



· CULTURE

# CHILD PHOTOGRAPHY

Investigating What is “Appropriate”

BY HANNAH MOON

CHILD PHOTOGRAPHY CAN have a profound impact on viewers through the relatability and emotional depth children display. However, the interpretation of photographs' context can change this beauty into misperceived dismay. Because of this, rules and conditions have been put in place – many of which are unofficial, contextually flexible, and based upon a portion of society's judgment alone – concerning the subject of children in photography. Concerning both art and documentary-style photogra-

phy of nude children, judgment and assumptions are at an all-time high. These photographs can be viewed with a vast range of different perceptions – honest displays of childhood life, inappropriate imagery unfit for the public eye, or downright unjust displays of child pornography. The crucial distinction between child photography and child pornography is difficult to define but important to explore; perception's power to guide or misguide viewers into various interpretations profoundly impacts both the photographers,

their photographed subjects, and the audience themselves. Therefore, a distinction in the display of children in photographs must be made based on the photographer's intentions behind the picture, rather than shamefully misperceiving all displays of child nudity as inappropriate or pornographic.

**S**ALLY MANN, a well renowned documentary-style photographer, lies at the heart of controversial child photography but perhaps also holds the key to resolution. Her most well-known work is *Immediate Family*, a photography series that was exhibited in Chicago in the 1990 Edwynn Houk Gallery and published as a monograph in 1992. The photographs display her three children, all under the age of 10, playing in the southern landscape of their remote Virginian cabin that sat near the water. Many of these photographs (like in Figure 2) display her children in the nude as they played around their secluded property, including such activities as skinny dipping, dress-up, napping, dancing, playing games, and more. Other nude photos captured emotional themes such as cuts and scrapes, bee stings, sadness, insecurity, and melancholy. Together, the series showcased her children playing in their typical manner, innocently and honestly at their southern home.

The state of the children's nudity caused an uproar of controversy immediately after the photos' release. Sally Mann was accused of child pornography by numerous viewers and journalists, claiming that she sexualized her children and was an unfit mother. Mann simply displayed her children in their natural state of play; she explained that it's difficult not to capture photos of her children outside the nude because, referring to her older daughter Jessica, "she's always naked out here" (Woodward, 2015). Nudity was very common for Sally Mann

herself as a child, and she passed along this same comfort and confidence to her children. Her work rightly asserts that the human body should not be shamed or censored.

Opinions and accusations from viewers against the photographs are unfortunately coupled with legality issues, which have caused Mann to face challenges by federal laws against such child exposure. Federal and several states' laws prohibit the "lascivious" exhibition of children's genitals under the age of 18 (Woodward, 2015). Artists like Mann often face such legal challenges when showcasing their art. However, these laws do not consider the intentions of the artist in taking a photograph – a concept crucial to justifying such allegations and to maintaining the integrity of the artist. Defending efforts to prohibit laws that force self-censoring of artists' thinking, professor and author Edward de Grazia argues that Mann's work (like many other artists') should not be suppressed by the First Amendment, in which freedom of expression should defend an artists' well-intended work. Since vague laws often take intentions and themes out of context, much like many viewers do themselves, they should rightfully be challenged based on their efforts to suppress artistic expression. As De Grazia states, Mann's "motives and the [photographs'] artistic value would be unmistakable" if rightfully considered and contextually understood (Woodward, 2015).

As for the dramatic nature present in many of Mann's photos, such as Figure 3, viewers must remember that the artist's intentions tell the story: either an artistic expression of emotion, a portrayal of innocent childhood (that just so happened to be characterized with nudity), or a combination thereof. Mann states that taking many of her pictures was "an act separate from mothering," where the children were actors, she

was the artist, and they "were making a photograph together," and her children understood and embraced that (Mann, 2015). The nudity and childhood activities captured in many photos sincerely and innocently represented their childhood, while the embodiment of emotion

and drama was the product of the artistic eye. Misunderstanding factors in when viewers mistake the children's dramatic poses, whether confident or emotional or even injured, as a cause for their nudity. Break each image down, and it's a representation of her children "at a



Figure 2



Figure 3



fraction of a second on one particular afternoon with infinite [artistic] variables" (Mann, 2015).

Because of misunderstanding viewers and legality issues that have each caused gross misinterpretations of Sally Mann's child photography, her reputation has been greatly summarized by a single controversial story. Outside of *Immediate Family*, Mann has published several photographic and biographical books beginning in 1988 with *At Twelve* and spanning through today with her 2018 publishing of *Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings*. She has received numerous awards for her work over the past several decades, some of which include three National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) awards under Individual Artist Fellowship in 1982, 1988, and 1992 and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship award in 1987. Relating to her photography work, the 1994 documentary *Blood Ties* was nominated for an Academy Award, and the 2006 feature film *What Remains* was nominated for an Emmy Award (Mann, 2018). To much of the public eye, however, Mann's decades of work, including her artistically exquisite child photography, has been largely shadowed by a debate in which a viewer's overall reflection on the artist is boiled down to a

mere question of approval.

In addition to the severe and detrimental impact that these misinterpreted accusations have on Sally Mann as both a photographer and person in general, the criticism also affected her children by the widespread talk of their shameful nudity. Journalist and critic Raymond Sokolov wrote an op-ed article in *The Wall Street Journal* in 1991 about Sally Mann's photography of her children, stating that a "line was crossed" in publishing such "degenerate" work (Mann, 2015). Sokolov also inserted one of Mann's photos *Virginia at Four* (notably without her permission) into the article, adding black bars over her eyes, nipples, and genitals to 'censor' it (as seen in Figure 4). As previously dis-

cussed, Mann's children had always been comfortable with their bodies in the nude and roamed around their house more often naked than clothed. Mann explains that it felt like "mutilation" of the image, Virginia herself, and her child's innocence. Mann couldn't even consider fighting for justice against Sokolov because the only option of pushback would involve a plethora of trial and debate; Mann, of course, could not put her child through any additional trauma concerning the photo, stating that "the third eye of shame was already in place. No need to blacken it" (Mann, 2015). Instead, five-year-old Virginia wrote a letter to Sokolov about the grief his censored picture caused her, which can be read in Figure 4. It is, therefore,

**"It made her feel, for the first time, that there was something wrong not just with the pictures but with her body," Mann explained. "Heartbreakingly, the night after seeing the picture with the black bars, she wore her shorts and shirt into the bathtub" (2015).**



Figure 4

imperative to note that the misinterpretation of child photography as child pornography can have a confounding impact on the children pictured, themselves.

**A**LTHOUGH SALLY Mann was never officially investigated under the law, Cincinnati museum curator Dennis Barrie was not so lucky. In July 1989, Barrie opened an exhibition by American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe titled *The Perfect Moment* in Cincinnati's Contemporary Arts Center (CAC), a nationally funded art gallery. Just after its opening, the American Family Association (AFA) issued a press release condemning federal funding for Barrie's "pornographic" exhibition of Mapplethorpe's work. The series comprised of 175 photographs from throughout Mapplethorpe's career, between the late 1960s to 1988, but it's namely remembered for the controversy surrounding two images of nude children (Figures 5 and 7) and five images of gay S&M culture. AFA called the two photographs of nude (or partially nude) children, namely an image of eight-year-old boy Jesse McBride, "for pedophile homosexuals" (Linkof, 2015). In its first traveling exhibition that ran from late 1988 through January 1989, the show was well received by the public, wherein Philadelphia it demonstrated robust attendance devoid of condemnation. Following the death of Mapplethorpe in March 1989, however, an exhibition of his work was unexpectedly canceled in Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. in fear of nega-



Figure 5



Figure 6

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Ionesco's work becomes so blurred that the two distinct concepts are consolidated to produce inappropriate photographic material.

**I**N EXPLORING DIFFERENT photographers and their work, whether artistic or documentary, appropriateness in child photography can be clearly defined based on the intentions of the photographer, the treatment of the subjects, and the context of the photograph. When photographing children, nudity should often be expected, for it's a natural part of childhood, itself. Sally Mann illustrates this concept beautifully in the pictures of her children, where their everyday life is depicted innocently with the comfort and consent of her children. Although the children were not his and the setting was more artificially studio-based, Robert Mapplethorpe photographed his child-subjects in natural poses under the comfort of the child and permission (and presence) of the parents. Their intentions were sound and entirely void of sensuality. In the category of documentary photography, Nick Ut's *Napalm Girl* illustrates that history should never be automatically censored merely because a child is nude. Ut's picture also demonstrates that the amount of nudity cannot dictate the amount of appropriateness, even if historically significant, for the same degree of nakedness was shown with far less scrutiny in publishing than Mann or Mapplethorpe's morally sound pictures. After examination, however, Irina Ionesco's photographs demonstrate that a line can be crossed in photographing nude children. The difference between the latter photographers and Ionesco remains in the lack of desire by her subject, daughter Eva, to be photographed naked, feeling compelled to do so by the mother photographer. On the surface, the pictures' context – provocative poses with coquettish props,

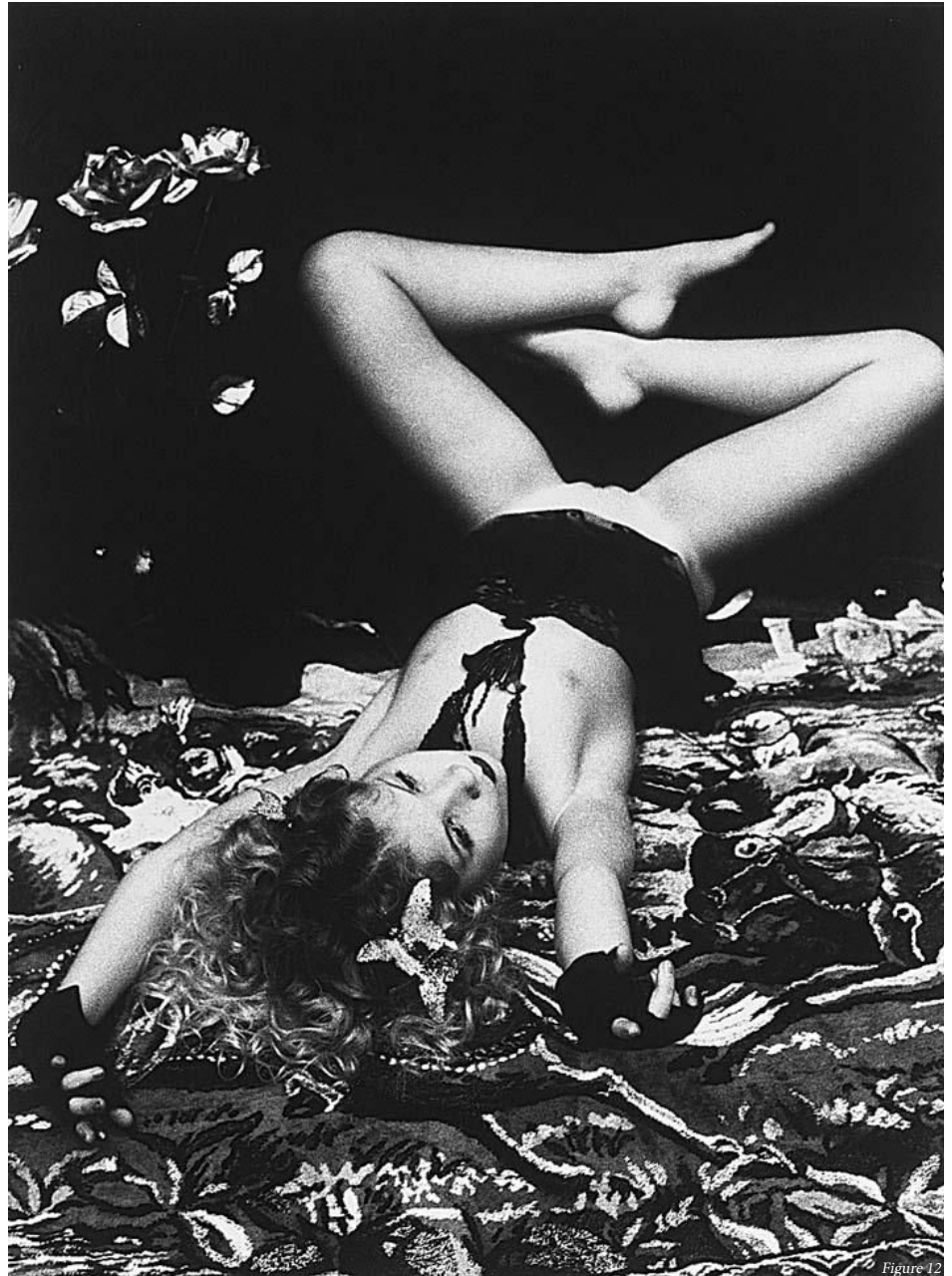


Figure 12

costumes, and make-up – distinguishes Ionesco's work from her child photographer counterparts. Whether at or below the surface of any photograph, the presence nudity, alone – even of children – does not define appropriateness in photography.

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