

Sally Mann: What Remains

WALL TEXT

Sally Mann: What Remains presents this celebrated photographer's most recent body of work, a five-part series that explores the ineffable divide between body and soul, life and death, earth and spirit. The project is organized into five sections that visually depict the eternal cycle of life, death, and regeneration. *What Remains* draws upon the artist's personal experiences as inspiration for a haunting series about the one subject that affects us all: the loss of life and what remains.

The Corcoran Gallery of Art has had a long relationship with Sally Mann. *The Lewis Law Portfolio*, her first museum exhibition, premiered here in 1977. Born in Lexington, Virginia in 1951, Mann is perhaps best known for *Immediate Family*, her photographic series and book that features artful and intimate photographs of her husband and three children in everyday moments. These evoke a mother's inquisitive gaze at her own family within a dreamlike rural environment. *Immediate Family* helped redefine how we think about the complex relationships between a photographer and her subject. Her other major projects include *Second Sight*, *At Twelve: Portraits of Young Women*, and *Mother Land: Recent Landscapes of Georgia and Virginia*.

Mann's work is produced in series that often unfold in poetic sequences of pictures. She combines sophisticated historical and aesthetic sensibilities with a highly personal, philosophical look at real life in the American South. Some of her photographs are fictional and some quite real, but they all connect her memories of a bucolic childhood growing up on her father's Shenandoah farm to an innate, emotional feeling for the landscape.

Never one to shy away from challenging subject matter, Mann asks us in *What Remains* to contemplate the beauty and efficiency with which nature assimilates the body once life is over. Here she seamlessly connects the landscape of the earth to the topography of the body and examines how both are tightly interwoven. Yet she creates tension between the

two. As the exhibition progresses, portrait faces of her children emerge from the darkness of the alchemical photographic process, surrounded by murky images of the landscape, as if struggling to become free of the earth that inevitably reclaims the body.

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Matter Lent

Created with an antique 8x10-inch view camera, using the wet-plate collodion process, these images document the decomposition of the of Mann's beloved pet greyhound Eva in a manner that is at once painterly, sculptural, and photographic. When Eva died, Mann buried her body in the woods. She returned the following year and disinterred the remains. Her photographs of Eva's bones and fur are at once anthropological and abstract, sometimes evoking astronomical views of galaxies and stars, sometimes resembling pictorial records from an archeological dig.

Introduced in 1851, the wet-plate collodion process is a method of making photographic negatives on a glass plate coated with light-sensitive chemicals. The plate is coated with a silver nitrate solution, loaded in a plate holder into the camera, and exposed while still wet and sticky. The photographer has only about five minutes to make the picture before the solution dries. A number of these photographs are presented in the exhibition as ambrotypes. To produce these, Mann backed her original collodion negatives with ruby glass, creating modern versions of this traditional photographic process popular in the 1860s. When the negatives are backed with this dark, translucent material, the image is reversed and can be viewed as a rich, warm-toned positive photograph.

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Untitled

Incorporating the most visually graphic photographs in the exhibition, this section includes images taken at the University of Tennessee Forensic Anthropology Facility, a study site where scientists, students, doctors, and law enforcement officers research the decomposition of human remains. In these varnished gelatin silver prints made from her original glass plate negatives, Mann does not avert her eyes from the reality of decay. Speaking about these images, Mann says, "there's a moment where you look at a body and say, 'that was a human being.' That was someone who was loved, cherished,

caressed. That's a very tough one for me, the whole question of when a human becomes remains. That question came up over and over again while I was doing this work."

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December 8, 2000

Because of a big bend in the river, our farm has water on three sides, a classic stronghold. This fact, coupled with the long views from our house, explains why at first we had no locks on the doors.

When the sheriff called to suggest locking up against an escaped prisoner, I was briefly amused by the impossibility of this, then paralyzed by bogey-man-under-the-bed fear. The fear was appropriate: the prisoner, a felon with sex offenses on his record, had escaped custody with two pistols and a shotgun. When he reached the river below our house he swam it, forcing his pursuers to backtrack by car to the nearest bridge. I was alone on the farm except for this wet, unhappy man with the guns.

He must have ditched the shotgun because by the time he approached the house he only had the pistols. Ducking behind a tree, he put one of them to his head. His shot was tinnily distinguishable from the rifle shots of the police who had appeared at the last moment. He fell among the stumps and bracken, just a kid after all, my son's age, bled out in the milky winter light.

When it was over and the trucks and cars and helicopters had cleared out, I walked over to the place where he died. The underbrush was matted down, there were patches of blue and orange spray paint marking coordinates of some kind, yellow crime tape hung on the wild rose, and there at the base of a hickory tree was a glistening pool of dark blood. I was tempted to touch its perfectly tensioned surface. Instead, as I stared, it shrank perceptibly, forming a brief meniscus before leveling off again, as if the earth had taken a delicate sip.

Death has left for me its imperishable mark on an ordinary copse of trees in the front yard. But would a stranger, coming upon it a century hence, sense the sanctity of the death-inflected soil?

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Antietam

A suicide on her property was the transitional incident from which the photographs in this section unfold. As a witness to life meeting death at her doorstep, she chose to introduce the subject of violence and its historic relationship to the land.

On a single day in September 1862, 23,000 men were killed, wounded, or declared missing on the infamous Civil War battlefield along Antietam Creek in Sharpsburg, Maryland. Mann's large-scale photographs of this now-hallowed landscape, also made using the wet-collodion process, encourage viewers to contemplate the role of photography in documenting history, war, the passing of time, and death's sanctification of the soil. Mann has photographed several Civil War battlefields but Antietam was especially meaningful for this project. Wandering the fields where soldiers lost their lives in record numbers, Mann felt compelled to record the feeling of "...walking among the accretion of millions of remains, walking in effect on the shifting remains of humanity."

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What Remains

More than 60 extreme close-up portraits of Mann's three children form an elegiac and loving coda to the preceding photographs in the exhibition. While the subject matter of this section contrasts sharply with that of the other four, viewers will certainly recall the earlier images when looking at them. As in the previous room, many of these portraits are presented as ambrotypes, with her original glass-plate collodion negatives lying in two long lines on a table, as if floating in a dark sea. With these images, Mann concludes, "Death is best approached as a springboard to appreciate life more fully. That's why this show ends with pictures of living people, pictures of my children. This whole body of work is a process of thanksgiving."

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All things summon us to death;
Nature, almost envious of the good she has given us,
Tells us often and gives us notice that she cannot

For long allow us that scrap of matter she has lent...
 She has need of it for other forms,
 She claims it back for other works.

Jacques-Bénigne Bousset (1627-1704), "On Death, a Sermon"

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—when a human body
 is drained of its broths and filled
 again with formaldehyde and salts,
 or unguents and aromatic oils, and pranked
 up in its holiday best and laid out
 in a satin-lined airtight stainless-steel
 coffin and stowed in a leakproof concrete vault—
 I will know that if no fellow-creatures
 can pry their way in to do the underdigging
 and jiggling and earthing over and mating
 and egg laying and birthing forth,
 then the most that can come to pass
 will be a centuries-long withering
 down to a gowpen of dead dust, and not ever
 the crawling of new life out of the old,
 which is what we have for eternity on earth.

Galway Kinnell, "The Quick and the Dead"

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Pensive on her dead gazing I heard the Mother of All,
 Desperate on the torn bodies, on the forms covering the battlefields gazing,
 (As the last gun ceased, but the scent of the powder-smoke linger'd,)
 As she call'd to her earth with mournful voice while she stalked,
 Absorb them well O my earth, she cried, I charge you lose not my sons, lose not an atom,
 And you streams absorb them well, taking their dear blood,
 And you local spots, and you airs that swim above lightly impalpable,
 And all you essences of soil and growth, and you my rivers' depths,
 And you mountain sides, and the woods where my dear children's blood trickling
 redden'd
 And you trees down in your roots to bequeath to all future trees,
 My dead absorb or South or North—my young men's bodies absorb, and their precious
 precious blood,
 Which holding in trust for me faithfully back again give me many a year hence,
 In blowing airs from the fields back again give me my darlings, give my immortal heroes,
 Exhale me them centuries hence, breathe me their breath, let not an atom be lost,
 O years and graves! O air and soil! O my dead, an aroma sweet!

Exhale them perennial sweet death, years, centuries hence.

Walt Whitman, from *Leaves of Grass*

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What thou lovest well remains,
 the rest is dross
What thou lovest well shall not be
reft from thee

Ezra Pound, "Canto 81"

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