generous, Egalitarian country with a Grand History: *Battlefields* and *Blackwater*

This series shows landscapes wounded by two and a half centuries of slavery and racism – on the one hand, battlefields that swallowed up thousands of young male bodies during the Civil War; on the other, marshes in which fugitive slaves drowned and died. How can one convey the past violence of a landscape by taking a picture of its tranquil present? Sally Mann's answer is twofold. Firstly, she uses photographic techniques that cause streaks, stains and other imperfections to surface in the images. Since our eyes spontaneously read everything as a symbol, the landscapes thus become painfully eloquent to us. All these years later, we can virtually hear the men's screams. Secondly, Mann asked a number of young African-American men to pose for her. Her close-ups of their heads and bodies manage to convey the distress and determination of the fugitives from long ago. As she worked on these portraits, Mann wondered how she could possibly hope "to establish a relationship of trust, communicate my uncommunicable needs, reconcile four hundred years of racial conflict, and make a good picture all in one session." Not an easy order to fill – and yet she did so with a combination of technical know-how and human empathy that command respect. "Faulkner threw wide the door of my ignorant childhood," writes Sally Mann, "and the future, the heartbroken future filled with the hitherto unasked questions, strolled easefully in. It wounded me, then and there, with the great sadness and tragedy of our American life, with the truth of all that I had not seen, had not known, had not asked."

'Now in this present,' writes Sally Mann, 'there is an urgent cry rising, one that compels me again and again to reconcile my love for this place with its brutal history.' My guess is that most people in this room could probably say the same. The crux and the paradox of Mann's technique in all her work is something we might call an *indirect authenticity*. By definition, photography entails recording appearances – registering the surface of reality, making a 'snap' shot of the visible world – yet to an amazing extent, this artist manages to *show the effects of passing time*.

By way of a conclusion... were we to attempt to sum up the specific genius of Sally Mann, we could say that *she uses a flat surface to represent not only three-dimensional space (all photographers do that) but also the fourth dimension which is time*. By reviving out-of-date photographic techniques, she encourages accidents, accepts the damage wreaked by time – rot, rust, warp, waste – and celebrates its terrible beauty. Preferring her own “angel of uncertainty” to Proust’s “angel of certainty”, she trusts chance to come and help her mess up slick seductiveness, thwart facile expectations, shatter stupid biases... – in a word, break myths.

An original lecture by Nancy Huston at Jeu de Paume, Paris. Translated  
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