

ART PAPERS

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SALLY MANN
RICHMOND, VA

The photographs on view in Sally Mann's exhibition *Afterlight* stray far from the early work that earned her fame and a confused controversy [Reynolds Gallery; November 13, 2010—January 29, 2011]. Here, the nudes of her children as intense and dreamy water sprites, so meticulously posed, composed, and exposed, have given way to equally intense and dreamy landscapes. Her technical emphasis has shifted from the crisp elucidation of forms to emergent magic and cultivated accidents. In this series, Mann lets the perils of an erstwhile technique take the lead. Using an antique large-format camera to expose hand-applied silver gelatin on glass plates, she relies on three instances of selection: the choice of process artifacts, the selection of subjects, and the composition of shots.

In several previously unseen works from her *Deep South* series, her apparent subjects—gnarled, moss-draped tree branches; crumbling, kudzu-choked towers; rotting piers; and ornate Corinthian columns holding up only a twilight sky—appear in near-total silhouette or blurred to a dubious substantiality. The figures are given just enough detail to invite obsessive inspection, but such labor is frustrated by variable focus—I feel as if I'm gazing through one of her glass plates while the glutinous substrate flows slowly down, thickening in protean waves. As I search *Fontainebleau, Louisiana, 1998/2010*, for a focal point, a center around which to coordinate a foundation for meaning, the image seems to throb; plural centers advance and recede impossibly in the still, flat print. In many, the focus appears to be somewhere in the middle distance, while all potential figures peek from the margins of the frontal plane or stand in aloof blur at the horizon. Mann's interest in these compositions is neither singular nor centered but diffuse and nomadic.

In one noteworthy exception, *Avery Island 2, 1998/2010*, a sharp symmetry appears at dead center: a few twining strands of Spanish moss hold in tension a near-perfect reflection between a maple branch hanging from the canopy and one of its saplings reaching up from the understory at the margins of a supernaturally glowing

pond. Bubbles trapped in algae at the surface of the pond likewise held me in tension for several minutes on each of three visits—it took me that long to satisfy myself that these bright pocks were a part of the scene and not process artifacts or raindrops on a window pane. I was so completely groundless that I could hardly distinguish horizontal from vertical planes, let alone frontal and central planes, scene and representation or intention and emergence.

It's tempting to bring to these images a theme of decay, of a resurgent nature reclaiming a collapsed culture through rot, entropy, and vegetal invasion, of derelict verticals as crestfallen phalluses. But Mann deflects meaning-oriented readings of her work, insisting on what she calls a roving "magpie aesthetic"—finding, capturing, and collecting interesting forms—as her only artistic principle. Artists routinely resist the fixity of critical interpretations. While I'm not one to accept an artist's word as final, I cannot deny that if I indulge her on that formalism—stop seeking delineated figures and take in the grounds; stop looking for a subject and begin to address the image as an object—the reason we're here emerges: the light. It seems always elsewhere and diffuse, dappled through a canopy of wild trees, reflected on an improbably still pond, refracted through haze from over the horizon, lingering for only a moment before disappearing from this world. Here meaning, medium, and meat agree: Mann is in the business of capturing disappearing things. Nineteenth-century photographic technique is both a means and a beneficiary of that mission.

—John Priestley

SIEMON ALLEN
RICHMOND, VA

Siemon Allen's *Imaging South Africa* features six installations [Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University; August 27—October 31, 2010]. Four are collection projects that combine socio-political and aesthetic dimensions. Operating simultaneously as subject matter and form, socio-politics and aesthetics are more than components of Allen's installations. They are two vital, mutually reinforcing realms, which as Allen once suggested, exist in "...two separate but equal (and maybe even contradictory) ways...." The relationship is curiously symbiotic, as the initially unintelligible and seductive tension eventually reveals itself as a striking irony.

The work features methodically assembled and archived collections of mass-produced materials—postage stamps, newspapers, audio recordings—linked to South Africa, Allen's native country. Conceptually, the collection projects focus on variable internal and external perceptions of South Africa, from both the production and consumption ends of the materials themselves. For example, *Stamps, 2010*, consists of Allen's extensive collection of South African stamps dating from 1910 to the present. The artist describes the stamp as a "kind of public-relations gesture—a highly self-conscious attempt to express through a single image some aspect of national identity." Over 50,000 of them are installed chronologically on the inner wall of a large circular panel, forming a round room-within-a-room. Across this visual text lies a multi-level, quirky narrative of South Africa's history. Filled with gaps, it nonetheless constitutes a particular historical index based on national self-assessment. This account contains an array of images—flora, fauna, geographic landmarks, architecture, government leaders, sports celebrities, and so on. Some representations are grim, others celebratory, earnest, academic or even hilarious. All of the images, however, reveal something about power, social relations or cultural trends in South Africa over the past one hundred years.

Allen allows the assembled materials to divulge their own narratives within each collection project—acknowledging that each object, be it a stamp, a newspaper page or article, a record label or a record jacket, has in some

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Sally Mann, *Avery Island 2, 1998/2010*, silver gelatin print, 20 x 24 inches, ed. 10 [courtesy of the artist and Reynolds Gallery, Richmond]; Siemon Allen, installation view of *Record, 2010*, at VCU Anderson Gallery, six digital prints, 80 x 80 inches each [courtesy of the artist; photo: Terry Brown]