

## *What Remains* – Sally Mann's Plates & Prints at the Corcoran

"A five-part meditation on mortality, exploring the ineffable divide between body and soul, life and death, spirit and earth."

I received the Corcoran's February 2004 press release announcing Sally Mann's upcoming June exhibition, giving me three and a half months to contemplate how an artist could approach such an all-encompassing, universal theme like death from a unique or revelatory perspective. How does one avoid the hackneyed tropes inherent in such a subject? I skeptically wondered how Mann, who is notoriously known for her provocative photographs of her children, could successfully switch to the genre of landscape. *What Remains* is a prolific outpouring of work addressing different manifestations of nature, death and decay, but also investigating process, the history of photography and its tenuous relationship to painting.

The exhibition is organized into five sections. The first gallery features the series entitled, *Matter Lent*, a collection of ambrotypes and silver gelatin prints coated with varnish, depicting the decomposed remains of her deceased family pet greyhound, Eva. Mann disinterred the greyhound's body one year after its death. Not unlike an archeologist, she formally arranged the bones, teeth, claws and hair, composing them carefully. Using an antique large format camera and the 19th century wet plate collodion process, Mann documented the swift decay of what was once a living, breathing creature. Due to the unpredictability of the technical process, the prints made from the plates are flat and gray. The subject matter is so abstracted that without the first image of the dead greyhound intact (pre-decay), it would be virtually impossible to determine the content in most of the images. These are the only framed prints in the exhibit, which further distances them from the context of object/specimen. In contrast, the ambrotypes (which are the glass plates backed with a dark ruby-colored glass) have a three-dimensionality and depth.

The rich tones and mirrored reflection adds a visceral quality, which the prints lack.

In the next gallery, the series *Untitled* reveals decomposed bodies from the University of Tennessee's Forensic Anthropology Facility. What makes these photographs so unsettling is not that they depict dead bodies but the context and aesthetic of the images. One could reasonably expect that a forensic center would preserve the bodies in medical lab. However, all the bodies appeared to be in various states of decay in a thickly forested area. By removing them from the context of the sterile lab environment, they seemed less like specimens and more like humans. The environment suggests that they were victims of horrific crimes, dumped into the woods for disposal. Nature begins to assimilate the bodies, reclaiming them for the earth. Mann states that she is interested in the question of when a human becomes remains. In many of the images, the humanness transcends the physical matter.

Mann creates a new photographic aesthetic using an anti-aesthetic process. The hand-applied emulsion and unpredictability of the wet plate collodion process produces results that would make photographic formalists shudder with disdain. Mann breaks all the technical rules in photography. The prints are flat, dark and covered with scratches, stains, streaks, rips and dust. The images are not matted and framed as traditional photographs, but glazed with varnish and mounted like paintings. The darkness of the images creates a veiling, which acts as a buffer between the horror of the subject and the viewer. Conceptually the veiling also symbolizes the part of death that cannot be seen; the spiritual journey of the soul. The visual references to process remind us that photography does not show us the truth; it is a constructed illusion. The



*Untitled #7* 2000 from  
the series *What Remains*  
ambrotype lent by the artist,  
courtesy of Edwynn Houk  
Gallery, New York. Copyright  
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*Untitled #11* 2000 from the series *Matter  
Lent*, gelatin silver print with varnish  
lent by the artist, courtesy of Edwynn  
Houk Gallery, New York. Copyright ©  
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presence of the artist's hand, usually absent in photography is key to the success of the images. If Mann had presented the work in a straightforward photographic manner, the haunting, emotional qualities of the images would have been lost. The mark making is not only essential to the uniqueness of the prints, but also in bridging the gap between painting and photography.

In the middle gallery is a series containing just a few copper-toned photographs of landscapes. *December 8, 2000* is title of the series and the date when an escaped prisoner committed suicide on Mann's Virginia farmstead. While the four prints from this series are not as strong as the other work, it is important as a transition into the next series. This incident served as an inspiration for Mann's subsequent work.

Mann continues with the aesthetic/anti-aesthetic in *Antietam*, a series of landscape photographs from 2000-2002, which blur the line between painting and photography. She revisited and photographed the Antietam battlefield in Sharpsburg, Maryland, the Civil War site where 23,000 men were killed, injured or declared missing in a single day in September 1862. The resulting landscapes surpass documentation of place. The mysterious canvases ask us to question photography's relationship to history, time and place. How does nature eradicate the traces of death? The dark beauty of the varnished photographs speaks to the horror of the past. Once again, Mann utilizes the darkness and flatness of the prints to abstract the specificity of the location, suggesting a multiplicity of places where atrocities in the past, present and

future continue to occur. The flaws in the prints (bubbling, tearing, dust and streaks) rupture the beauty, reminding us of our history and pointing to our human flaws and deficiencies.

The exhibit concludes with the series, *What Remains*; 36 ambrotypes and a few gigantic prints of her children's faces. Mann photographs the children from above, zooming in for an extreme close-up of their faces. The edges fade and parts of the images are blurred. The larger than life size faces staring at the viewer, create an unsettling mood. It is as if the faces are receding. Within the context of the other work, the faces appear ghostly and otherworldly, dramatically different from Mann's earlier portraits of her children. The ambrotypes are on display in an open case at waist level, allowing for an intimacy not available with the work on the wall. As in the greyhound series, the washed out prints did not hold up to the sculptural quality, immediacy and richness of the plates. Mann chose to end the exhibition with life, stating that, "Death is approached as a springboard to appreciate life more fully."

*What Remains* has remained with me over the past few weeks, as I ruminated on the ideas of trace and evidence as they pertain to the history of a place, questioning what is revealed and what is hidden, what is memorialized and what is forgotten. Mann's work contemplates the beauty in death, while pushing beyond the formal boundaries of photography.

The exhibit *What Remains* was on display at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC through September 7, 2004.

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*Untitled #18* 2000 from the series *Anrietam* gelatin silver print with varnish lent by the artist, courtesy of Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York. Copyright © 2003 by Sally Mann



*Untitled #18* 2000 gelatin silver print with varnish lent by the artist, courtesy of Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York. Copyright © 2003 by Sally Mann