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Portfolio by Sally Mann

Heaps of plentitude.

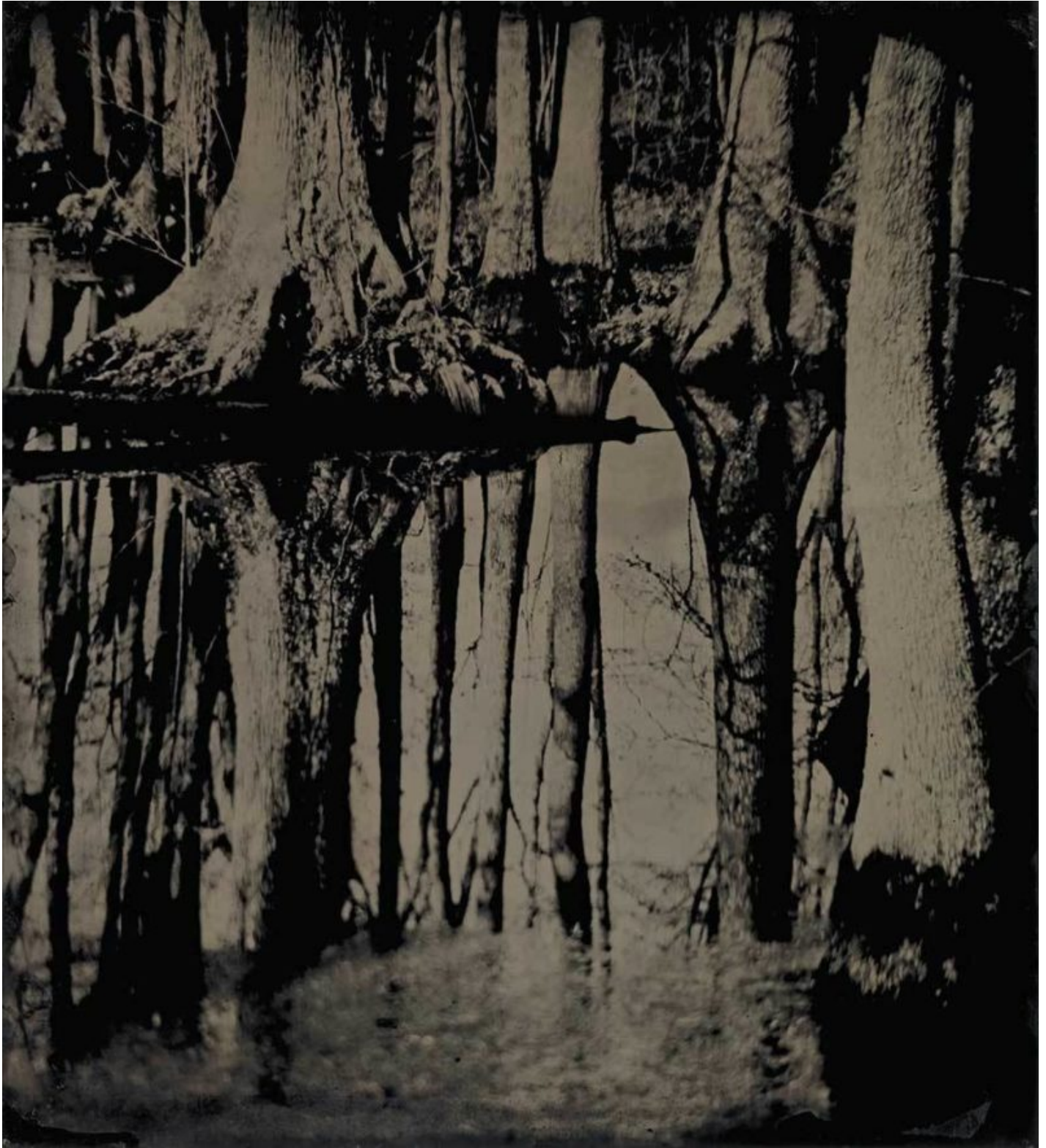


Sally Mann, *The Turn*, 2005, gelatin silver print, 38.18 × 46.94 inches. © Sally Mann. Courtesy Gagosian.

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 absencing 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.



Sally Mann, *Blackwater 9*, 2008–12, tintype, 15 × 13.5 inches. © Sally Mann. Courtesy Gagosian.



Sally Mann, *Blackwater 25*, 2008–12, tintype, 15 × 13.5 inches. © Sally Mann. Courtesy Gagosian.



Sally Mann, *Last Light*, 1990, gelatin silver print, 20 × 23.9 inches. © Sally Mann. Courtesy Gagolian.

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 × 50 inches. © Sally Mann. Courtesy Gagosian.



Sally Mann, *Deep South, Untitled (Stick)*, 1998, tea toned gelatin silver print, 40 x 50 inches. © Sally Mann. Courtesy Gagosian.



Sally Mann, *Virginia, Untitled (Vase)*, 1992, tea toned gelatin silver print, 30 x 40 inches. © Sally Mann. Courtesy Gagolian.

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

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, *Was Ever Love*, 2009, gelatin silver print, 15 x 13.5 inches. © Sally Mann. Courtesy Gagosian.



Sally Mann, *St. Paul United Methodist*, 2008–16, gelatin silver print, 8 x 10 inches. © Sally Mann. Courtesy Gagosian.



Sally Mann, *Triptych*, 2004, three gelatin silver prints, three panels, each 50 × 40 inches (overall 50 × 120 inches). © Sally Mann. Courtesy Gagosian.

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.

*Sally Mann (born in Lexington, Virginia, 1951) is one of America's most renowned photographers. She has received numerous awards, including NEA, NEH, and Guggenheim Foundation grants, and her work is held by major institutions internationally. Her many books include *At Twelve* (1988), *Immediate Family* (1992), *Still Time* (1994), *What Remains* (2003), *Deep South* (2005), *Proud Flesh* (2009), *The Flesh and the Spirit* (2010), *Remembered Light* (2016), and *A Thousand Crossings* (2018). In 2001, Mann was named "America's Best Photographer" by Time magazine. A 1994 documentary about her work, *Blood Ties*, was nominated for an Academy Award, and the 2006 feature film *What Remains* was nominated for an Emmy Award in 2008. Her bestselling memoir, *Hold Still* (Little, Brown, 2015), received universal critical acclaim and was named a finalist for the National Book Award. In 2016, *Hold Still* won the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Nonfiction. In March 2018, *Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings*, opened at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, and traveled subsequently, garnering overwhelmingly positive reviews and record-breaking attendance. Mann is represented by Gagosian Gallery, New York. She lives in Virginia.*

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