CULTURE

The Mournful, Magnificent Sally Mann

By BRIAN T. ALLEN | April 21, 2018 5:30 AM

Sally Mann Untitled [Antietam #12], 2001 (Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA, museum purchase, 2004.17)

Her photos mine the past and plumb the soul.

"Does the earth remember?" The infinitely gifted photographer Sally Mann asks this question in the catalogue of her great retrospective at the National Gallery in Washington. On view there is her series of Civil War battlefield landscapes, among the most ravishing works of art from the early 2000s. Once sites of brutal violence, they're now scraps of rolling fields or unremarkable clumps of trees, like the battlefield at Antietam. It's still the most bloodied land in the country, with deaths multiples of those on 9/11. "Do these fields where unspeakable carnage occurred bear witness in some way?"

These photographs are alone well worth seeing the show, which just started a long, national tour. Mann is one of America's greatest living artists. She belongs to a big, broad heritage beyond her mentors Ansel Adams, Robert Frank, and Emmett Gowin. Her work is painterly like Edward Steichen's and dreamy and ethereal like Whistler's. She takes great pride in being a Southerner, and the only truly American thing about Whistler was his Southern, implacably Confederate mother. Whistler's gauzy look and sense of suspended time is very Southern, and Mann's got this. She's the South's latest Romantic, like Faulkner or Flannery O'Connor, or, going further, Edgar Allan Poe. Some of her work has got to be among the most haunting, sublime art I've ever seen. It's often dreamlike, moody, blurry, and dark, not nightmarish but definitely not from the world of clarity and reason. Her images are mournful but don't comfort. They keep us on edge.

Battlefields, Cold Harbor (Battle), 2003,
(National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of the Collectors Committee and The Sarah and William L Walton Fund, Image © Sally Mann)

Mann is one of modern photography's technical virtuosos. That's a big and fascinating part of the show. For her landscapes, she often uses the wet-collodion process that Matthew Brady and Alexander Gardner used in their pioneering Civil War photographs. In the 1860s, it was newfangled. Today, it's a finicky, cumbersome process in which lots can go wrong. Mann loves this margin for error because its accidents — its blots, streaks, and variations in tone — augment the old-time mood she's after. This sense of age gives spiritual depth. There's nothing slick or shiny about them. She uses antique, uncoated lenses and a bellows and a hood. The chemical collodion originally helped cuts heal, like petroleum jelly. It's Latin root means "to adhere." It can also mean "to fixate upon" or "to be devoted to." If there's a work of art where subject, technique, and even etymology better create a mood of remembrance and grief, I can't think of it.

At its best, her work takes us places, sometimes into the deep and distant past. When I walked through the gallery of her battlefield photographs, depicting Fredericksburg, Manassas, Cold Harbor, and the Wilderness, all notably snake-bitten fights, I thought about another old battlefield I remember. It's on the edge of Lake Trasimeno in Umbria in Italy.

There, in 217 B.C., the bloodiest ambush in human history unfolded. Thirty thousand Roman troops were trapped in a foggy, narrow dip by this big, pretty lake. In about three hours, Hannibal's troops, surprising them from the heights, slaughtered most of them. Many drowned trying to escape. Survivors were sold as slaves. An earthquake occurred during the massacre, unnoticed by the combatants. Today, a stream near the lake is called the Sanguineto, or "river of blood." A village is called Ossaia, "place of bones," another "Preggio," deriving from the Italian word meaning "worse." There's a little museum and, aside from that, only farms, chicken coops, haystacks, cows and goats, cramped walled fields, and olive groves. Like Mann's landscapes, mostly land that's still farmed, empty of people or monuments, they're banal.

To answer Mann's question, I'd first say, "No, the earth does not remember." Memory, atonement, the state of the soul — these are usually the business of God and man. Mann's earth, though, works wonders. It evokes and prompts. She coaxes from it different meanings, and these make for varying emotional responses. I focus first on the images' beauty. Even if they didn't have that sense of specific place, we feel the menace and sadness beneath the surface. Knowing the name of the battlefield triggers more layers of thought — about history, generals, casualty counts, botched plans, lost and won causes. Her work is elastic and expansive, open to different readings by different people, or different readings by a single individual based on changing moods.

And here is my one complaint. Mann and the show's curators do too much spin. We're often placed on a forced march toward artist intent that really doesn't do her work justice. Mann promotes herself as a Southern artist. Well, okay. "Southerners," she writes, "live uneasily at the nexus between myth and reality, watching the mishmash amalgam of sorrow, humility, honor, graciousness, and renegade defiance." That's her take. The South's past is "impossibly present." Now, she's wandering onto thin ice. The South has an aftertaste of defeat. It's haunted by death. The South's past is "the historical burden I carry." If someone is itching to bear a cross, I suppose the world offers limitless options. Her sense of burden is genuine. I'm not sure it's justified. She sometimes turns from philosopher to victimologist.

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In the late 1990s, Mann traveled to Money, Miss., searching for sites linked to the death of Emmett Till, the black teenager murdered in 1955 by local racist thugs because he had flirted with a white girl. She likened the Mississippi backwoods, with their poverty and dense heat, to "the groves of death" in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of*

Darkness, which she listened to on tape while she drove there. Some mood music. The photographs are good. They're precursors for her battlefields project. Without her purple prose about them, no one would know they're about Emmett Till. What happened to Till stinks, but Mann's not telling us anything we don't know already. The formalist in me wants to use their mystery to create my own narrative.
There are other real, rich subjects beyond the "poverty, inequality . . . oppression, pain, loss, decay, and even death that seemed to permeate the very air," as the show's curators put it. Now, I'm from Vermont, so I have no dog in this fight, but that's painting with a broad brush. The Deep South, Virginia, and even Mann's Shenandoah Valley home are a million different places. The blunt imposition of meaning is both forced and limiting. Her vision goes further afield. For instance, Mann is fascinated with Till's brutal death at a young age, with his open coffin and shotgun head wound undisguised. She's smitten with death and dying. It's just on the edge of a ghoulish voyeurism, but hovering on that edge makes her work riveting.

Mann's Till project was bookended by two other series, shorted in the show because they don't involve race and slavery. In 1995, she was hired by the Corcoran Gallery to make photographs for the exhibit *Hospice: A Photographic Inquiry*. She sought, she wrote, "what exactly it is that matters to a dying person." It's easy, unsettlingly so, to leap from her straight documentary style to our own emotions as we revisit the hospice deaths we've seen and think about our own, inevitable leave-takings. These photos are effective.

In 2000, she photographed corpses donated to the University of Tennessee for scientific study. At what's called the Body Farm, forensic specialists there study how the body decomposes when it's left outside, under water, or wrapped in plastic and half-buried. About the same time, she exhumed the body of a favorite pet greyhound to see how she had decayed.

There's a big section in the show dedicated to her family's African-American nanny, housekeeper, and cook, Gee-Gee Carter. It's fine but feels like a guilt trip on Mann's part. I wonder if Carter felt that the relationship was as tinged with exploitation as Mann, regretfully, implies. Carter died in 2004. Again, death focuses Mann's mind.

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Mann became famous in the 1980s through her photographs of children, usually her three young children, at home and outdoors in rural Lexington. To me, these photographs are about youth, innocence, carelessness, growth, and promise, about a child's love of play, fantasy, and dirt. She was lambasted unfairly in the early 1990s because her children are often depicted nude. Some saw this as exploitative. Children's sexuality makes us uneasy, but it's part of their existence. Its discovery is a marker on the road to self-awareness. Her figures are free of shame, and that's a priceless, ephemeral "state of grace," Mann believes. Children are feral. They're creatures of nature, and her kids and, indeed, her life, are frankly rural. These photographs open the show and are beautifully presented.

Sally Mann, *The Ditch*, 1987 (The Art Institute of Chicago, Art Resource, NY, Image © Sally Mann)

The show closes with her latest projects: striking, visceral self-portraits of her and photographs of her husband, Larry, suffering from muscular dystrophy. They've been married for nearly 50 years. The pictures have a dreamy, surreal look that's similar to her landscapes, but also a touch of the X-ray, showing the effects of age, its slings and arrows and its sadness and weightiness. Larry continues to be a handsome man, and Mann is stunningly beautiful, but there's a sense that time has slowed and is reaching its end. She's focusing on essentials as death creeps closer to home, as do all great artists as they age.

Sally Mann, *Triptych*, 2004,
(The Sir Elton John Photography Collection, Image © Sally Mann)

Unlike even great artists, who often have a few years of work that's strong and special, Mann is in her fourth decade of visionary art. She's still and always thinking and experimenting. I don't know what's next for her. Her son Emmett's tragic death in 2016 is unbearable to her. It's tough for the people who admire her, too, partially because of natural empathy but also because Emmett appeared in so many of her photographs of children. I'd like to see her turn to Civil War–era memorials or to the complex, fraught history of the Shenandoah Valley. She's in her late 60s and so good an artist that she'll have something more to say. Until then, the retrospective is an essential show for anyone looking for the highest, consistent quality.

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