

# In Debate Around Sally Mann's Photography, Too Much Is Exposed

By KJ Dell'Antonia April 16, 2015 12:37 pm



"White Skates, 1990." Sally Mann

"What an artist captures, what a mother knows and what the public sees can be dangerously different things."

In the fall of 1992, the photographer Sally Mann published her third book of photographs, "Immediate Family." Here's [her description](#) of the book, from

## an article in The New York Times Magazine:

The book contained 60 photographs from a decade-long series of more than 200 pictures of my children, Emmett, Jessie and Virginia, who were about 6, 4 and 1 when I started the project. The photographs show them going about their lives, sometimes without clothing, on our farm tucked into the Virginia hills. ... Out of a conviction that my lens should remain open to the full scope of their childhood, and with the willing, creative participation of everyone involved, I photographed their triumphs, confusion, harmony and isolation, as well as the hardships that tend to befall children — bruises, vomit, bloody noses, wet beds — all of it.

At the time the book was published, The Times Magazine published [an article](#) by Richard B. Woodward, about the controversy surrounding the photographs, about the family's life in the woods, and about Ms. Mann's feelings about that controversy, that life and the photographs themselves.

More reaction, not surprisingly, set in, including one man's obsessive pursuit of any information he could get about the children, a visit to an F.B.I. behavioral science expert at Quantico, Va., and a shift in how the children themselves, particularly the youngest daughter, felt about the work at the time. Once largely the hands behind the camera, Ms. Mann found herself, and her life around the lens, exposed in ways she should perhaps have expected, but couldn't control. Although she does not say as much directly, things clearly changed, for her family and her work.

Which exposure broke the spell? Ms. Mann's photographs, or the lifting of the curtain around the photographer? It's easy to look at the images, particularly those with nudity, and say, "I wouldn't take that picture," or maybe "I wouldn't share it." But those aren't just any private family pictures. They're the work of an artist, capturing not a family moment but some other

idea or elusive thought about childhood, and that's why — unlike, say, my family photo of a naked 3-year-old proudly driving a Little Tikes car — they compel you to look more, and think harder.

These photos tell stories. They let you weave your own illusion of a raw, unobserved childhood, and invite you to look back and find those images in your own history.



From left: Virginia, Emmett and Jessie. Sally Mann

Until their narrative bubble is broken. Read Mr. Woodward's piece, and you have to step back from the picture. The photographer becomes mother and director, the children conspirators, and the power shifts in their collaboration grab the focus. Instead of children captured in the wild, they're children growing up in front of the lens, in a house with a small, black, wrought-iron breast for a doorbell. "Visitors," Mr. Woodward wrote, "announce themselves by pressing a red nipple within the raised areola."

Suddenly, those aren't any children in the pictures, knowing, inscrutable. They're those children, the Mann children, still alien but made that way more because of what we know than what we don't.

Ms. Mann meant only to release the images — as she says, "these are not my children at all; these are children in a photograph." Instead, she found that she had exposed her family's flesh.

Maybe because of Mr. Woodward's work; more likely because of human nature, the emotion we draw from an image we know nothing about fools us into thinking we want to know more. Instead of looking inside for that knowledge, as an artist hopes we will, we prefer to take the easier route and

dig for less metaphorical truths. Or maybe, and this is the risk, this is the fear, the reason for the visit to Quantico and supposedly no small part of the reaction the pictures provoke, maybe whatever is inside some few of us that the images touch is so ugly and unknowable that we want to destroy or possess the reality, or the illusion, behind their creation.

That particular fear was never physically realized, although it took hold of Ms. Mann in its own way in the first years after the book and article appeared. But the real children behind the children in the picture are gone just the same. Now, over two decades later, they're adults who are (at least for the purposes of Ms. Mann's current article) silent about their feelings about that collaboration and those exposures. Were they willing, engaged, thrilled? How do they look back upon that thrill now?

Maybe it's better not to know how they feel now, or how they think they felt then. We don't need that last exposure, the one that supposedly lets us imagine we can say, definitively, what was and what wasn't true or right or art or love. A child born a Wallenda grows up on a tightrope; a child born a Mann grows up on film; a child born a Milne becomes Christopher Robin, never growing up on the page. Then they embrace or defy that experience, or just put it in a box on the shelf the way most of us do our less remarkable childhoods.

There is no final word, unless some part of what's done outlives those who did it.