



Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings

October 19, 2019 – February 2, 2020

****Due to mature content, this exhibition is intended for 7th grade and up****

For more than forty years, Sally Mann (American, born 1951) has made experimental and haunting photographs that explore the overarching themes of existence: memory, desire, death, the bonds of family, and nature’s 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 reflected on what it means to live in the South and be identified as a Southerner.

Mann uses her deep love of her birthplace and her knowledge of its troubled history to make photographs that pose provocative questions about history, identity, race, and religion. *Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings* explores how her relationship with the land has shaped her work and how the legacy of the South—as both homeland and graveyard, refuge and battleground—continues to inform American identity.

The exhibition is organized into five themed sections—Family, The Land, Last Measure, Abide with Me, and What Remains. The Abide With Me section includes four subsections: Churches, Virginia “Gee-Gee” Carter, Men, and Rivers and Swamps.

All photographs in this exhibition are the work of Sally Mann (American, born 1951) unless otherwise noted.

Try the following themes to organize discussions around these works of art (do not feel limited by these themes; feel free to create your own):

- Identity as a white southerner
- Experimentation with medium/process
- Intimacy with subjects

Below is a sample introduction and sample prompts to use with your students (see Key Images slides for more artwork from the exhibition):

Today we’re going to explore the artwork of photographer Sally Mann, born in Lexington, VA in 1951. She has been making photographs for over 40 years and is still working today. Her artwork explores many themes but is tied together by Mann’s connection to the South and her own identity as a Southerner.

What does the term “Southerner” mean to you? What associations do you have with the South?

Sally Mann’s photographs explore themes of history, place, family, identity, and race, and the artworks can raise provocative questions and spark challenging conversations. I invite everyone to share and ask questions as you feel comfortable, speak from your own experience, and listen with care to other ideas and experiences.

Let’s start with this work of art ...

Family



Blowing Bubbles, 1987

“The more I look at the life of the children, the more enigmatic and fraught with danger and loss their lives become.”



Gorjus, 1989



Picnic, 1992

The following prompts will work well with many of the photographs in this section. These at left are presented as examples.

Gather Details: Have students truly look for as many details as possible and list them. Craft a narrative together about what is happening in this photograph.

Symbolism: Sally Mann talks about the use of symbolism in her work. She studied art history extensively. In older works of art, when looking specifically at *Blowing Bubbles*, the use of “bubbles” in paintings was usually a symbol for.....what? Ask students to infer why Mann would have included bubbles in this photograph. What about the baby doll, the shopping cart, the discarded shoes? Of what could these all be symbols? Of the other photographs, why are there mirrors on the ground, the growling dog, the raging fire, etc.?

Consider the Title: The artist used titles in an obvious way (telling us what we’re looking at), but also in a way to tell us more about the content of the photograph. Ask students to read out the title *Gorjus* – pronounced “gorgeous.” From where did that title come? What about this photograph explores the concept of “beauty?”

Compare and Contrast: Compare *Blowing Bubbles* to *Gorjus*. How are they similar? What are the major themes of these photographs that are the same? What about them make them different?

The Land



Deep South, Untitled (Scarred Tree), 1998

“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



Deep South, Untitled (Bridge on Tallahatchie), 1998



Deep South, Untitled (Valentine Windsor), 1998

The following prompts will work well with many of the photographs in this section. These at left are presented as examples.

Using Quotes: Use Mann’s quotes, when it makes the most sense. For example, Mann has described the South as “**a place extravagant in its beauty, reckless in its fecundity, terrible in its indifference, and dark with memories.**” Feel free to read this quote to students and, considering Mann’s words, what do they think she is trying to tell us in this photograph? What history could this photograph contain?

fecundity: the ability to produce an abundance of offspring or new growth; fertility; the ability to produce many new ideas.

Using History: Sally Mann photographed places that seemed overlooked by most people. In *Deep South, Untitled (Bridge on Tallahatchie)* and *Deep South, Untitled (Valentine Windsor)*, Mann is photographing places that have a violent history. For older high school students, most may know who Emmett Till is. If they don’t, briefly describe the story (refer to labels for a precise description). The same goes for *Valentine Windsor*. Students won’t know of this place specifically, but they will understand the concept of a plantation. After telling the history behind these locations, why would Mann photograph these places? What is she trying to tell us? What symbols do we notice in all of these photographs that tell us something dark happened here?

The Process: Sally Mann was known for being inventive in her photographic processes. How in the world was a gelatin silver print created or a collodion wet plate process? (*See bottom of this document for more information on process.*)

Last Measure

Battlefields



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 Confederate capital, 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 and the Union losses so great, Abraham Lincoln thought it could “almost be said that the heavens are hung in black.”

In this photograph, Mann conveyed the horrific nature of the battle by allowing the picture to fade into darkness at the edges. Horizontal streaks, probably caused by dust on the negative, evoke flying bullets.



Battlefields, Manassas (Airplane), 2000

Gelatin silver print

High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Purchase with funds from the H. B. and Doris Massey Charitable Trust

The following prompts will work well with many of the photographs in this section. These at left are presented as examples.

Gather Details: Encourage your students to look closely and keep looking at a photograph, noting as many details as they can. Avoid going on to historical/symbolic/artistic discussion until students have deeply investigated a photograph.

Movement: *What motion does this photograph indicate? How do you know it moves this way? What details in the work give you that idea?*

Personification: These images depict Civil War battle sites where thousands of soldiers, both Confederate and Union, were killed or wounded. Mann has said that she is investigating if “the earth remembers” what happened here. *What evidence, if any, of such memory can we find in this work of art?*

Consider the Title: This section’s title references Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address given at the dedication of the battlefield at Gettysburg. In the famous speech, Lincoln notes that the fallen soldiers gave their “...last full measure of devotion...” and called upon the gathered to “...resolve that these dead have not died in vain.” *In what ways is Mann responding to Lincoln’s call? Or not responding to it?*

Creative Question: These are modern photographs taken with an antique camera at historic locations. *Mann could have used a modern camera, in color, even. How might our perceptions of this place be different had she done so?*

Metaphorical Comparison: Though scholars disagree on a single “turning point” in the Civil War, some consider it to be the battle at Antietam, the site of the greatest one-day loss of American life, and a decisive Union victory. *Considering the Last Measure grouping in the arc of Mann’s career, how is it a turning point for her? Or not?*



Battlefields, Antietam (Last Light), 2001

Gelatin silver print

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



Battlefields, Antietam (Cornfield), 2001

Gelatin silver print

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

Investigate Composition: Mann has composed some of these images symmetrically, and others asymmetrically. Holding viewfinders* in the air, encourage students to “crop” a photograph or zoom in/out. Encourage students to interact, looking through each other’s viewfinders. Compare their new images to the original. *How is the impression different/the same? Which do they like better?*

*Students may make rectangles with their thumb and forefinger or you can make simple viewfinders by cutting a 1½” x 1” rectangle out of an index card.

Process: During their close looking, students are likely to notice evidence of Mann’s antique camera and wet collodion process. Validate their observations with information about it. (Details at the end of this document.) However, when the emulsion peeled or the alcohol pooled she could have discarded the print and tried again; Nineteenth Century photographers did. Instead, Mann embraces the imperfections of this medium, even intentionally manipulating them from time to time. *How do these “special effects” impact our impressions of the work? How do they make you feel?* Specifically with *Cold Harbor*, when students notice the white streaks, let them know that in her camera, the opening for the glass negative is on the side, and the streaks were likely created by dust as she inserted/removed the negative or the covering over it.

Abide With Me



St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal

Sally Mann's parents did not participate in organized religion, but she remembers attending church with her caregiver Virginia Carter, who she called "Gee-Gee." The image above is the church they attended.



St. Paul United Methodist



(not in exhibition – use for compare/contrast exercise)

The following prompts will work well with many of the photographs in this section. These at left are presented as examples.

Churches

"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!" (verse of the hymn *Abide With Me* from Henry Francis Lyte, 1847)

At the age of 45, Henry Lyte prepared a farewell speech for the morning of September 4, 1847 which included the lyrics of *Abide With Me*. Henry Lyte passed away 10 weeks after preaching his farewell sermon.

Investigate Composition: Sally Mann has selected details of different church structures. We are looking at the church she attended with Gee-Gee: allow the students to observe and explore the image; ask if anything is missing, can they imagine what the whole structure would look like? Look for symmetry and which elements help to create it within the image.

Empathize: Can you relate the following quote from Sally Mann's experience inside the church with something you have experienced?

"When the entire congregation was in full throat, I felt as if a great wave had picked me up and was rolling over"...

Process vs. Process: In 2008, Sally Mann began to photograph rural churches—some still active, some abandoned. These were made using high-contrast **Ortho film** and printed on expired photographic paper. (orthochromatic films can only see blue (outdoor) light. Reds are rendered darker and therefore create darker skin tones).

Photographic paper has been studied by photo-preservationists, restorers and chemists to learn more about its components, which is not—as is all too easy to forget in this age of screen-based image consumption—a simple flat surface. Instead, it's made up of different layers, which react in different ways to different conditions of light and temperature.



Beulah Baptist

Sally Mann experimented with film using many processes, including how to process expired photographic paper. That led her to create images that appear to have high contrast and smudges which can be interpreted in many ways.

Allow your students to observe and compare these images and what makes them look different from one another.

How do they look different from a picture you take today?

Discuss how photos are taken and processed today (digital process) versus how Sally Mann chose to use old processes to create her pictures.

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

Virginia “Gee-Gee” Carter

Observe and describe: Describe what you see in this picture? Can you identify the characters, do you have an idea who they are? Which of the elements of this composition has caught your attention?

Create a brief story about what it is happening in this image and share it with the rest of the group.

Contrast, light and shadow: Allow your students to use the viewfinders to locate the different areas where the artist chose to create light, shadow and darkness.

(This quote is for reference only, to be used after your group has done the observe and describe exercise).

Mann’s daughter Virginia sleeps on the lap of her namesake, Virginia “Gee-Gee” Carter. Mann wove the picture together through the depiction of the two figures’ upraised arms, suspended in midair as if dancing in their dreams. By using selective focus, Mann drew attention to Carter’s arthritic hand, conveying both her pain and her persistence.



The Two Virginias #4, 1991
Gelatin silver print
Collection of The Estée Lauder
Companies Inc.



Men, Ronald, 2006-2015
Gelatin silver print
Collection of the artist



Men, Janssen, 2006-2015
Gelatin silver print
Collection of the artist



Men, Anton, 2006-2015
Gelatin silver print
Collection of the artist

Men

Symbolism: Mann posed her subjects and composed these images very purposefully. Look closely at the way *Ronald/Janssen/etc.* is posed. Invite students to look closely at the setting, composition, and other details. *Do you notice any symbolism? Could what you noticed have more than one meaning?*

Using quotes: Sally Mann described this series as a particularly difficult and inchoate one. It is likely that these images will elicit strong feelings and reactions from students as well. Use quotes by Mann and her subjects to help articulate her goals and struggles with this series. **Discuss the quotes.** *Did the quote(s) change how you feel about the images? How so? If not, why not? Do you notice anything new about the image after hearing this?*

inchoate: just begun and so not fully formed or developed; rudimentary; confused or incoherent.

“What I want to do is find out who those black men were that I encountered in my childhood, men that I never really saw, never really knew, except through Gee-Gee’s eyes or the perspective of a racist society.” - Sally Mann

“These days I am more interested in photographing things either to understand what they mean in my life or to illustrate a concept. This work with black men...seems to be a little bit of both.” – Sally Mann

“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.” – Janssen Evelyn, law student at Washington and Lee University, modeled for Mann in 2006

Division and Connection: This complicated series invites us to reflect on the history and oppression of people of color, in particular of black men in the Southern United States. As a white woman from the South, Sally Mann is struggling to acknowledge this division and invite connection at the same time. *How has the artist acknowledged distance and division in this photograph? How has she invited connection? Use the quote below, if you choose.*

“We both give, and take, something. At the most basic level, making these images is exploitative, reductive, and fraught. But at a higher level ... the results can also be transformative expressions of love, affirmation, and hope.” – Sally Mann

Voice Questions: *What questions or thoughts do you have for the artist? What questions or thoughts do you have for the models?*

Reflect: Invite students to spend 10-30 quiet seconds just looking at the image and invite them to reflect on their own relationship with race and the racial history of our country. Invite students to sketch or write a response.



Blackwater 9, 2008-2012

Tintype

Collection of the artist



Blackwater 13, 2008-2012

Tintype

Collection of the artist



Blackwater 3, 2008-2012

Tintype

Collection of the artist

Rivers and Swamps

Looking 5x2: Encourage students to look closely at this work and name or write 5 details. After 30 seconds more looking, name 5 more. *Did any of the details you saw change your understanding of or emotional response to the picture?*

Magnet Poetry: Sally Mann was deeply attached to not only photography, but literature as well, often citing inspiration from Southern writers like William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Shelby Foote, among many others. She said about her work, "If I couldn't do justice with words...I tried with my camera, composing silver poems of tone and undertow..." Invite students to create a short poem in response to the images. If students need a prompt: encourage them to choose one adjective, one noun, and one verb; create a sentence. Repeat twice to create a short poem.

Process: Sally Mann's photographs are often highly constructed – she takes a lot of time to stage a scene, compose an image, and manipulate it afterwards in the darkroom. However, she also, "figured that luck, aesthetic luck included, is just the ability to exploit accidents." *Can you find any instances of what may have been an 'accident' in these images? What does this 'accident' contribute to your interpretation of the picture?*

Look, listen, and look again: Encourage students to look closely at one of the images in the Rivers and Swamps section, VTS, slowly building meaning. Add context: Many of these images were taken in the Dismal Swamp where Nat Turner hid for more than two months, while leading the rebellion of free and enslaved black people in Southampton County, Virginia in 1831. Eventually he was discovered, tried, and eventually executed. Invite students to look again. *How does this history change how you see the image? Do you notice details that may connect to the story? How so?*

Contemplate the Title: Sally Mann chose to title this whole series *Blackwater* in reference to a type of river with a slow-moving channel that flows through forested wetlands or swamps. Decaying vegetation causes tannins to leach into the water, turning it brownish-black.

Encourage students to create their own title for an image. *What do you see that made you choose that title?*

What Remains



The Turn, 2005
Gelatin silver print
Private collection

- **Investigate the Scene:** Encourage students to summarize their impressions of this photograph by asking, “What is one word to describe this image?” Keep the conversation tied to the work by asking them to support their words with details from the photograph.
- **Contemplate Mood:** What is the mood or overall feeling of this photograph? What do you see that makes you say that?
- **Not Happenstance:** Let your students know that this is a staged image of Mann’s husband Larry in a field that has just been burned. This is not a momentary snapshot. She instructed him to stand this way. She deliberately composed the image. *What is she telling us with these choices?*
- **Investigate Composition:** Mann has composed this image symmetrically. Holding viewfinders in the air, encourage students to “crop” the image or zoom in/out. Allow other members of the group to look through your viewfinder. Compare the new images to the original. How is the impression different/the same? Which do they like better?
- **Consider the Title:** Yes, Larry is turning. *What other turns might be indicated by this image?*

Conclusion

Conclude your lesson or conversation by inviting students to respond in writing to the content of the exhibition.

Invite the group to consider a reflective question or prompt:

- I used to think _____, now I think _____.
- What do you still have questions about?
- What would you like to ask the artist or her subjects about the work?
- Do you have new associations with or thoughts about the South or being a Southerner?
- What’s one word or phrase you would use to describe the exhibition?

Artistic Processes

Collodion Wet Plate Process (from label text)

Sally Mann began to make collodion wet plate negatives in the late 1990s. This time-consuming and messy nineteenth-century process requires coating a glass plate with a syrupy substance called collodion. After dipping the coated plate into a solution of silver salts to make it light sensitive, the photographer loads the plate into the camera for exposure and then develops it. The entire process—from plate preparation to development—must be done within minutes before the collodion dries. The resulting glass negative can be used to make positive prints on any kind of photographic paper, including Mann’s preferred gelatin silver paper.

While most nineteenth-century photographers worked hard to produce flawless negatives, Mann realized it was the imperfections she liked. Praying to “the angel of uncertainty,” she deliberately cultivated the accidental streaks, blurs, and scratches that the process invited and allowed chance to play a determining role in the appearance of her prints. Making wet plate collodion negatives required Mann to work in a completely new way. In addition to using an 8-x-10-inch camera specifically set up for the process, she remarked that she needed “custom-made film holders sized for glass, a traveling darkroom for the Suburban, and a collection of esoteric and explosive chemicals.”

Gelatin Silver Prints (Source from Art Institute of Chicago website)

“Gelatin silver printing has been the primary black-and-white process since its development in the late 1880s and consists of three layers—paper, baryta, and gelatin—on which an image is produced. The paper essentially serves as a base, with the baryta layer (a surface preparation of barium sulfate) sitting on top to separate the image-containing gelatin layer from the paper support. The gelatin layer is made up of an emulsion that consists of light-sensitive silver compounds that form the image following exposure of the negative and development in a chemical bath. Another distinguishing feature is the smooth, even image surface. Photographers often use additional chemicals on gelatin silver prints in order to alter the range of tone and make the print more permanent.”

Tin Types (from label text)

Most popular during the 1860s and 1870s, tintypes are produced when a collodion negative is made directly on a thin sheet of black-lacquered metal. The dark background causes the photographic negative to appear as a positive image. Because the negative is made directly on the metal sheet and is not used to produce multiple images, each tintype is one of a kind. Some of Mann’s tintypes are edged with an eerie, wavering, incandescent blue line—probably caused by excessive collodion on the plates—that adds to their morbid otherworldliness.

Ortho film and expired photographic paper

(read more at: <https://www.poppphoto.com/american-photo/photographic-paper-decades-past-its-expiration-date/> and <https://filmphotographyproject.com/content/howto/2018/07/panchromatic-orthochromatic-film/>)

Orthochromatic films can only see blue (outdoor) light. Reds are rendered darker and therefore create darker skin tones.

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