The Family of Mann

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Immediate Family
by Sally Mann,
afterword by Reynolds Price.
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The audacity and authority of Sally Mann's work are perhaps nowhere so immediately manifest as on the cover of her first collection of photographs, *At Twelve: Portraits of Young Women* (1988). The cover picture is a sort of double portrait: a girl stands in front of a clapboard house next to a chair on if anticipating the criticism that *Immediate Family*, her next book of photographs, was to attract—the charge that she exploits her young subjects—Mann offers an illustration of the medium's innate exploitativeness that is like an impatient manifesto. Of course the girl who posed for Mann in front of her house did not know—everything in the stance of her body tells us she did not—that Mann was taking a picture centering on her pudendum. We can almost see the girl's face squinting against the sun, arranging itself to levelly meet of official Surrealism to photography's authentic, natural surrealism. Within photography, Szarkowski distinguished between the calculated, well-made, undialectical art photograph and the artless but vitally interesting snapshot, and he supported photographers who attempted the tour de force of the art snapshot. Of course, every photograph with any claim to interest is a tour de force—all the canonical works of photography retain some trace of the medium's underlying, life-giving, accident-proneness. But the Szarkowski

Photograph © Sally Mann/Courtesy Houk Friedman, New York

Blowing Bubbles, 1987

which a torn, oval photograph of another girl, from another time, has been propped. The girl in the old photograph wears a flounced dress and a bow in her hair, and has the stern, fixed, mildly sulky expression that nineteenth-century photographers regularly induced in young subjects; her hands are stiffly, self-protectively crossed over her stomach. The "actual" girl, in contrast, opens herself up to the photographer's scrutiny. Dressed in tight shorts and a T-shirt, she stands in an attitude of trusting relaxation, her legs parted, a hip outthrust, an arm extended to grip the chair holding the torn photograph. We do not see her expression—Mann has cropped the photograph at her chest and her knees—but we don't need to, because the body is so eloquent. Its transfixing feature—you could almost call it its "face"—is the girl's vulva, which plumply strains against the soft stretch fabric of the shorts, creating a radius of creases that impart a sculptural, almost monumental presence to this evocative, slightly embarrassing, slightly arousing sight of summer in America.

The photograph is radical, however, not because of the truth it renders about twelve-year-old-ness but because of the truth it renders about photography. As the camera's gaze, the gaze that has treacherously traveled elsewhere. The photograph both unrepentantly enacts and ruefully comments on the treachery. Mann knows, as the major photographers of our time know (the photographers whose company she joins with *Immediate Family*) that photography is a medium not of reassuring realism but of disturbing surrealism.

In *Immediate Family* Mann photographs her own three children, Emmett, Jessie, and Virginia, during warm weather over a period of seven years, in and around the family house in rural southwestern Virginia. The children wear bathing suits or light summer clothes or no clothes. The photographs are beautiful and strange, like a dream of childhood in summer. They are not your usual pictures of the children to send to the grandparents; they are pictures to send to the Museum of Modern Art. During John Szarkowski's tenure as director of the photography department at the Modern, he cultivated a kind of photography that Sally Mann brings to triumphant, sometimes transcendent, fruition. In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag compared the "sleekly calculated, complacently well-made, undialectical" productions photographers (William Eggleston, Lee Friedlander, Joel Meyerowitz, Garry Winogrand, Emmett Gowin, for example) put greater pressure on the snapshot side of the equation: their pictures are looser, messier, "uglier" than the results of the traditional mediation between the contingent and the premeditated. In Sally Mann's photographs the scale tips back toward the older "beautiful" photograph—without, however, any diminution of the appearance of photojournalistic chanciness and the sense of anxiety, disjunction, invasiveness, uncanniness by which the Szarkowski school is marked.

What mothers who photograph their children normally try to capture (or, as the case may be, create) are the moments when their children look happy and attractive, when their clothes aren't smeared with food, and they aren't clutching themselves. Mann, abnormally, takes pictures of her children looking sulky, angry, and dirty, displaying insect bites or bloody noses, and clutching themselves. Reviewers of *Immediate Family* and of the exhibitions that preceded its publication harshly rebuked Mann for her un-motherliness and pitied the helpless, art-abused children. "At moments when any other mother would grab her child to hold and

comfort, Mann must have reached instead for her camera," one reviewer wrote in a piece entitled "It may be art, but what about the kids," which concluded with the dictum "Beauty does not validate exploitation. Motherhood should not give licence to activities that are morally wrong. Nor should art." In the *TLS*, Julian Bell wrote, "I don't doubt that Sally Mann's children are doing better than most, but since she offers them for my inspection, I'll say that seems a rotten way to bring them up." Charles Hagen, a *New York Times* photography critic, offered no opinion of his own, but felt constrained to point out that "many people regard photographs of naked children as inherently exploitative and even pornographic, and will reject Ms. Mann's work on those picture. A photograph entitled "The Wet Bed" shows Virginia, the youngest child, at the age of two, lying in bed fast asleep on her back, her arms raised above her head as if they were cherub's wings, her torso stretched out in luxurious relaxation. She is naked; it is a hot night—a chenille bedspread lies in a heap at the foot of the mattress. Like Blake's little girl lost, whose radiant innocence subdued beasts of prey as she slept in the wilderness, Mann's Virginia is the embodiment of invulnerable defenselessness: What harm can befall this beautiful, trusting child? But as we follow the photographer/mother's gaze and look down with her on the sleeping little girl, we feel her mother's fear. We take in the heavy darkness that frames the whiteness of the child's bed, out of childhood's discontents is drawn in a paradisal Southern summer landscape, and that the family in which the children are growing up is as enlightened, permissive, and affectionate as a family can be, only adds to its power and authenticity.

With her pictures of her children's bloody noses, mean insect bites, cuts requiring stitches, faces and bodies smeared with mud and dirt and drips from ice cream, Mann offers striking metaphors for the fall from purity that is childhood's ineluctable trajectory. (We give it the euphemism "child development.") But where *Immediate Family* achieves its great ring of disturbing truth is in the "plot" that emerges from its pages—the plot of how the three children have worked out their respective destinies within the

Photograph © Sally Mann/Courtesy Houk Friedman, New York

The Wet Bed, 1987

grounds." He went on, "Other viewers will bristle at the sensual, emotionally drenched nature of Ms. Mann's vision of childhood, and will object to her using children to act out the fantasies, some of them sexual, that are central to it."

One of the ways we make ourselves at home, so to speak, in the alien terrain of new art is to deny it its originality, to transform its disquieting strangeness into familiar forms to which we may effortlessly, almost blindly respond. To look at Sally Mann's photographs of her children as unfeeling or immoral is simply to be not looking at them, to be pushing away something complex and difficult (the vulnerability of children, the unhappiness of childhood, the tragic character of the parent-child relationship are among Mann's painful themes) and demanding a cliché in its place. With her summer photographs of Emmett, Jessie, and Virginia, Mann has given us a meditation on infant sorrow and parental rue that is as powerful and delicate as it is undeserving of the facile abuse that has been heaped on it.

"That seems a rotten way to bring them up." Is there a good—or even a good enough—way to bring them up? Mann asks this question in picture after which the image of the sleeping cherub emerges like a hallucinatory vision, and, above all, we are transfixed by the large pale stain that spreads from the child's body over the tautly fitted sheet. The stain is yet another insignia of Blakean innocence, another attribute of the time of life when nothing has yet happened to seriously disturb a child's blameless instinctuality. But the stain is also an augury of Blakean experience. It foretells the time when the child will have to be broken of its habit of trust in the world's benevolence. What Mann, in her introduction, calls "the predictable treacheries of the future" waft out of "The Wet Bed" as they do out of the book as a whole. All happy childhoods are alike: they are the skin that memory has grown over a wound. Children suffer, no matter how lovingly they are brought up. It is in the very nature of upbringing to cause suffering.

Sally Mann's project has been to document the anger, disappointment, shame, confusion, insecurity that in every child attach to the twenty-year-long crisis of growing up. She stalks and waits for, and sometimes stages, the moments that other parents and photographers may prefer not to see. That this anatomy of family constellation, how they enact the roles that heredity, chance, and will have written for them in the bitter contest for the parents' love.

This plot is played out in every family, of course, with infinite variations and invariable pathos. In *Immediate Family*, Jessie appears as the tense, self-conscious, younger-sister-haunted older daughter; Emmett as the scowling, withholding, only son, warily stepping through the Oedipal minefield; Virginia as the baby, wearing her belatedness like a blanket against the chill of the others' precedence. The blows and stings of early child-parent and child-sibling relationships do not fade like insect bites and skin punctures but imprint themselves on us forever, determining who we are. Sally Mann's extraordinary contribution has been to give photographic expression to pathetic truths that have hitherto been the exclusive domain of psychologists and authors of great works of fiction. Photography's specificity gives the portrait of the Mann family its arresting, almost abashing intimacy. Its ambiguity—a photograph never says anything unequivocally, even when it most appears to be doing so—allows the family to escape with its secrets. □