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CROSSING THE RIVER

Photographer Sally Mann addresses the South's past in her new exhibition at the National Gallery of Art



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2008-2016

Photographer and writer Sally Mann knows controversy. Her photographic series “Immediate Family,” which included a few pictures of her children unclothed, ignited public backlash when it was exhibited in 1992. Now Mann, born in 1951 in Lexington, explores how the South's history influences life today. In “Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings,” which opens March 4 at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., one section, titled “Abide With Me,” features images of her family's African-American housekeeper, Virginia “Gee-Gee” Carter; African-American male models; the Great Dismal Swamp and rivers in Southeast Virginia that offered shelter to runaway slaves; and 19th-century African-American churches. In these photographs of people, buildings and landscapes, Mann investigates how race shaped her own experience and attempts to reconcile the racial divisions

that continue to plague America.

In the accompanying exhibition catalog, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Hilton Als writes that in these photographs, “Mann doesn't assume that she is speaking about the black experience, but a black experience.” However, visitors must decide how to read these photographs. In some images, there is a sense of unease because of the dark exposure, as in “Blackwater 20.” That unease is mixed with anguish in a portrait titled “Singer, D.J.” Other photographs are straightforward, like “Payne's Chapel United Methodist”, which mimics Walker Evans' 1936 photograph “Negro Church, South Carolina.” That is the appeal of Mann's photographs. Even while she tackles complex questions related to race, identity politics and power dynamics, she provides a dignity to her subject matter that allows anonymity, remembrance and honor.

—Amanda Dalla Villa Adams

“Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings” will be at the National Gallery of Art from March 4 to May 28. Free. 6th Street Northwest and Constitution Avenue NW, Washington, D.C. 202-737-4215 or nga.gov.