

TV REVIEW | 'WHAT REMAINS: THE LIFE AND WORK OF SALLY MANN'

Sally Mann Portrait in Which She's the Star

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Sally Mann came to the world's attention in the early 1990s with her book and exhibition "Immediate Family," a series of luminous, haunting photographs of her young children, Emmett, Virginia and Jessie, that evoked the languid anxiety of preadolescence, the sense of somnolent August days soon to vanish with the coming winds of maturity, sex and longing.

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Stick Figure Productions/HBO Documentary Films

One of Sally Mann's photographs of children, "At Warm Springs" (1991).



Stick Figure Productions/HBO Documentary Films

Sally Mann, left, and above, one of her photographs of children, "At Warm Springs" (1991).

Ms. Mann's pictures arrived as the maelstrom surrounding the McMartin preschool sex-abuse trials in California was finally waning and the hysteria around the sexualizing of children perhaps seemed to be ebbing. But her portraits stirred controversy while they brought her fame, renewing concerns that America's young were no longer adequately and safely kept.

Ms. Mann's approach to her subject certainly had precedents in art. In the 1920s the photographers Imogen Cunningham and Nell Dorr took nude pictures of children in the wilds as expressions of their own interest in naturalism. But Ms. Mann's images arrived just as the country was beginning to fall deeper and deeper under the thrall of a new culture of obsessive child-rearing, and she seemed, however voyeuristically, merely to be letting her children be.

But she was not letting them be, or so it is implied in "What Remains: The Life and Work of Sally Mann" on Cinemax this evening. It is one of the most exquisitely intimate portraits not only of an artist's process, but also of a marriage and a life, to appear on television in recent memory.

Steven Cantor, the director, had made a short documentary about Ms. Mann at the time of "Immediate Family." It was nominated for an Academy Award. He returned to his subject some years later to follow her through her subsequent project, "What Remains" (from which the film's title is borrowed), Ms. Mann's study of death

and the human body's decomposition, which made its debut at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington three years ago.

It is not the film's central interest to investigate the origins of "Immediate Family," but it manages to reveal the contradictions in the photographer's relationship to it. Ms. Mann never offered the works as reportage, but her manipulation of the images in some instances took a very deliberate form. Mr. Cantor has had the benefit of spending years filming Ms. Mann, and he had also been given some of her home movies.

In one of them, she is shown directing her son while she is taking a picture of him by a river. Later, she reflects on photographing her daughter Jessie: "I'd say, 'Jessie, I want you to prop your hand with the candy cigarette with just that look of world-weary ennui on your face,' and she could do it easy. I didn't even have to mimic it for her." But Ms. Mann never quite seems to see how significantly her own vision comes into her work. She calls the pictures in "Immediate Family" "their" work, meaning her children's, and she decided to photograph them, she says, because they had "extremely potent personalities."

The beauty of the images remains no less overwhelming for anything the photographer says, but the pictures become provocative in an entirely different way — darkly true to what many currently understand parenthood to be, the irrepressible desire to manage and micromanage every transition a child faces. Ms. Mann is not merely watching, she is there in every frame.

Blindsided, she claims in the film, by the panicked reaction to those early pictures, Ms. Mann turned her eye to landscape photography in the mid-1990s. Then in 2000, an incident on her family farm in Lexington, Va., redirected her attentions again. A convict, escaped from a nearby prison, killed himself on her property.

If the pictures of her children had shown Ms. Mann to be a sort of poet of the human body, she now wanted to document the body at the end of its life cycle. She began taking pictures of bones (one of her beloved greyhounds had died) and of decaying corpses that had been left in the open air for the purpose of forensic study at a laboratory in Tennessee. During the same period, her husband, Larry, her partner since the age of 18, was found to have a rare form of muscular dystrophy. "It never occurred to me to leave home to make art," Ms. Mann says early on in the film, and poignantly, the death project doesn't take her away from home because she is confronting mortality in it. Her children, her original subjects, are grown and gone.

Mr. Cantor wisely does not make a fetish of the children, tracking them to monitor "how they have turned out." They appear as peripheral characters devoted to their mother, delighted by her company — and proud.

WHAT REMAINS

The Life and Work of Sally Mann

Cinemax, tonight at 7, Eastern and Pacific times; 6, Central time.

Directed and produced by Steven Cantor; Daniel Laikind and Pax Wassermann, producers; Suzanne Georges, executive producer; Paul Dokuchitz, director of photography; Julie Goldman, Krysanne Katsoulis and Caroline Stevens, executive producers for Cactus Three; Nick Fraser, executive producer for BBC; Nancy Abraham,