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Portrait of Family Values: Transgressions and Controversy in the Work of Sally Mann

Despite its overwhelming popularity, the work of photographer Sally Mann (1951 -) remains a subject of great controversy. Most notably, her books *Immediate Family* (1994) and *At Twelve: Portraits of Young Women* (1988), which contain nude and provocative photographs of her three children, have aroused great critical debate and speculation. Though the Virginia photographer asserts that, “they were just photographs of. . . children doing what children do,” and is largely dismissive of what she terms an application of “often absurd, psychological stuff” (Art:21 1), it is without question that her photographs pique the raw nerve of perceptions of family and childhood in the United States. Emerging on the coattails of the Reagan revolution, which reaffirmed family values and a conservative moral sensibility as matters of public policy (Berlant 7), Mann’s work has thrust the photographer into the debates surrounding child pornography, commodification of the family, motherhood, and children, and presents a compelling exploration of the maternal gaze.

One of Mann’s most poignant pieces that has invited much criticism is that of *Venus After School*, 1992 (Fig. 1), which many critics cite as exemplifying Mann’s sexualization of her children. In this photograph, Mann’s daughter poses nude in the same position as the female subject in Edouard Manet’s *Olympia*, 1863 (Fig. 2), noted by legal scholar Amy Adler in her exploration of child pornography in the U.S. legal system. She describes Mann’s work as “erotic nudes,” and in her efforts to demonstrate correlations between “legal prohibition and artistic popularity,” Adler is only able to view the subject in Mann’s photograph as a sexualized child (254). While not discounting potential eroticism in Mann’s photo, it appears most useful to explore the subtext in the piece’s similarities to Manet’s *Olympia*. In Mann’s image, the child’s

gaze engages that of the viewer. Her reclining posture, though somewhat awkward, is more relaxed than Manet's subject. Yet the young girl's expression appears slightly unnerved, and like Manet's subject, her hand extends over her pubis functioning to cover it from the viewer's gaze while also drawing attention to it. Rather than pointing to Mann's maternal perversions, the likenesses between this depiction of her adolescent child and a 19th century prostitute offer a stark commentary regarding the socialization of the female subject into her role as a sexualized object at the visual behest of the presumably male spectator.

The gaze as discussed by such art historians as John Berger (*Ways of Seeing*) and Laura Mulvey ("Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema") refers to the look of the spectator upon a passive, typically unaware subject. Historically, that subject is often female and functions solely as the vehicle through which the traditionally male viewer enacts his own means of gaining satisfaction and tangible action. In this way, regardless of the subject's perceived sex, there is a power dynamic created wherein the subject is both feminized and ineffectual/ lacking agency and the viewer is masculinized and in control. What is most disturbing about Mann's depiction, however, is that the viewer may or may not be aware that the image is captured by the maternal gaze. In Marianne Hirsch's treatment of Mann's photography, she notes that rather than exhibiting "voyeuristic desire to look at beautiful nude bodies of children" (165), Mann's photographs highlight:

The ambivalent urge to contemplate the look of mothers: what they see when they look at their children and what they have never openly talked about. . . but we have not found the modes or the means to talk about the range of emotions, often transgressive or disallowed, that they evoke. Decidedly, they reveal the family's unconscious optical relationships. (165)

Hirsch's observations expose the unsettling yet complex implications of Mann's *Venus After School*. The spectator of the young female body, whose image is already imbricated with woman-as-visual/sexual-object, is both male and mother, addressing the role that the maternal gaze plays in the process of female socialization and directly frustrating conventional notions of mother and child as sacrosanct depictions of futurity. Though Hirsch is correct in asserting the photograph's appeal to the silenced and blindfolded perceptions of maternity and maternal communication, she employs a similar strategy to that which she critiques by diminishing the sexualization of the child in ways that naturalize mother and child as vessels of purity and symbolic of hegemonic mythology.

Mann similarly disrupts ideas of maternal and youthful purity in *Popsicle Drips*, 1985 (Fig. 3). In *Popsicle Drips*, Mann's son Emmett is pictured nude with his torso dripping with a substance that cannot at once be easily identified. His stance emphasizes a form of sexualized masculine bravado, yet the omission of his face in the photograph eliminates the subject's ability to engage the spectator and thereby exert any control within the image. Anne Higgonet describes the image as "not pretty, or sentimental, or simple. It is not merely a photographic document, but a complex image that works self-consciously" (12). The ambiguity of the substance that drips down the subject's chest lends itself first to horror and then, upon clarification, to knowledge of imperfection (Higgonet 11-12). In this way, Mann's work here also confronts acceptable depictions of children in U.S. popular culture. This image counters delusions of perfection that abound in media portrayals of both childhood and family life.

Higgonet's exploration of Mann's work also bears more complexity, as she likens Mann's *Popsicle Drips* to Edward Weston's *Neil*, 1925 (Fig. 4) (11). As she endeavors to point out that Weston's *Neil* would be considered child pornography in contemporary U.S. culture, she also

tacitly situates Mann's *Popsicle Drips* within the discourse surrounding child pornography. Higgonet describes Mann's photograph as Weston's "seen through a flame, Mann's image twists where Weston's sways, with a sooty luminosity, blacker and brighter, smoky at the edges, and in the place of sharpest focus, clearest light, *the mark*" (11). The mark described by Higgonet is the distinction between the two photographs. While Weston's *Neil* appears superficially innocent despite the photograph's preoccupations with the subject's genitals, Mann's *Popsicle Drips* seems somehow more perverse. The contrast between the two photos is in their representations of childhood. Once again, Mann chooses to emphasize the uniqueness of imperfection through the mark of the dripping substance. While Weston's subject, smooth-skinned and soft-edged, reads more like a Greek statue that emphasizes a masculine aesthetic, Mann's subject emphasizes humanity and subjectivity. The realness of her photograph makes more apparent the absence of the subject's face. It is in this absence whereby the photograph foregrounds subjectivity. Her reworking of Weston's *Neil* speaks not only to cultural obsessions with childhood, innocence, and perfection, but also comments on what is sometimes a lack of subjectivity in artistic subjects. The objectified subject, traditionally associated with depictions of femininity, is the child in Mann's *Popsicle Drips*. Here, the gaze-less male subject is objectified because of his status as child. Just as women experience infantilization and subjectivity at the behest of viewers in both artistic renderings and culture at large, the child – the product of woman – is also fetishized. It is this culturally problematic correlation that Mann's *Popsicle Drips* speaks to and seems to refuse.

The complex relationship between womanhood, motherhood, childhood, and the fetishized commodity appears consistently in Mann's photographs such as *Venus After School* and *Popsicle Drips*. The manifestation of this precarious relationship lies in both political and

cultural fixations with “family values” and its most disturbing implications are explored in Lauren Berlant’s analysis of expecting mothers in the media:

The contemporary national and mass-cultural fixation [turns] women into children and babies into persons through photography and cinema. Against her will, the woman’s body becomes a screen for projections of maternal plenitude; against her will, the distance collapses between herself as a child and herself as a spectator of her own lost embodied dignity. (84)

In this passage, Berlant addresses the recurring theme in U.S. reprocentric culture that takes the historic infantilization of women even further by marking adult female identities as subservient to those of their [unborn] children. Marianne Hirsch describes the culture wherein Mann creates her depictions of childhood as one that “pits the rights of children against the rights of mothers. . . that sexualizes nudity and takes it as the measure of violence and transgression. This is the culture in which Sally Mann produces her pictures, and her pictures reveal this context” (152). Mann’s photography does not reveal her *own* perversions, but culturally sanctioned and systematically obscured perversions that define motherhood and female identity in the United States. I argue for a shift away from what is largely a fixation on the artist’s intentions toward a more critical approach that complicates culturally informed responses to her work.

Though it is both important and useful to read Mann’s images in this contemporary context, it is also necessary to situate them within the broader historical milieu of child photography in the United States. The fetishization of the child, functioning as a trope for futurity, is not unique to the late 20th Century. Rather, this can be traced back to the late 1800s in the field of photography. Josephine Gear notes in her article “The Baby’s Picture: Woman as Image Maker in Small-Town America,” the correlation of this trend of the fetishized child with

the increased disjunction of the domestic sphere and that of a family's livelihood during the Industrial Revolution of the late 1800s:

baby worship, and the adulation of the mother, were complementary ideologies...baby photos formed part of this valorization of infancy. . . serv[ing] middle-class women of small-town and rural America as a kind of union card when they entered the ranks of motherhood. These women not only reproduced and raised their offspring, but they also shaped their public representation as familial heirs...These photos encode familial attitudes toward the infant; unlike the images of high art or advertising, they afford a view of the infant formed from *within* the family. (420-421)

Photos of children during this period are indicative not only of class but of what the infant represents to that family. Signifying the work of the parents and the past and continued legacy of the family, children are relegated to symbols of futurity nowhere more plainly than in their portraits. Just as Mann's work speaks to the unrealistic representations of children in high art and mass media, her work can also be viewed as a commentary on the American commodification of the image of child in terms of historically salient notions of kinship. Unlike most mothers' photographs of their children, Mann's images do not portray an unrealistic homogenized landscape of childhood and family legacy; instead they demonstrate the messiness, the unhappy gazes of the brooding child, and familial difficulties and imperfections.

They also provide a savvy critique regarding the person not present within the photographs: the mother. Gear further explains that the type of photograph taken of the child is illustrative of the mother's relationship to her family's income and to different conceptions of motherhood:

farming families favored the formal, traditional portrait, but the middle-class families in town preferred the less formal, more intimate, and more personal portrait. . . the traditional type served the farming family as an image of “our baby,” an emblem of the family, but the more intimate portrait of baby ordered by the small-town family lent itself more easily for use as an emblem of motherhood in and of itself. (426)

Though Gear explicitly notes the correlation between the mother’s increasing role as mother rather than contributor to the family’s economic livelihood with the abstraction of motherhood, she fails to make the next step by demonstrating the subsequent commodification of motherhood that necessarily occurs. As women’s identities are linked more closely and for some inseparably with their identities as mothers, their abilities to demonstrate legitimacy in this category become inextricable from their relationships to consumerism. As the mother participates in social and consumptive practices that fetishize the child, her own identity is further obscured, more diffuse, and also relegated to the realm of the fetish. This echoes back to Lauren Berlant’s discussion of this problem in contemporary U.S. culture and marks it as a theme much more far-reaching in its historical scope.

Gear notes a compelling example of this regarding the mass production of baby books at the end of the 19th Century. Initially, this practice is entirely personal, homemade, and solely emblematic of what mothers want to convey regarding their children’s infancies. (438). However, as manufacturers take hold of this trend as a market, mothers’ expressions of their children’s infancies are made subjugate to manufacturers’ templates of infancy. The personal sentiment involved in culling a baby book is replaced by an album in which the mother is made to fill in the gaps. The agency involved in this practice is removed and replaced with a culturally

and market-driven sanctioning of what correct motherhood should look like. This is also not unlike the implications of Kodak's marketing campaigns geared toward mothers (Fig. 5).

Mothers are directly targeted as having to live up to a prescribed and narrow image of mother as documentarian. Her fitness as a caregiver is directly tied to her ability to live up to externally derived standards of motherhood, which are heavily linked to her identity as a consumer.

Mann's work both illuminates and rejects this trend. By working within photography, Mann participates in this field's complex and longstanding dialogue with American notions of the family by problematizing the relationships between subject (child), viewer, mother, and commodity. The images of her children do not conform to societally acceptable ideas of adolescence. The discomfort that results for some viewers speaks to these images' attempts to unsettle traditional representations and the controversy that has developed around Mann's body of work also aides to reassert the presence of the unseen mother. Discussions surrounding her photographs inevitably include discussions of her success or lack thereof as mother. By foregrounding her unseen presence, Mann's photographs and the conversations they incur seek, whether consciously or not, to reclaim the tangibility and materiality of motherhood and the child.

As Mann's daughter Jessie meets the viewer's gaze with apparent cynicism and disinterest in *Candy Cigarette*, 1989 (Fig. 5), Mann speaks to the contradictory specifications of female identity in U.S. culture. The mock cigarette is poised between the young girl's fingers and only she, unlike the other two figures in the photograph, is aware that she is being watched. She challenges the voyeuristic spectator while at the same time foregrounding elements of a culture that privileges the child above the adult. The adolescent girl entertains a certain level of power that will arguably not be afforded to her as she matures into adulthood. Berlant notes these

contradictions not only as the sources of the perpetual infantilization and subjugation of women in the United States, but also as indices of systemic problems that ensure much broader disenfranchisement:

The political imagination's displacement away from adults to the horizon of "our children" or "the unborn" signifies a widespread incapacity to conceive, with the overabundance of information we already have, a positive sense of the present or the future of the adult American. Fetuses become the "problem" in the absence of a sustained critical national political culture. (143)

In this sense, Mann's work can be construed as an even more incisive critique regarding the politics of family and motherhood. Her photographs and the controversy that surrounds them become a palimpsest, speaking to a politically indigent post-Reagan United States, a climate of national uncertainty, and a history of marginalization. Through her reconfiguration of celebrated images in art history, Mann is also able to point to the fetishization of mother and child throughout the history of Western art. The breadth of the discourse housed within her work necessitates that its controversy is not simply whether it transgresses contemporary laws of child pornography, but in its ability and willingness to speak to what is considered the most sacred and perhaps most problematic areas in Western history.

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Fig. 1 Sally Mann, *Venus After School*, 1992 photograph.



Fig. 2 Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863 oil on canvas.



Fig. 3 Sally Mann, *Popsicle Drips*, 1985 photograph.

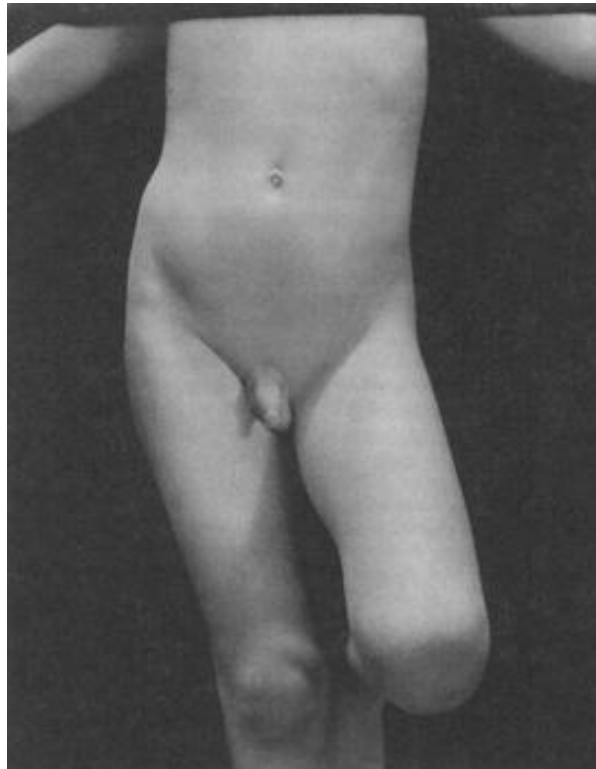


Fig. 4 Edward Weston, *Neil*, 1925 photograph



Fig. 5 Keep a Kodak Story of the Children by Eastman Kodak Company. Advertisement. 1919.



Fig. 6 Sally Mann, *Candy Cigarette*, 1989 photograph.