

# Mann Made

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I grew up as a little girl in Maine, a part of the community. In the winters I toddled by vast expanses of windswept lake and knew the fishermen huddled in their plywood ice-huts and waved to them. I knew the lawns dotted with holes and dirt and broken glass and children that played hopscotch around cigarette butts and rusty hubcaps. I knew the boys who hung around the soft periphery of the pond in the summer, catcalling and getting fatter every year. I knew the girls who smoked outside the grocery store, some of their eyes smeared with the purple-black of bruised skin. I knew the kids who slept in beds stained with urine, kids whose parents were their aunts and uncles because one more child wouldn't make much difference. I have pictures and pictures of these times—one of me and my friend Audrey propped against her father's rusted truck, one of me and a boy named Clark, toddlers, smiling on a wharf. But I wasn't one of those kids, and we moved away. I am no longer a Mainer in anyone's eyes but my own.

When I see Audrey now she smiles protectively, is engaged, has a child. Clark killed himself when he was fourteen. This is not melodrama; it's a gaping and present reality of a rural lifestyle. And though I knew these children, was friends with them, slept in their beds, was an insider, I belong there now no more than a spot of oil floating atop an ocean. Those photographs I have are the only ones I will ever have because I can't take them now. The Mainers are not my friends, not my people, and I am not theirs. Mine wouldn't be pictures *with* them, but pictures *of* them; each person would be my subject, my art, my design. When I walk by the frozen lake now, I appreciate the desolate, cinematic beauty of men sitting alone in little houses hoping for cold fish. But I can't take it with me, because it's not mine anymore.

Photographer Sally Mann lives in a similar world. Based out of Lexington, Virginia, she lives in a home surrounded by poverty, a rural landscape, and a community to which she does not unquestionably belong. She has become a contentious figure, to say the least. Upon the gallery opening of her 1992 show *Immediate Family*, controversy churned the stillwater of her

home. The majority of her photographs depict her three children in various stages of undress, often appearing abused, bloodied, or at least bedraggled. While most critics bashed Mann for exploiting her children, many also critiqued her subject matter, rather than her subjects. In a *New York Times* interview conducted with Mann shortly after the release of *Immediate Family*, columnist Richard Woodward slices an interesting vein. He writes, “The class status of her children, who are not poor but appear to be in the photographs, can also seem problematic. Suicide, child abuse and poverty are not fictions. What may be cowboy playtime for her children—pretending to be garroted—is taken away from them when transported to the realm of adult melodrama.”

Woodward is correct in his assertion that dark, tender themes sit like bruises under the artfully crafted skin of Mann’s photography. One photograph, entitled *Damaged Child*, frames her young daughter Virginia, perhaps aged three or four. She is clean and stoic—not crying, not smiling. But one can’t help but notice her right eye in the center of the frame—barely peeking out from under a roll of swollen flesh, while the other shines brightly, unharmed. We assume abuse, but the bites are from gnats, and the child is merely suffering from an unfortunate byproduct of play. Mann seems to be shedding light on very dark, very real issues that some people deal with every day—but she and her children do not.

Throughout her career, Mann has exposed themes without actually exposing people. Her second-largest published body of work, entitled *Deep South*, is a collection of natural landscape scenes from her native Virginia. *Immediate Family* and *Deep South* make a particularly interesting pairing: both subtly explore patterns of abuse and neglect inherent to Southern culture without ever objectifying Southern people. When asked in an interview about the influence of the rural setting on her work, Mann replied, “Even though I take pictures of my children, they’re still about here . . . it exerts a hold on me that I can’t define” (Woodward). It is hard to imagine how a tree and a child can evoke the same feelings of tenderness, deep hurt and crude vulnerability. But Mann shows us.

In one particularly striking photograph from *Deep South*, a tree stands alone in the middle of a patch of grass. Majestic, gray, and well worn, its boughs stretch backwards over a wire fence. In the middle of the frame, however, near the base of the trunk, a large gash rakes through the bark. Either because of sap or frame exposure, the deep laceration seems to bleed and scab, giving the tree a dying-while-living feeling. The feeling I get when I look at this photograph is all too reminiscent of my experience viewing *Damaged*

*Child.*

As one looks more deeply into each collection, the thematic similarities become even more apparent. In *Deep South*, one picture displays a mangle of knotted tree roots rising out of a pallid fog. The overexposed frame gives everything an unsettlingly still feeling. Crawling from edge to edge of the frame, the roots seem to have stopped mid-squirm under Mann's observation. It's almost as if she has caught this ancient, bedraggled mess before it could creep offensively into the forest. Another photograph from *Immediate Family* shows a young Virginia lying naked, sprawled in the middle of her bed. It is overexposed, like the picture of the forest, and Virginia, as the focal point, seems to have been frozen in time. The corners of the picture fade into oblivion. What is most striking, once more, is the feeling of being caught: sleeping Virginia is sprawled docilely in what seems to be a spill of her own urine, which seeps off the edge of the bed and onto the floor. Like the roots, it has been apprehended in the middle of its encroachment.

Mann's photography recalls the bucolic yet destitute imagery captured during the Great Depression by photographer Walker Evans. Although he took some of the most iconic, relevant photographs of the dust bowl of that time, many have criticized him for exploiting his subjects. His photographs capture men, women, and children, impoverished and covered in dust. But if Evans meant to capture them in that way, are the images truthful? In a *New York Times* op-ed, Errol Morris discusses this conundrum with author and photographer James Curtis. Evans has been criticized for moving furniture and people around to achieve a certain look in his photographs. Many argue that these alterations constitute a kind of fraud. Curtis maintains that "Evans's photographs were more romantic and aesthetic" (4). He believes that Evans was justified in moving furniture around in people's homes and altering their appearances to capture a "true portrait," and lays out Evans's earnest, if paradoxical, logic: "Some objects are removed and other objects are rearranged in order to make the scene appear more simple. And, therefore, in his view more *honest*" (Morris). Evans alters reality to create a more truthful depiction of a rural, destitute lifestyle. He seems quite a bit like Mann.

There is, however, one crucial difference. Mann does not claim to be capturing reality—she merely hints at it, through evoking themes. So perhaps her photographs are more honest. Still, like Evans, Mann has been criticized for displaying a degree of moral indifference. Woodward writes:

The pictures dramatize burgeoning sexuality, while implying the more forbidden topics of incest and child abuse. Mann's laconic captions lend a parental concern, honed with a feminist edge. Some of the poses seem

casual; others, carefully directed. Mann has been criticized for treating violence with an esthete's dispassion, for bringing out the subtle texture of blood and bruises without offering a clear political statement along the way.

Once again, Woodward raises the issue of whether a photograph is natural or posed. Oddly enough, there is love in each of Mann's photographs: she seems like a mother with a vested interest in her subjects and their surrounding landscape, rather than a removed, dispassionate auteur. Mann states:

I struggle with enormous discrepancies: between the reality of motherhood and the image of it, between my love for my home and the need to travel, between the varied and seductive paths of the heart. The lessons of impermanence, the occasional despair and the muse, so tenuously moored, all visit their needs upon me and I dig deeply for the spiritual utilities that restore me: my love for the place, for the one man left, for my children and friends and the great green pulse of spring. ("Biography")

Mann feels deeply attached to the situations that bloom around her. Her art would not be as personal if she were to use subjects other than her children or the sprawling, debased landscapes that crowd her line of sight. Yet they would not be her own—and she could not make them true—without alteration, like Evans and his furniture.

Mann is both an insider and an outsider in her native Virginia home—she needs to be, or else she wouldn't be able to represent it. Woodward writes, "Born and raised here, married to the same man for 22 years, Mann is secure enough in her surroundings to take liberties with the mores of a place only 50 miles from the headquarters of the Rev. Jerry Falwell and his Moral Majority." And Mann herself, embracing the contradiction, believes that "[the South] loves [eccentrics], and it rewards them in lots of ways. This community allows itself to be scandalized by me and by my work, but they love it. What else would they do if it wasn't for me? I take being iconoclastic sort of seriously. It's my role here" (Woodward). Her tone is laced with both honesty and irony; she is the resident scandal, caught between the inside and outside worlds, saddled with the artistic desire to show people, themes, and moments without actually exposing the people themselves. That is how she dredges up the raw nerve, the insidious suggestion, the seductive discomfort. She has access to the emotions and themes inspired by her life and her surroundings, but she is not quite of the people. She is not fully a part of that world's harsh reality, so she can imply, suggest, hint at its darker seams.

One of Mann's most criticized photographs, entitled *The New Mothers*, pictures Jessie, Mann's most thoroughly represented subject, standing and staring straight at the camera, one hand held tightly across her chest, the other casually holding a (candy) cigarette. She is nine in the photo. Her gaze is one that seems to run in the family—a gaze of cold, unfaltering resolve. She frowns slightly, her windswept blond hair brushing over her forehead. Virginia, her younger sister, stands to her immediate right. Her back is to the camera; with hands on hips, back arched, she looks like an indignant old woman. The children, both under the age of ten, look much older than they are. Woodward comments that “by posing Jessie with a candy cigarette and Virginia in Lolita glasses for the picture entitled ‘The New Mothers,’ Mann gives them props whose dark associations they can’t begin to understand.” Mann uses her children themselves as props—vessels to convey an idea. In a way, this exposes them less. We do not see who they really are, even though they are naked. They are posed, staged messengers. Mann's children are like Evans's furniture.

While some cry exploitation and child abuse at Mann's work, I think she has artfully, beautifully mastered the difficult task of portraying a turbulent environment without exposing the individuals who live in it. Mann captures what she knows—the South, her children, darkness—without victimizing, exploiting, abusing the people. Like the Mainers of my upbringing, they call to her with their suffering but remain ever distant and obscure. They drive her to create, but cannot be in what she has created. So she turns to her children. We can even find ugly, perverse beauty in her landscapes. The gaping slash in Mann's tree is a startling depiction of the permanent residue of a wound. Her sulking tree roots exude a shame and suspicion that lurks on forest floors and in the human world.

Yet she struggles with artistic honesty. It is the struggle, in her words, “between the varied and seductive paths of the heart” (“Biography”). These paths lead her down two different roads at once as artist and resident, intellectual and human being. She tries to be the portrayer of abstract truth, never lowering herself to the level of documentary exposure. Yet she still uses her own children as purveyors of the truth she understands.

If she captured the people of her town, encapsulating their pain, she would become Walker Evans, the intellectual voyeur, firmly declaring his subjects' truth and staging the engagement. But Mann knows that she does not have the right to photograph these people as an insider, because she is not one. It would be a calculated, presumptuous lie; her photographs would be as dishonest and dangerous as people who know little but think they know

much. Sally Mann as the artist has the opportunity to give her people, her subjects, a voice, but she must not let that voice simply be her own. By capturing her children, she lets the abuse, incest, and neglect speak for themselves, whispering from a space between reality and abstraction. Burning, tender, painful truths scream out of her work without being dampened by the issue of whether or not they are hers to depict.

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