Portfolio by Sally Mann

Heaps of plentitude.
Many high-modernist artists (and the modernist historians and critics who theorize them) understood themselves as engaged in a process of utopianism-through-negation, that is, the assertion that by absenting or abjecting something (hierarchies, subject matter, consumer culture, craft, decoration) there could emerge a radical future of pure form. Yet as has been insistently mourned by art historians of a depressive (and often masculinist) tendency, modernism’s utopian object never amounted to anything and begat only metastasizing voids. Postmodernism did not resolve these traumas and only replaced nostalgia with more of the same in the shape of a writerly emptiness, a profusion of words that had no stable object to mourn and no body with which to mourn it.
I recall these art historical obsessions with negation in order to frame Sally Mann’s own absences, which I will present unceremoniously and unpoetically as a list. She is absent from conventional, academic art histories, which resent her for eluding appropriation, for being a photographer and not an artist-using-photography, for intersecting with the popular imagination, and for sidelining academic discourse in her writings in favor of the poetic. Relatedly and always surprisingly, she is largely absent from feminist art histories, save a smattering of essays, such as those by Anne Higonnet (2001), Jennifer Friedlander (2008), and Claire Raymond (2017). Finally, she is absent from queer histories of censorship and the Culture Wars, with Robert Mapplethorpe and all his cold and careless handsomeness dominating that discussion at the expense of others, like Mann, the
Guerrilla Girls, and Judy Chicago—each of whom faced censorship in the same period.

Sally Mann, *Deep South, Untitled (Bridge on Tallahatchie)*, 1998, tea toned gelatin silver print, 40 x 50 inches. © Sally Mann. Courtesy Gagosian.
I have outlined a *mise en abyme* of nothings upon nothings as an art historical/critical necessity, but Mann, it seems to me, frames nothingness with plenitude and heaps plenitude upon itself. In *Virginia, Untitled (Vase)* (1992), for instance, a receptacle with unknown contents stands on an unassuming pedestal, both remnant and erstwhile monument (like Georges Bataille’s *informe*, maybe). Its loneliness ensures its perpetual emptiness. There is no standing water and therefore no mosquitoes to transfer fluids or discourses. Likewise, with no one to fill or refill it, mythology tends to evaporate. Yet Mann frames the image with the washed-out sky, a signifier not of absence but indeed of too much presence, of an image-world so replete with light and darkness that it cannot be captured all at once. A sky becomes a necessary stain-as-frame, something once-there-now-gone, like the grease from my or a previous library patron’s fingers that have smeared

Sally Mann, *Virginia, Untitled (Vase)*, 1992, tea toned gelatin silver print, 30 x 40 inches. © Sally Mann. Courtesy Gagosian.
the blacks of the left and right bottommost corners of the image. All that has been forgotten or pushed out is in there, in the vessel, in the chemical halo, in the book, cradled, and yet entirely resistant to the self-conscious touch of metaphor or historicism.

—William J. Simmons

Sally Mann’s work can be seen in the group exhibition *Time Lapse: Contemporary Analog Photography* at the Shelburne Museum in Shelburne, VT, until March 8.


William J. Simmons is a poet, essayist, and Provost Fellow in the Humanities at the University of Southern California.
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