

#53 September 2020
Cameraderie
Sally Mann (1951-)



Sally Mann is a highly original and super controversial photographer, perhaps even more so than Robert Mapplethorpe (#17, March 2015). Basically, she has extensively photographed her own children nude and/or expressing sensual (or sexual?) postures. This stirs up questions as to whether she has abused them, is a pornographer, or is expressing their natural developmental changes. However you take it, I will present some of her striking photographs below. Closely coupled with this is the question of artistic freedom, the precarious rim of which Mann certainly treads upon.

I have done Mann somewhat of a disservice to focus mostly on her family photographs, for she is artistically renowned for other subjects. Mann has a website, <https://www.sallymann.com/>, and I recommend you to browse through it for an overview of her other areas of interest, like landscapes and death-and-decay.

The Wikipedia article on Mann is here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sally_Mann

Here are some quotes from the Wikipedia article:

Mann is widely known for Immediate Family, her third collection, first exhibited in 1990 by Edwynn Houk Gallery in Chicago and published as a monograph in 1992. The New York Times said, "Probably no photographer in history has enjoyed such a burst of success in the art world". The book consists of 65 black-and-white photographs of her three children, all under the age of 10. Many of the pictures were taken at the family's remote summer cabin along the river, where the children played and swam in the nude. Many explore typical childhood themes (skinny dipping, reading the funnies, dressing up, vamping, napping, playing board games) but others touch on darker themes such as insecurity, loneliness, injury, sexuality and death. The controversy on its release was intense, including accusations of child pornography (both in America and abroad) and of contrived fiction with constructed tableaux.

Mann herself considered these photographs to be "natural through the eyes of a mother, since she has seen her children in every state: happy, sad, playful, sick, bloodied, angry and even naked". Critics agreed, saying her "vision in large measure [is] accurate, and a welcome

corrective to familiar notions of youth as a time of unalloyed sweetness and innocence”, and that the book “created a place that looked like Eden, then cast upon it the subdued and shifting light of nostalgia, sexuality and death”. When Time magazine named her “America’s Best Photographer” in 2001, it wrote:

Mann recorded a combination of spontaneous and carefully arranged moments of childhood repose and revealingly—sometimes unnervingly—imaginative play. What the outraged critics of her child nudes failed to grant was the patent devotion involved throughout the project and the delighted complicity of her son and daughters in so many of the solemn or playful events. No other collection of family photographs is remotely like it, in both its naked candor and the fervor of its maternal curiosity and care.

The New Republic considered it “one of the great photograph books of our time”.

Here are some of Mann’s best-known photographs:

Luncheon in the Grasses 1991



Of course this is a direct quote from Édouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (Luncheon on the grass), which raised quite a flap in its own time. In both cases, I think the artist has chosen to deliberately break away from tradition, with somewhat "in your face" results. This could be called "originality," if you want to be positive about either one.



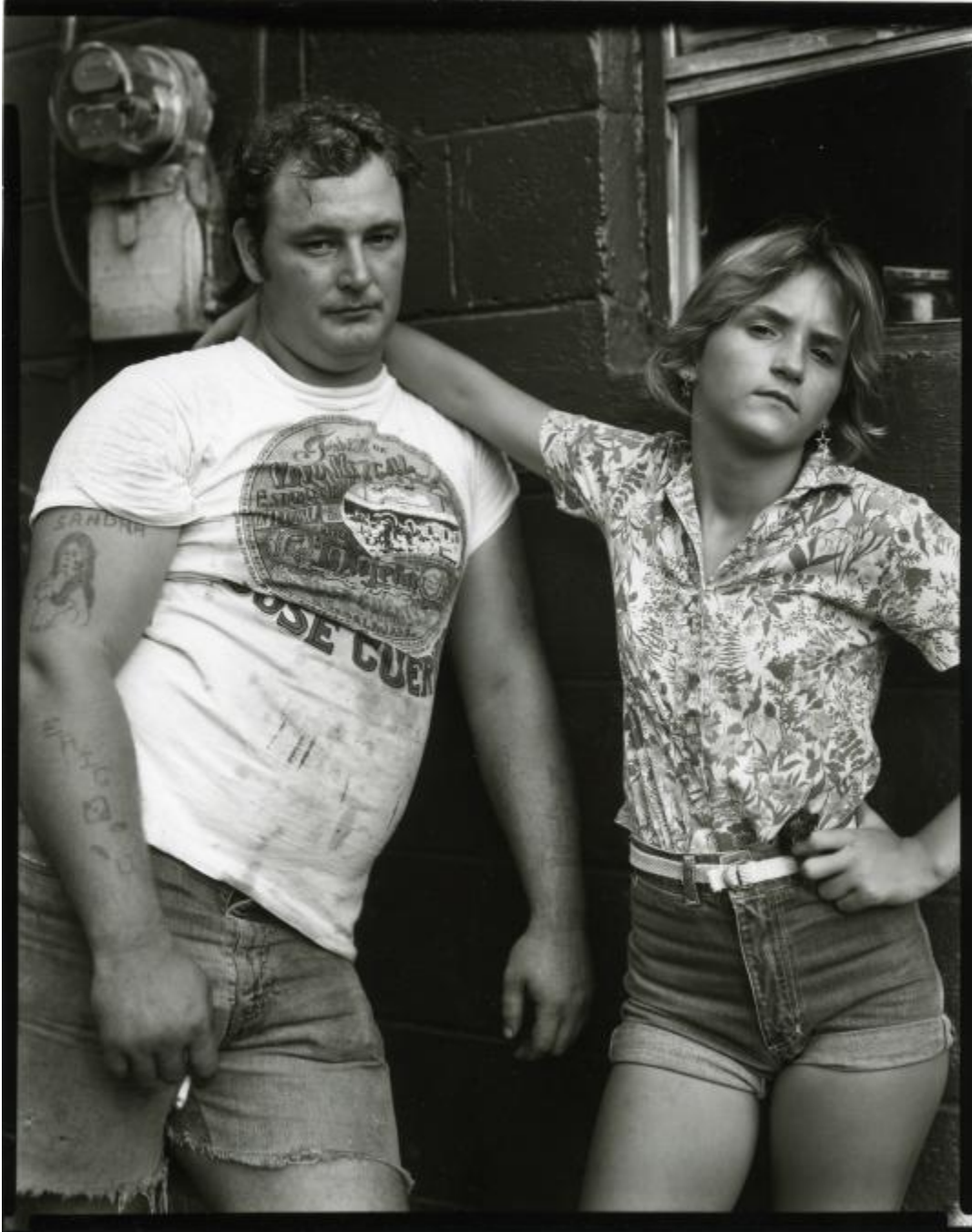
Emmett, Jessie and Virginia 1989



The Last Time Emmett Posed Nude [title according to one source I found]



[I can't find a title or year for this.]



This is a whole other discussion, about sexuality, age, and abuse. I do not think Mann's documentary photograph views this couple positively, as of course it should not. Note the obvious symbolism of the man's right hand.