LEAVES OF GLASS

Sally Mann: Proud Flesh
New York: Aperture/Gagosian, 2009
64 pp./$80.00 (hb)

The digital revolution in photography has coincided with a resurgence of interest in nineteenth-century photographic processes. As the technology moves forward and looks back, there is no longer a clear standard for how a photographic print should look. Even silver gelatin—the standard for black-and-white printing for most of the twentieth century—will soon be an “alternative” process. In a postmodern twist befitting an era of technological revolutions, art photographers now can choose which moment in the history of their medium they will inhabit. Of course, there are commercial factors to consider. Just ten years ago, curators were unsure whether inkjet prints, the closest we have come to a new standard, belonged in museums. Now these are ubiquitous but seldom command the prices of handmade prints, even as pigment inks boast permanence standards rivaling traditional darkroom processes. The gallery world rewards rarity, and art photographers have gone further and further to secure it.

Photographers who choose historic processes without irony join the ranks of wartime re-enactors, playing dress-up, while those who do so with an overt acknowledgment of the passage of time manage the anachronism in a contemporary idiom. Witness Chuck Close’s daguerreotypes, a further exploration of portraiture from this forensic pathologist of the genre (aided by the modern daguerreotypist Jerry Spagnoli). Or Sally Mann’s use of the wet plate process, which connects her both visibly and viscerally to the classic photographs of Civil War battlefields made near her Virginia home, as if Mann’s resulting black-and-white images had been toned in blood. Her subdued landscapes and nudes are oddly charged by the all-too-obvious fragility of the process, which stretches a skin of emulsion on glass, one plate at a time.

“I’m so worried that I’m going to perfect this technique someday,” Mann confides to Steven Cantor in his 2005 HBO documentary What Remains: The Life and Work of Sally Mann. Describing her work with collodion—a new chapter in her career after the portraits of her children, and other young girls, that brought her to prominence—she adds with her usual candor, “I have to say it’s unfortunate how many of my pictures do depend upon some technical error.”

But it is clear Mann considers the accidents that befall her glass plates blessings in disguise. They chip and crack, chemistry and dust stain them, fingerprints, and sometimes fingernails leave their impressions. Shallow depth of field and vignetting suggest that Mann literally pulled these images from her big camera—quite unlike the polished 8x10 negatives of her earlier images from At Twelve (1988) and Immediate Family (1995). Thanks in part to this physical evidence of her photographic process, she creates the illusion of swimming in time’s liquid medium, pouring it across her plates and letting it drip off the edges as she sensitizes them with silver nitrate to practice her “black art,” as photography was known in its early days. (Light-sensitive silver nitrate leaves dark stains on skin, and photographers seemed to be engaged in a kind of alchemy.) Collodion, the sticky liquid emulsion, was also used to seal wounds on Civil War battlefields—further evidence that photographs can heal scars of life. Mann reveals the wounds in time’s fabric she tries hard to knit together, working with a Homeric preoccupation with death, understanding that it lends human efforts their dignity even as it justifies her fierce affections. In her recent series, “What Remains” (2004), she even photographed rotting corpses—a quiet nod to Timothy O’Sullivan, who gave us the most gruesome Civil War photographs. “The main thing, I think, about us southerners,” she remarks in Cantor’s film, “is we’re willing to experiment with dosages of romance that would be fatal to any other postmodern artist.”

The unnamed war that preoccupies Mann in her latest book, Proud Flesh—published this fall by Aperture and New York’s Gagosian Gallery, which in October exhibited its thirty-three silver gelatin prints, all made from wet plate negatives—is her husband Larry’s struggle with muscular dystrophy, a disease that is slowly putting his body to rest. Addressing this tragedy in Cantor’s documentary, Mann describes Larry’s Herculean strength, relating how she fell in love with him in college when he removed a boulder that a storm had deposited at the doorstep of her family’s summer cabin.
Perhaps these images are her effort to remove the blockage in his way. The disease works slowly, she dryly notes in the film, since he had so much muscle to lose. It also lets her photograph the gradual disappearing act we all witness in the bodies of those we love. One of Mann’s most direct and powerful family photographs—exhibited in the 1996 show and book, Hospice: A Photographic Inquiry—shows her father lying peacefully on a sofa after he died. This image comes to life in Proud Flesh, an elegy for the body, for all bodies. “He never ever wavered in his fearlessness,” Mann tells Cantor of her father’s approach to death.

Following the lead of her physician father—who gave her her first camera and instructed her in its use—Mann is equally fearless, never clinical, always loving, and even proud in the portrayal of her husband. Whereas the photographs of her children are remarkable for their specificity and ability to hone in on each child’s unique character, Larry is portrayed as Everyman, cloaked in his nudity by the age-old photographic process. Is Mann’s process itself her subject, or the molten window through which she looks? Certainly, it is a way to show time’s passage. The book’s cover image, Hephaestus (2008), shows Larry’s torso, partly obscured by a stain that perforates the emulsion on the glass plate, poking holes around his heart. If we peer through these holes, will we see it beating? An upended block on the table in the foreground looks like molten metal, and Larry’s hand seems to be made of the same material. Of course both have been cast in silver by the photographer. The ancient Greek god Hephaestus was a blacksmith, and a lame one at that. The bed Larry rests on in this long life-drawing class resembles an army cot. Walt Whitman must have nursed wounded Union soldiers in Washington, DC, with as much sympathy during the Civil War. Several of Mann’s images include flashes of light, reminiscent of nineteenth-century “spirit photographs,” which set out to prove that the camera sees what the eye cannot. Does she hope her antique process will allow her to see the past—as if that might change the present?

Inevitably, all photographs have an affinity for death, since they still both time and life. Photography’s own survival after its death was announced is also Mann’s subject here. It remains a comfort as her loved ones grow up and leave her.

**STEPHEN LONGMIRE** is a photographer and writer living in the Adirondacks of upstate New York. He is the author of Keeping Time in Sag Harbor (2007), a photo-text. His next book, Life and Death on the Prairie, a photographic portrait of a unique Iowa prairie graveyard, will be out in the fall of 2010.

**NOTE** All quotations are by Sally Mann in What Remains: The Life and Work of Sally Mann (2005), directed by Steven Cantor (HBO Documentary Films).