A Recent Museum of Art Acquisition:  
New Work by Sally Mann

Sally Mann  
American, born 1951  
*Untitled [Manassas #28]*, 2001  
Gelatin silver enlargement made from wet-plate collodion negative, dry-mounted, and coated with custom matte-surface varnish, 101.6 × 127 cm  
Museum purchase made possible by the W. Hawkins Ferry Fund, 2004/2.129

In 2000 Sally Mann began journeying to various battlefields of the U.S. Civil War, from Fredericksburg and Manassas in her native Virginia to Antietam in neighboring Maryland, visiting the soil where American lives were lost in record numbers. In doing so, she knowingly followed in the footsteps of such renowned nineteenth-century photographers as Mathew Brady and Alexander Gardner. Mann’s motives, however, were not those of Brady and Gardner in recording the faces and ravages of war but, in her words, of “walking among the accretion of millions of remains—the bones, lives, souls, hopes, joys and fears that devolved into the earth—walking, in effect, on the shifting remains of humanity” (quoted in Edwynn Houk Gallery 2003). *Untitled [Manassas #28]* shares these motives, charged with a peculiarly Southern absorption with history yet equally concerned with aesthetics. While evoking something of the Romantic morbidity identifiable among Victorians, Mann infuses her work with a twenty-first-century self-awareness.  

*Untitled [Manassas #28]* and the larger project of which it is a part, known as *Last Measure*—itself part of a five-part project entitled *What Remains*¹—represent a substantial departure from the warm, romantic qualities of Mann’s previous landscape work, such as the series *Mother Land* and *Untitled [Virginia]* (1993) from it, which entered the UMMA collections in 2002. Here these qualities are supplanted by a somber, meditative quality and cooler, darker tonalities, which result from both the photographic and the printing methods Mann developed for this work. The scale has become monumental—and technically extraordinary given that Mann continues to do her own printing in an age when most photographers of scale are printing digitally, in labs.

The collodion photographic process is one of the earliest, developed in the 1850s but largely abandoned for its technical complexities.² The technique involves coating a glass plate with a mixture of gun cotton and ether before bathing the plate in silver. The plate is then inserted into an 8 × 10 inch view camera; the
nature of these materials requires that the exposure be made within five to six minutes (which also has the strangely “modern” advantage of causing the image to develop quite quickly, rather like digital photography). When used to capture distant vistas, as here, and the dark silhouettes of trees and high horizon lines, the effect is similar to that of a night photograph. As generally through the series, details are largely absent; no physically human impact remains apart from the occasional fence or eroded trench—leaving aside our awareness of Mann’s presence in making the image in the first place. Yet Mann’s position relative to the image is hovering, even dislocated and unusually vague—where is she, exactly? when was she shooting?—to the point that it becomes universalizing.

Punctuating the central image of Untitled [Manassas #28] and much of Last Measure are glowing, unsettled (and unsettling) points of light that seem to emanate from some undefined distance. These, along with the ripple effects of the wet-plate process, are clearly intentional: in the case of the hovering points of light, they seem to result from the exposure, developing, and printing techniques. Although issued in small editions (of five), the works from Last Measure have been printed in what is essentially a monotype process in which sand is used to create a definably tactile surface, further brought out through an unusual process of varnishing each piece. (The artist has suggested that the works be shown unglazed so that the unique and irregular aspects of the surface remain clearly visible.) In the absence of most definable landscape elements, these resulting points of light and surface modifications intimate a kind of spectral presence in the photographs suggestive of the spirits of those who fell on these lands and who may still, Mann’s work suggests, inhabit the land for which they died. To this end, Mann relates Last Measure to a line in Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass in which the “Mother of All” surveys the dead on the battlefields of 1862 and cries for the earth to do its work: “Absorb them well O my earth, she cried, I charge you lose not my sons, lose not an atom” (quoted in Mann 2003, 80).

These distortions have agitated some viewers. Writing in the New York Times, Sarah Boxer (2004) regarded these manipulations and lack of visual clarity as a kind of “violation” that is fundamentally aesthetic in nature but that for Boxer exceeds the legitimate authority of the artist and verges on what she calls “grave robbing.” It is tempting to read such concerns as being more fundamentally about the invocation of the spiritual in Mann’s photography, something that in those who resist it can seem counter to photography’s sense of “truth telling.” Mann’s subject is clearly mortality, a concern long present in her work but now brought out more emphatically and motivated, perhaps, by two events—the death of Mann’s father and the diagnosis of her husband, Larry, with muscular dystrophy in the mid-1990s.
In *Last Measure* Mann explores how mass death turns ordinary landscape into hallowed ground, asking us to look at landscape in new ways and to question how art affects our sense of landscape, of place, of history. But for Mann, the historic and communal marries with the profoundly personal. In her words, “Loss and memory are the twin poles of the Southern artist’s sensibility…. My subject, ultimately, is time and love, how the physical familiar evanesces into shade, shadow” (quoted in *Style Weekly* 2004).

Sally Mann was born in Lexington, Virginia, in 1951, in the house once inhabited by the Confederate military hero Stonewall Jackson. Her work is held in over twenty museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art. In 2001 *Time* magazine named her “America’s best photographer.” She continues to live outside Lexington on a 423-acre horse farm long in her family, of which she has written, “As I walk the fields of this farm, beneath my feet shift the bones of incalculable bodies; death is the sculptor of the ravishing landscape, the terrible mother, the damp creator of life by whom we are one day devoured” (Mann 2003, 6).

*James Christen Steward*
*Director, University of Michigan Museum of Art*

**Notes**

1. The title comes from Ezra Pound’s “Canto 81”: “What thou lovest well remains, / the rest is dross / What thou lov’st well shall not be / reft from thee.”

2. Space limitations preclude me from discussing here the current movement of a number of leading photographers, such as John Dugdale, Ernestine Ruben, and others, working in early and often cumbersome photographic methods. See Rexer 2002.

3. In doing so, Mann’s work can be seen in the intellectual context of artists exploring the power and meaning of place, especially those places central to American history (see, e.g., Huddleston 2001).

**Works Cited**


*Style Weekly* (Richmond, Va.). 2004. 21 April, p. 27.