



What remains

Life, love and death through the lens of Sally Mann
Vince Aletti

BECAUSE THERE IS NO narration in *What Remains*, Steve Cantor's engaging new documentary about Sally Mann, Mann's own voice becomes the film's heart and soul. Anyone who has read the texts she's written for her books – including *What Remains* (2003) whose genesis provides the film with a dramatic backbone – knows Mann has a way with words. But she's just as eloquent, and even more ingratiating, in conversation, and listening to her warm, tangy, down-home voice is one of the film's prime pleasures. Talking about her work and her life, which have always been intimately intertwined, Mann is so passionate and so reasonable that any other editorial voice would have been superfluous, if not intrusive. As a result, *What Remains* is not just an unusually intelligent portrait of the artist; it's a vivid, revealing self-portrait as well.

This is the second film Cantor has made about Mann. The first, a short called *Blood Ties* that focused primarily on Mann's *Immediate Family* photographs and their near-miss collision with the Christian right's crusade against child pornography, was started when Cantor was 23 and still waiting to be accepted into the film school at USC. Though nominated for an Academy Award in 1994, *Blood Ties* never had an official theatrical release. *What Remains*, which was a hit at Sundance this year and is scheduled to be shown on the BBC in July and HBO early in 2007, is still doing the rounds on

the festival circuit in search of theatrical distribution. Cantor's new movie incorporates some of his first's grainy early 1990s footage of Mann and her three children – Jessie, Virginia and Emmett – at a cabin in the woods, making some of her most famous photographs. 'Unless you photograph what you love, you're not going to make good art,' Mann says at the beginning of the new film over a brief montage of *Immediate Family* photos. That series changed Mann's life, but the controversy that surrounded its publication and the 'backdoor celebrity' that resulted spooked her. In any case, it was time to move on: 'We took those pictures for ten years and at some point you just get sick of doing the same thing over and over.'

As much as she admires intrepid travelers, Mann says, 'It never occurred to me to leave home to make art,' and she's never really strayed far from her birthplace in Lexington, Virginia. Her family's farm on the edge of town is the setting for much of *What Remains*, and it's here that Mann addresses every artist's dilemma: What next? 'Each picture ups the ante,' she says. 'As an artist, your trajectory just has to keep going up. The thing that most subverts your next good body of work is all the work you've taken before. All the good pictures that came so easily now make the next set of pictures virtually impossible in your mind.' She made what she calls a very 'smooth segue' out of the *Immediate Family* work when she realized that the landscapes

that had come to dominate those pictures were her natural next step. Quoting poet William Carlos Williams on the importance of 'the local' to an artist, Mann says, 'For me "the local" has two parts: my family and the land. They're the wellspring and inspiration for all my work.'

But the land took an unexpected hit in 2000 when an armed escaped convict turned up at Mann's farm and shot himself under a tree just as the police were closing in. After the authorities removed his body, Mann describes going to the spot where it lay and impulsively reaching out to touch a pool of blood. Before her eyes, a bit of it sank into the ground; she says it was like 'watching the earth take a little sip of his blood'. This might sound off-puttingly morbid, but Mann is unusually comfortable with death, a relationship she traces back to her 'remote', eccentric father, a doctor who studied and filled his home with the iconography of death. Still, she says, 'the convict's death had a radical impact on the way I thought about the land,' and she set off for Civil War battlefields with the idea of evoking 'death's memory' from the landscape.

In a sense, *What Remains* has already prepared us for this death-haunted turn of events by interrupting a sequence about Mann's lawyer husband, Larry, with title card informing us that 'in 1994, [he] was diagnosed with a rare form of muscular dystrophy – an incurable disease that weakens muscle tissue over time'. In one of the film's most appealing passages, we

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watch Sally set up a shot with Larry, wearing nothing but a towel, and one of their greyhound dogs in a white-tiled bathroom. Throughout the movie, Cantor is careful to balance a fascination with the mechanics of Mann's photographic process (the big, old-fashioned view camera; the messy, accident-prone wet-plate collodion technique) with insights into her motivations and concerns. Over a series of still shots, Mann talks about these photographs of Larry as a complex, frank 'portrait of a marriage', from cutting the dog's nails to sex. Because very few of these images have been exhibited and none have been included in her books, she says she thinks of the series as an 'aesthetic savings account: I know they're there and I know they're good'. But she's also conflicted about working with him as the signs of his illness become more pronounced. '[Larry's] obviously willing to model for me, but is it fair to ask him? That's the question that I'm wrestling with. I don't want to leave vapid, meaningless pictures, but I don't want to leave behind anything that's hurtful – to him or to anyone else.'

So even before Mann launches into the project that will come together as the

exhibition and book called *What Remains*, mortality is very much on everyone's mind. This swing between life and death gives the film an unhurried but concentrated momentum and an emotional heft often absent from profiles of living artists. 'One thing you can say about us Southerners,' Mann remarks at one point, 'we're willing to experiment with dosages of romance that would be fatal to any other postmodern artist.' But she's ready to put romance aside when the subject demands it. The film follows her onto the park-like grounds of the University of Tennessee's Forensic Study Facility, where human corpses are left outside so that scientists might better understand the nature of decay. Here again Mann's attitude is respectful yet disconcertingly matter-of-fact. But if it seems cold-blooded to poke at someone's leathery remains and comment, 'I love mummified skin,' Mann makes it clear that, as far as she's concerned, the souls are elsewhere. Besides, she says, she has no investment in her body after death: 'I don't care what they do to me. Leave me for the buzzards. Let the little foxes eat me. Put me out there and let me nourish those hickories.'

Since *What Remains* is so tightly focused on Mann's home, work, and family (there are no critical talking heads), the intrusion of the outside world – especially the artworld – is a bit of a shock. When an exhibition of the *What Remains* series, scheduled for September 2003 at Pace in New York, is cancelled, Mann is initially 'flattened', 'humiliated' and tortured by doubts any artist would recognize: maybe I'm just old news. Maybe it's four years of wasted time. But Mann is not one to wallow in self-pity or self-doubt and long before the exhibition opens at the Corcoran in Washington, D.C., in the spring of 2004, she's offering up an analogy – and good advice: 'It's sort of like a bird flying into a plate-glass window. You pick yourself up, dust yourself off, check for anything broken and go back to work.'

Made over a period of nearly four years, *What Remains* is so comfortable with its subject it feels a bit incestuous at times. But who could blame Cantor and his crew for falling under Mann's spell? She makes great company, and the pleasure of seeing things through her eyes, which cinematographer Paul Dokuchitz maximizes, doesn't end when the film does. ●

Below from left
Sally Mann
COURTESY STICK FIGURE PRODUCTIONS
Sally Mann *Emmett No. 43*, 2004, gelatin silver print with varnish, 127 x 102 cm
COURTESY GAGOSIAN GALLERY, NEW YORK
Previous spread
Sally with Jessie
PHOTO: LEM PRINCE, 2005
COURTESY STICK FIGURE PRODUCTIONS



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