Public/Private Tensions in the Photography of Sally Mann

Sarah Parsons

This article examines the circulation of Sally Mann's pictures of her children, which were exhibited and published in 1992 under the title Immediate Family. Most of the Immediate Family photographs were made at the Manns' rustic summer house in a wild, isolated area, not far from their home in Lexington, Virginia. The children are often naked or nearly naked, and they are variously dirty, injured, confrontational and flirtatious. Strong and divergent responses to the Immediate Family photographs affirm art historian Anne Higonnet's conclusion that 'No subject is as publicly dangerous now as the subject of the child's body'. This article expands on the spatial dimension to Higonnet's insight, and argues that the anxieties about Immediate Family stem from photography's refusal, or perhaps confusion about, the division between public and private. The circulation of the Immediate Family project suggests how notions of public and private are negotiated through photography.

Keywords: Sally Mann (1951-), photographs of children, motherhood, privacy

In 1984, when Sally Mann began to photograph her three small children regularly with a large-format vintage camera, photography was firmly entrenched in New York as the subject and tool of postmodern artists. Mann's photographs of her two daughters, Jessie and Virginia, and her son, Emmett, are a far cry from Cindy Sherman's anti-aesthetic, intellectualized self portraits or Richard Prince's grainy copies of Marlboro ads. That all three of these artists have entered the establishment is evidenced by the museums that collect their work, the wealth of art historical and critical writing devoted to their work, and now their shared New York dealer, the Gagosian Gallery. But, while Sherman's and Prince's deliberately critical work has been neatly absorbed into art discourse, Mann's images from this era, exhibited and published in 1992 under the title Immediate Family, have lost little of their provocative power. Whatever else we might say about Mann's images, she certainly proved that old-fashioned art photography had much more life left in it than the art world might have thought.

On one level, this article is an analysis of the disturbance caused by Immediate Family photographs. Now that the Mann children are young adults and the public hand-wringing about their safety has subsided, it is possible to step back from the photographs themselves to examine their circulation. Photographs from this series circulated in both the contemporary art world and in a wider cultural context through their inclusion in exhibitions, collection as a book, and reprinting in the media. The immediate critical and popular responses to the photographs focused on their aesthetic, the subjects, and the fact that the artist was the children's mother. Along with the laudatory reviews,
Sarah Parsons

Mann was accused of sexualizing her children. Responses to the Immediate Family photographs are often marked by authoritative and divergent and highly contradictory claims about what is in the photographs or what they might do as cultural objects, affirming art historian Anne Higonnet’s conclusion that ‘No subject is as publicly dangerous now as the subject of the child’s body’. However, it is the spatial dimension to Higonnet’s insight that I pursue here. I argue that in a broader sense, the anxieties about Immediate Family are anxieties about the way photography often refuses, or perhaps confuses, the division between public and private. The circulation of the Immediate Family project provides a rich opportunity to examine how notions of public and private are constantly and importantly constructed and dismantled by photographers and viewers. The subjects and spaces that Mann depicts challenge the clear distinction between public and private, as do the physical spaces (such as commercial galleries, museums, and books) and ideological contexts in which viewers encounter those photographs. As the title for the series indicates, the most important space that Mann’s work occupies is the contested space of the nuclear family.

In her study of family photo albums from the 1950s, Deborah Chambers notes a remarkable similarity in subjects, poses, and narratives in the genre. She argues that these similarities indicate the extent to which normative external notions of the nuclear family had been internalized and enacted by citizens. She thus argues that this ‘ideal’ image presented in family albums can hardly be viewed as authentic portraits of the individuals and their collective experience as a family. Sarah Edge and Gail Bayliss add that the family album has ‘never been anything but an adult version of childhood’. British photographer Jo Spence poignantly materialized this ideological function of family pictures in her 1987 installation at the Hayward Gallery in London entitled ‘Putting Myself in the Picture’. In this project, she disrupted innocuous reading of her family snapshots by adding her own enhanced and often critical narrative text.

Most of the Immediate Family photographs were made at the Manns’ rustic summer house in a rather wild, isolated area, not far from their home in Lexington, Virginia. The children are often naked or wearing little in the way of clothing, and they are variously dirty, injured, confrontational and flirtatious; images most parents can recognize, but would not capture on film, much less circulate publicly. Some are spontaneous images of the children and others are recreated or staged. Even so, the photographs and their circulation are heretical to the most sacred fantasies about innocent, happy childhoods, singularly protective mothers, and the privacy of the middle class nuclear family. Those are the fantasies usually represented by the family album, those private pictures intended for at least semi-public consumption by family and friends. Although Mann makes no explicit claim to challenge the family romance by reworking its picture book, I will argue that Immediate Family does so.

Mann’s introduction to Immediate Family frames the project in much broader terms than the title would suggest. She begins with a meditation on the passing of time and the ability of photography momentarily to capture people and places both for reflection and to testify that some things do not change very much at all. Mann outlines her own family history describing her eccentric doctor father, her Bostonian mother who found the Virginia heat oppressive, their nanny/housekeeper, her brothers, the house, the land and her own children. She frames the photographs as ‘of [her] children living their lives’. The children, Mann tells us, ‘have been involved in the creative process since infancy. At times, it is difficult to say exactly who makes the pictures’. Mann never describes these images as portraits in any conventional sense; nor do they


5—In 1995, the film theorist Annette Kuhn developed this insight further by writing a memoir based largely on readings of her own family photographs, a process she called 'memory work', to highlight the difficult and unpredictable relationship of photographs and memory. See Annette Kuhn, Family secrets: acts of memory and imagination, New York: Verso 1995.
The power of the *Immediate Family* photographs as a comprehensive project rests largely on our reading of them as windows into Mann’s domestic sphere, encompassing its inhabitants, spaces and practices. Even if we understand that Mann and her children are spinning stories, the fact remains that the actors are her children and they are pictured at home, a space that reads as private. But, as Rosalind Krauss has pointed out, art photography is largely distinguished from other forms of photography through its ‘exhibitionality’. When art photography is publicly exhibited it will be understood in relation to public codes already at play, such as those around motherhood and the protection of children. Within this visual system, Mann’s images garner power from their legibility as representations of private space but, paradoxically, in order to realize that power, Mann had to make those spaces public through the public exhibition space or the space of a publication. Public/private is only one of the tensions that fuel this project, however. Fact/fiction, mother/child, artist/subject, innocent/knowing, safety/danger, and free/coerced are all at work and often gain intensity as the photographs circulate. Perhaps the most romantic aspect of Mann’s work is her often contradictory embrace of these tensions, rather than adopting a more postmodern, internal, critical analysis of their false constructions. The binaries may still fall apart around and through *Immediate Family*, but they do so because they collide spectacularly rather than because the artist explicitly analyses them. These collisions, of course, are the result of the work’s circulation over and across different spaces and discourses.

The first public exhibitions of the *Immediate Family* images were small and often combined with photographs from *At Twelve*, an earlier, Guggenheim-funded project that Mann published as a book in 1988. That earlier project involved photographing girls in Rockbridge County around Lexington, Virginia, and is useful in considering both the production and reception of Mann’s pictures of her own children. In her acknowledgements, Mann tells us that Emmett and Jessie accompanied her on these forays, which may help to explain how the children learned to model for their mother. Some photographs in *At Twelve* are as theatrical as the photographs of the Mann children, but they are identified as portraits and even tend towards a vertical orientation rather than the horizontal orientation favoured in *Immediate Family*. The drama of the series is heightened by both the differences in circumstances between the girls and by Mann’s occasional stories about some of the pictures. She recounts details about pregnancies, sexual abuse, poverty and general loss of innocence. As Robert Coles writes on the book jacket, these pictures are about ‘girls becoming women’. The novelist Ann Beattie follows this thread in her introduction to *At Twelve* when she observes that ‘these girls still exist in an innocent world in which a pose is only a pose – what adults make of that pose may be the issue’. For Beattie, those tensions within the images and those suggested by their circulation are not unproblematic even while she finds the portraits important and compelling. The photographer and critic Elsa Dorfman makes a connection between the photographs and troubling mass culture images in her unenthusiastic review of the book: ‘The sexuality and boredom – and hint of danger – that I associate with the Calvin Klein-Brooke Shields advertisements of a couple of years ago are omnipresent in these images’.

Beattie’s introduction to *At Twelve* frames the project as rife with tension and contradiction, and this is the frame within which much of Mann’s
subsequent work has circulated. In 1989, the Museum of Photographic Arts in San Diego exhibited selections from both At Twelve and ‘Family Pictures: A Work in Progress’ (as Immediate Family was known before its publication as a book). Even the most positive reviews keyed into the sexualized tensions within At Twelve and in the not dissimilar images of Mann’s own, much younger children. In an even more provocative move, later that autumn and long before a firestorm had really developed around the project, several photographs from ‘Family Pictures: A Work in Progress’ were included in an exhibition called ‘Taboo’ at the Greg Kucera Gallery in Seattle. The exhibit was in response to Jesse Helms’s bill which proposed to deny public money to make or exhibit art deemed obscene. Mann’s photographs hung beside such works as Andreas Serrano’s Piss Christ and several S&M photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe. When Immediate Family was published as a book, Mann’s introduction included four photographs of rustic sculptures made by her father that decorated her childhood home and garden. They include a stripped tree trunk adorned with a carved penis, and what appear to be two Christmas balls for testicles as well as another phallic sculpture entitled ‘Portnoy’s Triple Complaint’. The illustrations seem simply intended to demonstrate Mann family’s eccentricities, but in a wider cultural context the sculptures also add an explicitly sexual element to the frame of the project.

Although Mann made choices that heightened the tensions of the project as it circulated in public, she also attempted to control the circulation. Before publishing the book, she consulted a Federal prosecutor in Virginia who advised her that some of the images being exhibited could result in her arrest. In 1991, she decided to postpone publication of Immediate Family. She told Richard Woodward of the New York Times ‘I thought the book could wait 10 years, when the kids won’t be living in the same bodies. They’ll have matured and they’ll understand the implications of the pictures. I unilaterally decided’. The children were outraged, however, and their parents arranged for Emmett and Jessie to talk to a psychologist to ensure they could voice their honest feelings and understand the implications of the publication. Each child was given veto power over the photographs that were to be included in the book and in a rather dramatic and, one imagines, ultimately futile effort, Richard Woodward reports that to protect the children ‘from teasing, [Mann] hopes to keep copies of Immediate Family out of Lexington. She has asked bookstores in the area not to sell it and libraries to confine it to rare-book rooms.’ In 1994, filmmaker Steven Cantor made a short documentary about Mann. Although it was nominated for an Academy Award and won a prize at the Sundance Film Festival, Mann blocked its release. She said it ‘felt too much like real life; that was an invasion’, adding that ‘we unwittingly are out in the public eye a lot more than I ever expected’. The images’ circulation comes to reveal their independence from the artist. As Berthold Brecht observed of artists and critics many decades earlier, ‘they think they possess an apparatus that in reality possesses them’.

In the public space of the museum, gallery or library, the photographs enter into an art discourse. Though they cannot be contained by this discourse, they are nonetheless dominated by it. In addition to their obvious technical skill, several Immediate Family photographs, for example, make sophisticated compositional allusions to the canon of art and photography. Several images quote canonical photographs: ‘Goodnight Kiss’ references Julia Margaret Cameron’s ‘Double Star’, while ‘Popsicle Drips’ reworks Edward Weston’s pictures of his son, Neil. In general terms, Mann’s pictures recall to Cameron’s and even Lewis Carroll’s nineteenth-century photographs. Additionally, the suggestion of rural poverty in dirty children, dusty roads, beaten-up pickup


9 – Ibid., 35.

10 – Sam Whiting, ‘Naked Truth About Family / Mann’s photos expose her kids’ moods and bodies’, San Francisco Chronicle (9 October 1996).


Quotes from Kiku Adatto's address to a Kennedy School forum on 'Sex, Commercialism, and the Disappearance of Childhood'.

Woodward, 'The Disturbing Photographs of Sally Mann', 34.

Lest anyone be concerned that Mann's children were not adequately compensated for their modelling work, Mann reported in a 2004 talk at George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, that 'I had to buy Emmett so many things to get him to go back into the water' over the seven weeks it took to get 'The Last Time Emmett Modeled Nude' just right.' Quoted in Asher Hares, 'The Appalachian Housewife', *Afterimage* (January 2005).

drucks all featured in black and white is reminiscent of the FSA photographs, a reading that would have been shored up in the early exhibitions by the photographs in *At Twelve*, several of which fit even more tightly with the Depression-era photographs. In turn, those photographs built on the social documentary work of Lewis Hine and Jacob Riis which sought to bring the conditions of poverty to mainstream awareness and ideally to engender pity and calls for help. Viewers trained to respond to photographs of victims become rabid in the pursuit of empathy. Mann is obviously not courting the same response with *Immediate Family*, but some of the images call forth this viewing mode.

In *Immediate Family*, moments of vulnerability, such as 'Wet Bed' (figure 1) are sharply contrasted with the self-possession of children before adolescence, such as 'Candy Cigarette, 1989' (figure 2). Higonnet argues that Mann signalled an important wider representational shift from images of romanticized childhood, dominant since the Victorian age, to the now pervasive, modern, 'knowing child'. As Dorfman pointed out in her review of *At Twelve*, the 'knowing child' was already in circulation as a means to sell. (It should not go unremarked that Higonnet's dating of the wide cultural emergence of the image of the 'knowing child' to the 1980s dovetails with the emergence of the child consumer, now a major force within the American economy.) Acknowledging that a picture such as the 'Candy Cigarette, 1989' quotes an emerging strain of fashion photography should not close down any other origin or meaning. Can the image not be both Jessie's own story and a stylistic quotation? As Jessie recently said of the project:

[T]here are so many levels to childhood that we as a society ignore, or don't accept. Rather than just saying it, [our mother] was able to capture it with photographs. It's easy to discount these things unless you can really see them in the kids' eyes, or see it in their actions'.

The question then becomes: how can children's stories and adults' cultural language for understanding those stories coexist? How can we respect children's thoughts and actions and yet deny their role in the photographs? When Mann claimed, 'the children love to model and are continuously thinking of new pictures', surely our doubts concern the degree and not the fact of the children's participation. Over the course of the *Immediate Family* photographs, it is possible to see the children becoming increasingly conscious of their relation to the camera, whether marked by resistance in Emmett's case, or by Jessie's increasingly theatrical performances.

But even the most prominent child-studies scholars seem torn about the extent to which children can tell their stories or collaborate with adults who wield power over their lives. Kiku Adatto, director of Children's Studies at Harvard, says 'there's no better way to elevate the voices of children than through respecting and listening to their stories – and recording them'. However, she says of *Immediate Family* that Mann photographed 'her own young children nude in erotic poses, or posed as victims of abuse and incest'. Would Adatto be less concerned about the subjects in Mann's pictures if they were not her children? What if they had been paid models? At twelve, even Emmett Mann seemed to understand that the paid model constitutes a different (perhaps more palatable) power dynamic. In 1992, Richard Woodward reported that when Emmett was teased about a topless picture of him that ran in the *Washington Post*, he 'defused their jibes by telling [his classmates] that his mother pays him huge sums of money to model for her'. (His mother was horrified. She thought he should have told them 'I'm making great art'.)

Figure 2. Sally Mann, *Candy Cigarette*, gelatin silver print, 1989. © Sally Mann. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York.
Professional models were not an option because *Immediate Family* is not just about children and childhood; it is also about motherhood. For many reviewers, such as one in San Diego who cried 'What about the children?', the making of the photographs and the decision to circulate them revealed Mann's poor mothering. But, motherhood cannot be separated from children in life or in representation. To tell a mother's story is to tell a child's. Can there be any other way? When Mann says of *Immediate Family*, 'we try to take on the grand themes', she makes explicit her active role as mother/collaborator. All children are aware at some level of these grand themes, and one task of parents is to explore them with kids, to explain, to question, to affirm that they are real, perhaps frightening, but necessary parts of life. Mann takes up this task with a camera by exploring with her kids how to visualize and then capture her children in relation to these themes. Janet Malcolm honed in on this contradiction around representing motherhood in Mann's project. In a fiercely argued review of *Immediate Family*, she wrote scathingly of the reviewers who had trashed Mann's book for its un-motherliness. She argued that 'Mann has given us a meditation on infant sorrow and parental rue that is as powerful and delicate as it is undeserving of the facile abuse that has been heaped on it'. Malcolm's defence of Mann is not really surprising. Malcolm has made a career of boldly deconstructing widely held assumptions and myths about other kinds of co-dependent relationships. Of psychoanalysis, she wrote that 'In the popular imagination, the analyst is an authoritarian, dominating figure who has rigid control over a malleable, vulnerable patient. [But] it is the patient who controls what is happening, and the analyst who is a puny, weak figure. Patients go where the hell they please'. Malcolm made an even more scandalous claim of journalism when she argued that, despite the myth of objectivity, journalists tell their own stories rather than those of their professed subjects. She proved this with a string of captivating and scathing character assassinations which got her into legal trouble. Like Mann, she pulls no punches. Malcolm opened 'The Journalist and the Murderer' with the statement that 'every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible', but, she might have added, still truthful and important.

Mann still defends her work on moral grounds, but she also insisted on her right to tell her own story about family, including motherhood, 'without shame'. For all it suggests about childhood, *Immediate Family* can also be read as an ambivalent meditation on motherhood and the overwhelming responsibilities and risks for which most mothers feel completely unprepared. Mann has described her 'struggle with enormous discrepancies: between the reality of motherhood and the image of it.' The lack of preparedness is in large measure due to the fact that, more than forty years after calls that the 'personal is political', it is still heretical to publicly describe motherhood in ambivalent terms. In fact, motherhood is often about keeping secrets and maintaining the privacy, and, one might say, the façade of the family. Mann's images of her children respect none of these unwritten rules, as she publicly airs, if not the family's authentic selves, then their games, fears, fantasies and eccentricities. In doing so, Mann, the mother-photographer, like Malcolm, the woman-journalist, transgresses through her blunt and seemingly unsympathetic public displays. As a result, both Malcolm and Mann have been criticized to an extent that far outweighs the actual impact of their work. Malcolm's books did not degrade the profession of journalism any more than Sally Mann's photographs have eroded the innocence of American childhood or the pleasures of motherhood.

Malcolm's insight into the innate subjectivity of journalists is particularly interesting to consider in the responses to *Immediate Family*. Some critics seem
to luxuriate in their repulsion while others appear to bring more than a little of their own baggage. One British writer describes the photographs this way: 'all are disturbing and confrontational', but moves on specifically to the *Wet Bed*: 'there is one of a young girl asleep on a sheetless mattress; it is obviously hot; the girl is naked and sprawled and her arms are flung up. There is a stain on the mattress. She looks like a prostitute, with her lover just departed not like a little girl, fast asleep, who has just wet her bed'. In a negative 2004 review of Mann's *What Remains* exhibition at the Corcoran in Washington, New York Times columnist Sarah Boxer described the *Immediate Family* pictures. She writes, 'In a few, grape juice dripped down their fronts, a gory mess. In one, the youngest child was shown sleeping on stained sheets. Another focused on her son's dirt-smeared genitals'. Leaving aside the fact that Boxer seems to have confused the pictures 'Dirty Jessie' and 'Popsicle Drips', what stands out is her attempt to assert the deliberate goriness of Mann's series. First, this is an argument against Mann that sounds like a disconnected parent or a childless adult who sees only the sanitized visions of childhood in popular culture (and probably the person who complains constantly about people who bring their children to restaurants and museums). There are so many gorier, more grotesque, infuriating, terrifying and intensely private moments for most children and parents than the scenes Mann depicts. Secondly, the fact that Boxer finds grape juice, and probably dirty children, gory does not hold up as a critical position.

At this point, I must admit, in the spirit of Janet Malcolm, that Boxer’s reading of the images underlines for me just how subjective any reading of *Immediate Family* really is, how tied it is to one’s own experience of and relationship to the subjectivities and events in the photographs. While it seems to be no match for the goriness of childhood for Boxer, some viewers find Mann’s aestheticization of the children in the photographs dangerous, arguing that it beautifies and thus belittles the real physical and emotional pain of children. As a mother of young children and someone with no personal experience of child abuse, sexual or otherwise, I experience Mann’s aestheticization to be a convincing recreation of the ideal, and in my case inconsistent, maternal gaze. I am still startled to find myself looking at my dirty children when they are engaged in some usually infuriating activity, and feeling an overwhelming desire to hug and kiss them. In my most subjective or solipsistic thoughts as a viewer, Mann’s work seems to ask: How does parenting change one’s psyche? How do children bore into our souls? When I look at the ‘Wet Bed’, I could come up with a hundred associations before arriving at prostitute, but I marvel at Mann’s ability to make Virginia look absolutely beautiful lying in a pee puddle (even if I understand that it was staged with watered down Coke). These pictures do sometimes trigger the maternal erotic, which is perhaps too subjective, too dangerously close to sexuality to talk about.

In interviews, Mann says that the most vociferous objections to the work question what potentially dangerous activities transpire in the private space of her home. This is especially true when the work began to circulate outside the whole book format or the staged museum exhibit. As the images began to appear as single or double illustrations accompanying, sometimes negative, reviews in newspapers and magazines, literalism flattened the nuanced tensions of the project. ‘Damaged Child, 1984’ (figure 3), the photograph that started the project, is one of the most problematic in the series. When Jessie arrived home with swollen and bruised eyes after an allergic reaction to an insect bite, Mann saw a similarity to Dorothea Lange’s subject in her picture ‘Damaged Child’. Jessie’s fierce look heightened both the similarity to Lange’s image, for

---
The Photography of Sally Mann

those who know it, and increased the concern of viewers without a historical or conceptual context for the image. In this instance, it is possible that art discourse might contradict a more subjective approach to the photograph, indicating how different interpretive positions can redefine public and private in relation to Mann’s work. Sometimes the expressed concerns are for Mann’s children and sometimes for children as viewers. In 1991, selections from ‘Family Pictures: A Work in Progress’ were included in a three-person exhibition in Milwaukee entitled ‘Blood Relatives’. Shortly after it opened, complaints were lodged by people who had not seen the show about three images including ‘Wet Bed’. The local District Attorney’s office, which declined to press charges, reported that ‘the complainants have no problem with adults viewing the photos, but they think it should be roped off for children’.20

Outside Milwaukee, quite a few people had problems with adults viewing the photos. In a 1996 discussion on sexualizing children, novelist Mary Gordon wrote of ‘Candy Cigarette’ that Mann’s ‘daughter looks at the camera with the come-hither stare of the siren or the hooker; her prop the iconic cigarette. It could be said that the cigarette’s being candy throws the iconography into ironic relief; but there is nothing ironic about the child’s face. It is unambiguously sexualized, and the viewer must encounter a sexual invitation’.21 Mann has rejected the terms erotic and sexual in relation to these images, but she uses the term sensuality. In 1992 she told Woodward, ‘I don’t think of my children, and I don’t think anyone else should think of them, with any sexual thoughts. I think childhood sexuality is an oxymoron’.22 Woodward observes that it is not just her representation of the naked children but the way she does so obsessively ‘by cropping and “burning in” of detail’ that really pushes at the taboo. When he challenged her on the fine distinction between sexual and sensual, she admits that ‘it may be a maternal refusal to face facts’. Echoes of Brecht are again conjured by her plea: ‘I only wish that people looked at the pictures the way I do’.

Significantly, Mann says that the Federal prosecutor she consulted told her: ‘Do you know what you really have to watch for? Someone who sees these pictures and moves to Lexington and ingratiates himself into your family life.

21 – Mary Gordon, ‘Exchange on Sexualizing Children’, Salmagundi (1 June 1996). Gordon’s text on Mann was so extreme as to draw a rare response from Mann whose brilliant retort includes the following lines, of which Janet Malcolm would be so very proud: “She condemns my photographs for not representing “natural acts” because, she reasons, it is a “fact” that the children have been posed like marionettes in every one of them and “No animal has the instinct to pose; no animal nvishes to reproduce the in.rage of another animal.” Perhaps in her next sermon Mary Gordon will let us know precisely which beasts of the field and fowl of the air go around writing earnest middlebrow novels about god-haunted exurbanites – otherwise, what kind of unnatural perversion has this woman been engaging in her whole career?”
They’ll come after Jessie and Virginia because they seem so pliable, so broken in’. Mann admits. ‘That seems far-fetched, but if you want to know my worst fear, that’s one of them’. This did not transpire, but it cannot be ignored that there is a lurid side to the circulation and consumption of Mann’s child photographs, although nothing like the scale and severity predicted by the more hysterical public responses to Mann’s work. Mann is a highly recommended photographer on the ‘Young Girl Watchers’ lists posted to a website in 1995 which endorses ‘only the appreciation, aesthetically and erotically, of mankind’s most angelic and beautiful people: young girls’. This certainly must be disturbing for Mann and her family, but it is worthwhile noting that many films and TV shows that have never been accused of flirting with this kind of sexualizing viewer are also highly recommended, such as the wholesome 1970s television show Little House on the Prairie.

In 2001, police in Lexington, Kentucky arrested a local man who was eventually convicted of possessing a large amount of child pornography. Despite the fact that he possessed thousands of pictures on computer files and faced previous charges for sex abuse, his media savvy defence attorney told the press at the time of his arrest that the case centered on a book of Mann’s photographs. An earlier child pornography case posed the question of whether the book of Immediate Family could be considered lewd under Texas law. The jury was hardly unanimous in its support, but the law was deemed too vague not to clear Mann’s book and another by the even more notorious Jock Sturges. However, the jury found against an album the accused had created with cut-outs of nude children from mainstream books such as a Time Life manual on photographing children. What these disparate cases expose is not the problem of Mann’s photographs as much as the problem of controlling images. No matter how hard we might try to circumscribe images by identifying them as art, pornography or as rightly private, photographs cannot be pinned down. This seems to be particularly true when they circulate or are feared to circulate in an economy driven by desire aroused by looking at children.

As Higonnet has argued, the cultural obsession around nude pictures of children is symptomatic of an overinvestment in images. Not only does this obsession drive an ultimately hopeless effort to control the circulation of a wide array of images by limiting freedom of expression, but it also distracts us from addressing real threats against children. When child pornography displays real abuses against children, it is clearly criminal, but vague laws that might encompass works like Mann’s endanger freedom of expression. Law professor and civil liberties expert Edward de Grazia has noted, regarding Sally Mann, that ‘Any federal prosecutor anywhere in the country could bring a case against her in Virginia, and not only seize her photos, her equipment, her Rolodexes, but also seize her children for psychiatric and physical examination’. Although Mann had a few exhibitions cancelled, a book-burning campaign by a group of photographers and films as ‘a service to those who are attracted to young-girls, but simply choose not to make erotic contact with them [...] channeling pedophilic tendencies into what I feel are healthier directions (i.e. young-girl watching) can act as a safer alternative to actual contact. I would not want to imply that those who choose to make erotic contact are inherently harming the child and inherently doing the wrong thing, but I feel such actions are simply too opposed and risky to easily consider, in our current social climate.’


24 - Young Girl Watchers (YGW) was a chatroom used to discuss child pornography in the mid to late 1990s. The name the chatroom held previous to YGW was United Pedophilia Network (UPN). Archives of YGW chats can be accessed at http://www.clogo.org/clogo.php. According to the author of the website, it provided lists of photographers and films as ‘service to those who are attracted to young-girls, but simply choose not to make erotic contact with them [...] channeling pedophilic tendencies into what I feel are healthier directions (i.e. young-girl watching) can act as a safer alternative to actual contact. I would not want to imply that those who choose to make erotic contact are inherently harming the child and inherently doing the wrong thing, but I feel such actions are simply too opposed and risky to easily consider, in our current social climate’.

25 - Associated Press Newswire, ‘Child porn arrest could be one of state’s biggest’ (15 April 2001).

26 - Jock Sturges specializes in photographing the children of his ‘naturist’ friends. In 1990, his studio in San Francisco was raided by the FBI and all his photographs and equipment were seized. Along with Mann and fellow photographer David Hamilton, Sturges has been the subject of a theatrical boycott of Barnes and Noble for selling ‘child pornography’. Sturges was United Pedophilia Network (UPN).

27 - Dave Harmon, ‘Jury: Man guilty in child porn case // Travis jurors say popular art books aren’t lewd but man’s photo album is’, Austin American-Statesman (1 May 1998).

Harrison has claimed that *Exposure* (1993) was written before *Immediate Family* was published in 1992. However, in 1991 the Brooklyn based novelist would have been able to see selections from the series at the Whitney Museum, the Museum of Modern Art and the Aperture Foundation in New York.

The story is told by the adult daughter, Clara, who ran away from home at eighteen and returns, reluctantly, twelve years later as her mother, Ruth, is dying. Shapiro’s tale imagines the possible experience of Mann’s pictures from the perspective of the daughter/subject. If Kathryn Harrison had not written an absolutely horrific tale based on child sex abuse between photographer father and daughter/muse (a book she claims was not inspired by Mann’s photographs), one might say that Shapiro framed her tale as a worst-case scenario. Ruth is veritably monstrous—a vain, self absorbed artist, unwilling or unable to hear and put her children’s needs ahead of her own creative ideas and ambitions. The story Shapiro tells is decidedly unlike the story of collaboration that all the Manns, including husband Larry, have communicated about the production of the *Immediate Family* pictures.

In *Black & White*, Clara revisits the production of many of the pictures as awkward and physically as well as emotionally uncomfortable. She recalls often being awakened in the night and called into service in various cold and uncomfortable poses. Emotionally, she feels her mother offers care and attention only as long as she plays the willing muse, a position Shapiro heightens by making Clara the only child her mother photographs, as opposed to Mann’s photographic engagement with all three of her children. Shapiro’s dramatization of the photographs’ production is convincing and moving, as told from the child’s perspective. Clara oscillates between flattery and discomfort and, finally, resentment. At fourteen, Clara rebels by gaining weight, getting a tattoo, cutting her hair and generally trying to make herself as unattractive as possible to her mother and her camera. However, for my purposes here, it is Shapiro’s imagining of the effect of the photographs’ circulation, the move from a private, domestic domain to a public one, which is particularly salient.

*Black & White* is framed as a tale of trauma, not as extreme as some, but traumatic nonetheless. Clara has developed a state of disassociation from her body, her childhood, her memories and, more tangibly, her birth family. The trajectory of the novel is to have her heal these breaks. The trauma is inflicted slowly through the often uncomfortable production of the photographs but, in the novel, interestingly, the poignancy of the trauma is established in the first few pages as a public trauma, by Clara’s experience as a teenager of being interpolated by strangers as the ‘girl in the pictures’. Clara recalls the first gallery exhibition when she was four, of being surrounded by huge pictures of herself and being pointed at by reams of adults, to the horror of her father, from whom the subject of the pictures has been kept secret. Shapiro’s fictional account of Nathan’s horror, empathy and betrayal in encountering a huge blow up of ‘Accident’ (described in almost exact terms as Mann’s ‘Wet Bed’) is entirely conceivable and decidedly unsettling. In these scenes, Shapiro imagines viewer responses in ways that are helpful in thinking through the circulation of the photographs. *Black & White* also articulates and feeds an authentic curiosity about the grown Mann children and their relationships with their parents. However, Shapiro’s portraits and prognostications of Clara and Ruth differ dramatically from those of Jessie and Sally.

Unlike Clara, Jessie became the most recognizable of her mother’s family subjects because she became an accomplished and enthusiastic model. Instead of retreating from her mother’s world and from modeling, Jessie became an artist and continued to model. In 2006–07, ‘Self-Possessed’, a five-year collaboration with the portrait photographer Len Prince, was exhibited in New York, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. The photographs of Jessie are glamorous black-and-white fictional portraits in the vein of Cindy Sherman (the
Figure 4. Len Prince and Jessie Mann, Untitled Plate #37 Jessie Mann 'Self-possessed' Photographed by Len Prince, gelatin silver print, 2003. Courtesy of the artist.
hand-held shutter of ‘Untitled Film Stills’ is often evident in the Prince pictures. Jessie morphs impressively between Botticelli’s Venus, Robert Mapplethorpe and a range of less determinable characters of pop culture and high art, which nonetheless seem familiar (figure 4). Plate 37 seems to merge Jessie’s earlier ‘come hither’ look of ‘Candy Cigarette’ with an emboldened Marilyn Monroe in the midst of a soft porn shoot. The unselfconsciousness she demonstrated in her mother’s photographs is on full display in these later images. But just as she played roles for her mother, Jessie plays roles and spins stories here, trying on a range of possible adult skins from art star to film vixen. Those looking for the ‘real’, adult Jessie will be disappointed by Prince’s photographs, just as they will be disappointed by turning to Sally Mann’s recent series of photographs of the children.

What Remains, Mann’s 2004 exhibition and book project which examined the effects on death on animals, humans and the land, ends with intensely close-up pictures of her children. They are an interesting turn in this story because they do not feed the salacious curiosity that the Mann children have generated since Immediate Family. These pictures represent the children, but at the same time they do not. The entire series was created using nineteenth-century wet collodion equipment. The process requires long exposures and when manipulated by Mann produces almost painterly, flawed and blurry images, like this one of Emmett, which Mann has printed on huge forty by fifty-inch sepia toned paper (figure 5). The children are grown up, but the photographs are too abstract for details. In fact, Mann herself has noted how interchangeable her children seem in the photographs, with their features running together. The photographs carry no narrative, refuse to deliver us even a sense of what the children look like now, and they do nothing to answer what Jessie cites as the pervasive question: ‘Did we turn out okay?’ In some ways, these pictures should be as shocking as Immediate Family. What are pictures of three healthy living young adults doing in a book and an exhibition on death? In a 2005 documentary film of the same name, Mann suggests she wanted to end the exhibition at the Corcoran on an upbeat note, to embrace the ones she loved while they are here. However, it is impossible to ignore that the children look quite dead in many of the images. The nineteenth-century process elicits reminders of that era’s penchant for death photographs of children. Mann’s recent series of photographs of her children are radically different from the Immediate Family photographs in many ways; however, their visual likeness to nineteenth-century death photographs parallels the provocative relationship between Immediate Family and the family album. In both cases, Mann mines her own private sphere and the convention of the private photograph in order to probe the permeable boundary between public and private.

30. What Remains (Steven Cantor, Stick Figure Productions; US, 2005).