



Transatlantica

Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

1 | 2018

Slavery on Screen / American Women Writers Abroad:
1849-1976

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/12930>

DOI: 10.4000/transatlantica.12930

ISSN: 1765-2766

Publisher

AFEA

Electronic reference

Mary-Elaine Jenkins, "Sally Mann's "A Thousand Crossings" at the Musée du Jeu de Paume", *Transatlantica* [Online], 1 | 2018, Online since 01 October 2019, connection on 29 April 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/12930> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.12930>

This text was automatically generated on 29 April 2021.



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Sally Mann's "A Thousand Crossings" at the Musée du Jeu de Paume

Mary-Elaine Jenkins

- 1 About a year after seeing it at its first home at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, I had the pleasure of seeing the Sally Mann exhibit "A Thousand Crossings" at Paris's Musée du Jeu de Paume in July 2019. An artist myself (musician) with very deep Southern roots (13th generation South Carolinian), I have been rattled by Mann's work since I first saw it. The images felt familiar, relevant, giving me a sense of *déjà-vu*. Seeing them at the Jeu de Paume was even more surreal, a ringing reminder of home in the center of Paris.
- 2 "A Thousand Crossings" allows us to follow Mann's footsteps from her iconic early photographs of her children, to her focal shift to Southern landscapes and battlefields and her adaption of the nineteenth-century wet plate collodion process, to her most recent work: a white woman's reckoning with her own history *vis-a-vis* the African American experience in the South. Though it spans decades and includes a wide spectrum of Mann's work, it is not, in fact, intended as a retrospective, as Sarah Greenough, senior curator and head of the department of photographs of the National Gallery of Art, and co-curator of this exhibit (with Sarah Kennel, the Byrne Family Curator of Photography at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts) points out in her introductory lecture for the exhibit (Greenough). Instead, it serves to highlight the significance of the American South—its staggering beauty coupled with its tumultuous history of violence, racism, suffering, and oppression—as Mann's most beguiling and transcendent muse. It inspires her, sustains her, and challenges her to ask the most difficult questions about her history. Throughout her decades of photos, the South is ever-present; it is woven into the DNA of her work.



(1) Deep South, Untitled (Fontainebleau), 1998, Sally Mann
Sally Mann/National Gallery of Art, Washington (All Rights Reserved)

- 3 Looking at these different phases of her photographs of the land that nourished her and shaped her, the “Southern-ness” of Mann’s work is one of the most conspicuous ribbons that run through it. But what about it is particularly Southern? And why is it relevant in France?
- 4 In her bestselling 2015 memoir, *Hold Still*, Mann states: “Southern artists [...] have long been known for their susceptibility to myth and their obsession with place, family, death, and the past. Many of us appear inescapably preoccupied with our historical predicament and uniqueness [...]” (Mann 240).
- 5 Along with this obsession with our past, the South and its art have, more often than not and in varying degrees, elements of darkness, of foreboding. We are drawn to it, and how could we not be? As Mann notes in *Hold Still*:

It’s not that we Southerners are exactly in love with death, but there is no question that, given our history, we’re on a first-name basis with it. And such familiarity often lends Southern art a tinge of sorrow, of finitude and mourning. Think of the blues, for example, or early jazz; think of Faulkner, Welty, O’Connor [...]” (Mann 82)
- 6 It’s true: Southerners are, by nature, fixated on their past, and the complicated, dark history we share: of slavery; of the degradation of Southerners after a bitter defeat; of the aftermath of a cruel societal system that came crumbling down, leaving torn vestiges of an impoverished land and people in its wake; and of our forebears, black and white alike, who doggedly clung to this place and forged their lives here. The land is veritably howling with this history. Mann believes, as many Southerners do, that this legacy and these voices are seeping up through the ground. Take, for example, “Deep South, Untitled (#9),” which depicts the ruins of the Windsor Mansion, a Greek revival Mississippi property built by slave labor (“National Register of Historic Places”). The

timeless image with its blurred edges is a living allegory of the downfall of this system and what it left behind.



(2) Deep South, Untitled (#9), 1998, Sally Mann
Sally Mann/Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (All Rights Reserved)

- 7 Mann's photographs of the Southern landscape—in several iterations: her journeys through the Deep South in the "The Land" section, her battlefields series in "Last Measure," and her swamp series in "Abide With Me"—make up an essential part of the exhibit. As she turned her focus away from her family and toward the land, she set out from her home in Rockbridge County, Virginia, on trips deeper south to Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana in her Suburban, which, more often than not, doubled as her hotel and (full of "esoteric and explosive chemicals") her darkroom.



(3) Sally Mann's mobile darkroom

From *Hold Still* (229), Courtesy Kim Rushing (All Rights Reserved)

- 8 She was looking to this land, through her waiting lens, to reveal the scars of its past. “For me,” she writes, “the Deep South was haunted by the souls of the millions of African Americans who built that part of the country with their hands and with the sweat and blood of their backs. I was moving among shades, aware, always, of their presence” (Mann 234).
- 9 A story that has haunted her since childhood is that of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black boy visiting from Chicago who was kidnapped and murdered near Money, Mississippi, in 1955 for allegedly making a pass at a white woman. Till’s beaten, naked body was thrown into the Tallahatchie River, tethered to a cotton gin fan with barbed wire. His mother insisted on an open-casket funeral so that his ruined body could be seen by all, a testament to the injustice. Mann named her first-born child for him.
- 10 There is a series of photos in the exhibit through which Mann makes a sort of memorial to the murdered Till. Led by a local friend, she moved along the Tallahatchie, tracing the sites of his last hours. One of these photos, “Deep South, Untitled (Bridge on Tallahatchie),” is a view of the Black Bayou Bridge in Glendora, Mississippi, the site where his body was thrown into the river. The photo depicts a typical rural Southern scene: rickety old bridge, muddy river overhung with brush. Yet there is something truly unnerving about it: a hand-like branch reaches into the picture, with off-shooting smaller branches reminiscent of curling, grasping fingers. The river from which his body was pulled is vignettted, crowded on either side by dark trees, losing focus as the eye goes outward, while on the bottom left of the image appear marks created by the development process, chemical specks moving out from a long drip, resembling tears, or blood.



(4) Deep South, Untitled (Bridge on Tallahatchie), 1998, Sally Mann
Sally Mann/Markel Corporate Art Collection (All Rights Reserved)

- 11 As she moved around this area, Mann stopped at one point on the riverbank, and recalled bemoaning that a place with such a sorrowful history of injustice and violence seemed... nondescript. However, when she set up her camera at the edge of the water, the land spoke. This image, "Deep South, Untitled (Emmett Till River Bank)," is flooded with light, the reflections of the trees in the river and the grass on the bank awash in that light, and in focus is an ugly, ragged split in the earth. In *Hold Still*, Mann writes that as she took the photo, she could feel that there was something different about this place, and this picture and this piece of wrecked earth are a symbol and a testament to the violence this river saw: "There was, in fact, something mysterious about the spot; I could see it and feel it, and when I released the shutter I asked for forgiveness from Emmett Till" (Mann 236).



(5) Deep South, Untitled (Emmett Till River Bank), 1998, Sally Mann
Sally Mann/Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts (All Rights Reserved)

- 12 "A Thousand Crossings" explores this concept of the interplay between land and memory once again in Mann's battlefields series, begun in the early 2000s. In these photos, which appear in the section of the exhibit entitled "Last Measure," Mann photographed sites of some of the bloodiest battles of the American Civil War: Antietam (the bloodiest in American history), Manassas, Fredericksburg, Cold Harbor, and the Wilderness. Through these photographs, Mann asks "Does the earth remember? Do these fields, upon which unspeakable carnage occurred, where unknowable numbers of bodies are buried, bear witness in some way?" (Mann 411).
- 13 These pictures are the most striking in the exhibit. Though most of them were shot in the blaring afternoon sun, the negatives were developed in a way that makes them very dark and softly focused, the skies swirling, simmering, rippling in places. She shot them close to the ground in an attempt to capture the view of a dying soldier, felled in one of these battles, absorbing with his remaining senses his surroundings in the midst of enormous destruction and loss of human life. The plots of land where these battles took place, today ordinary, green, and peopled by tourists, become through Mann's lens dark, alarming, and cataclysmic, visions almost apocalyptic in nature. "She believed," says Dr. Greenough, "[...] that the only way to connect the latent energy that lingers in a site charged with historical suffering was through an act of imagination and fiction" (Greenough 0:28).



(6) Battlefields, Antietam (Black Sun), Sally Mann
Sally Mann/Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York (All Rights Reserved)

- 14 Mann's beloved wet plate collodion processing, in all its allegorical glory, plays its part magnificently in these photos. The process, invented in the nineteenth century, was used by Civil War photographers, making it historically significant to Mann's series. The fact that it was also used to bind soldiers' wounds gives it even more symbolic relevance. The nature of the process, such as beginning with spotlessly clean glass plates and proper handling of the viscous chemical, creates enormous room for flaws in the negative. Bits of dust on the glass or an area where the chemical pooled create effects such as swirls, streaks, specks, or other blemishes. Rather than taking pains to avoid these abnormalities, as her predecessors would have done, Mann embraced them and gave them a kind of agency to manipulate her pictures in dramatic, meaningful ways. She writes that, in contrast to Proust's narrator in *Swann's Way*, who prayed for a visit from "the angel of certainty," Mann prayed for what she called "the angel of uncertainty," who worked her way into the process and gave the images marked anomalies that helped illuminate the drama of their symbolism (Mann 224).
- 15 In "Battlefields, Antietam (Black Sun)," "Battlefields, Antietam (Cornfield)," and "Battlefields, Fredericksburg (Cedar Trees)," the collodion formed in a way on the surface to suggest fire or smoke. In "Battlefields, Antietam (Starry Night)," light spots across the image look like bullet holes; in "Battlefields, Cold Harbor (Battle)," short, thin fading lines across the image seem to suggest flying bullets. Tears in the emulsion and imperfections in the antique glass used to make the negatives give the viewer the sense that these images have been pulled from time, from memory. The chaotic darkness and nebulousness of them remove you from the middle of a sunny field, where your car is nearby and you are safely reading a plaque about the hideous Battle of Antietam, and place you right in the middle of the horror.



(7) Battlefields, Antietam (Cornfield), 2001, Sally Mann

Sally Mann/Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, The National Endowment for the Arts Fund for American Art (All Rights Reserved)



(8) Battlefields, Fredericksburg (Cedar Trees), 2001, Sally Mann

Sally Mann/Waterman / Kislinger Family (All Rights Reserved)



(9) Battlefields, Antietam (Starry Night), 2001, Sally Mann
Sally Mann/Alan Kirshner and Deborah Mihaloff Art Collection (All Rights Reserved)



(10) Battlefields, Cold Harbor (Battle), 2003, Sally Mann
Sally Mann/National Gallery of Art, Washington (All Rights Reserved)

- 16 In her writing, Mann has borrowed the statement from her friend, Canadian novelist Niall Mackenzie, that “we Southern artists [...] display a conspicuous willingness to use doses of romanticism that would be fatal to anyone else” (Mann 240). Southerners are predisposed to this romanticism, sentimentality, even mysticism. It stems from an idea that our surroundings are alive with the past, electric with the energies of those who came before. Not in a ghostly way (though we love a good ghost story), but, as Mann might put it, in a “metaphorically resonant” way.
- 17 True to her roots, Mann was guided by these particularly Southern principles as she moved through the landscapes, through the decades. She was determined to make the land “give up its ghosts.” And the ghosts are there, visible in these images. The land does indeed carry these scars, as does the collective Southern memory. Those who share that past live among its relics, both material and societal.
- 18 Another facet of her work that is uniquely derivative of Mann’s Southern identity is her lifelong grappling with exactly that. How do you reconcile your blood-quickenning love of a place, a place where you absolutely belong, with its painful history? And how can you come to terms with the part you and your people played in it?
- 19 For me, one of the most moving experiences in “A Thousand Crossings” was the homage paid to Virginia “Gee-Gee” Carter, in the section entitled “Abide With Me,” in which Mann set out to examine how race and history had shaped her own childhood and adolescence. Carter worked for Mann’s family (the Mungers) from the time Mann was a small child into Carter’s old age—nearly 50 years. Mann writes: “Down here, you can’t throw a dead cat without hitting an older, well-off white person raised by a black woman, and every damn one of them will earnestly insist that a reciprocal and equal love was exchanged between them” (Mann 243). She insists, however, that this type of love did exist between her and Carter, the granddaughter of a former slave and the daughter of a woman who was most likely raped by a white man, as Mann writes in *Hold Still* (Mann 257). Carter was, in a sense, Mann’s custodial parent and, from childhood, Mann felt secure in what she said was Carter’s unconditional love.
- 20 In this part of “Abide With Me,” Mann examines the unasked questions, her own obliviousness of the world around her in the Virginia of her youth, a world alive with what she calls “the fundamental paradox of the South: that a white elite, determined to segregate the two races in public, based their stunningly intimate domestic arrangements on an erasure of that segregation in private” (Mann 243).



(11) At Segregated Drinking Fountain, Mobile, Alabama, 1956, Gordon Parks
Gordon Parks/ The Gordon Parks Foundation (All Rights Reserved)

- 21 The Mungers were liberal intellectuals, supporters of the civil rights movement, and yet they played a highly typical role in the caste-like system that fundamentally oppressed African Americans. Mann recalls becoming aware of this paradox, years later, reading Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom* at boarding school in Vermont: "It wounded me, then and there, with the great sadness and tragedy of our American life, with the truth of all that I had not seen, had not known, and had not asked" (Mann 263).
- 22 The exhibit includes photos Mann took of Carter in the late 1980s and early 90s, including a few of Carter with Mann's young daughter Virginia, who was named after Carter. The images have a poignant tenderness to them, particularly "The Two Virginias #4," taken from above as the two are napping, both of their hands raised skyward, a delicate light on the older Virginia's white hair and arthritic hands, and young Virginia's face. In the context of "Abide With Me," these photos are odes to Carter's quiet dignity, strength, and perseverance in the face of the pain and toil in a place and time fundamentally inhospitable to her. Through Mann's lens, this often takes shape in her focus on Carter's immense physicality—strong, capable, and proud. She has, since childhood, had a fascination with Carter's size 13 feet. This is visible in "The Two Virginias #3," where young Virginia sits on Carter's lap, her tiny feet dangling above Carter's massive, nearly 100-year-old feet. We see this physicality again in "The Two Virginias #1," where the young Virginia rests against the powerful leg of her elderly namesake, Carter's hand, long-nailed and weathered by age, resting on the child's head.



(12) The Two Virginias #4, 1991, Sally Mann
Sally Mann/Collection of The Estée Lauder Companies Inc. (All Rights Reserved)



(13) The Two Virginias #3, 1991, Sally Mann
Sally Mann/Gagosian Gallery, New York (All rights Reserved)



(14) The Two Virginias #1, 1988, Sally Mann
Sally Mann/Gagosian Gallery, New York (All Rights Reserved)

- 23 How does "A Thousand Crossings" translate across continents? Why is it relevant in France? Firstly, Jeu de Paume, as an institution, is a champion of American photography and has endeavored consistently to bring it to a French audience. The work of Dorothea Lange, Richard Avedon, Vivian Maier, and Diane Arbus, among a slew of others, have all been part of the programming over the past years. Presumably, one of the reasons for this is to help people understand the American experience. Visiting the Dorothea Lange exhibit at the Jeu de Paume last year offered me a startling new perspective on WWII-era Japanese internment camps, thanks to the showcase on her work for the War Relocation Authority. We can read about the history of place or spend time there, but art holds the key to the heart of a culture, and photography is such an immediate and evocative medium. In an (easily accessible) instant, we are transported, intimate details are revealed to us, and the feel of moments and movements are accessible in a way they are not through prose or even sound.
- 24 How might a French viewer relate to Sally Mann's photos? For one, the French know what it means to endure military defeat and occupation. In *Hold Still*, Mann quotes the British military historian Sir John Keegan:
- The thing about that South is that it retains for Europeans a trace of cultural familiarity, as the rest of the country does not. [...] Class system, yes; history, yes; but more important, I suspect, is the lingering aftermath of defeat. Europe is a continent of defeated nations. [...] America has never known the tread of occupation, the return of beaten men. The South is the exception. Pain is a dimension of old civilizations. The South has it. The rest of the United States does not. (Mann 81)
- 25 French visitors to the exhibit might also relate to Mann's fervent belief in the land as "vessel for memory," as Dr. Greenough puts it. Do Parisians have this sense, for

example, walking through the streets that ran with blood during the Revolution, where Nazi boots tread during their occupation, that the place itself vibrates with these histories? Walk outside the Musée du Jeu de Paume, for example, and you are in the Place de la Concorde, where the infamous guillotine executed the monarchy and changed the course of French history. Victor Hugo describes in *Les Misérables* (1862) the site of the Battle of Waterloo:

The blast of battle is still present in this courtyard; you can still see its horrors; the violence of the conflict has been fossilized here; there's life here, there's death here; it happened only yesterday. The walls are still in their final throes, the stones are falling, the breaches are howling, the holes are gaping wounds; the trees hang down and shudder, and seem to be trying to get away. (Hugo 330)

Hugo would agree with Mann that the land does, indeed, remember.

- 26 When I first saw "A Thousand Crossings" in its entirety, I felt tenderness for her children, immense sorrow for all the suffering that has taken place in our land, impressed with the beauty of the landscapes, familiar as I am, as a native of the South Carolina Lowcountry, with the "radical light of the South" and its "profligate physical beauty," to which Mann has often referred. The aesthetic felt like an embodiment of something elusive and unnamable that I am always seeking in art—my own and that of others. That exquisite clash of darkness and light, lingering mysticism rooted in historical conflict, a palpable search for transcendence. This imperfect land, beautiful and harsh, difficult and tender, rife with contradictions, is perhaps my own muse as well. "I weep for the great heart of the South," Mann writes, "the flawed human heart" (Mann 228). So do I. And so now do many Jeu de Paume visitors, I imagine.

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Mary-Elaine Jenkins is a musician living in New York City. Her debut album, *Hold Still*, was released in September 2018. Ironically, the title track was written years before discovering Sally Mann's work and reading her 2015 memoir of the same name. She holds a B.A. in international affairs from the George Washington University.