

Charlie Rose and Sally Mann
92nd Street Y
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Charlie Rose: My first interview with Sally Mann was twelve or thirteen years ago. Back then she was the best photographer I ever knew. And she's the best photographer I know now. What has changed about her is a sense that she has done so much and done it in a very unique way, with an extraordinary eye. Whether it is about something she loves, her sense of home in Virginia, her family, her husband, or whether it is about race, slavery, or death, she has photographed it like no one else can.

She has also written a book. It's a memoir—it was published first last year—in which she takes us through the journey of this remarkable life in photography. And tonight, she is going to make us two martinis.

[laughter]

Sally Mann: As Charlie just said, we've had several interviews in the past, and they've all been brow-furrowing, forelock-tugging, leather-elbow, kind-of-highbrow interviews.

So I thought, you know, why don't we just—

CR: —have a drink.

SM: Something to lighten the mood, a little party atmosphere.

CR: You know, when I first came to New York, I did my interview show on live television. People would come to do the show after dinner, because it started at 11:00. And we had some really wonderful interviews, because people would have a bit too much wine at dinner and then roll in around 10:50.

SM: It's a great trick.

CR: And it often was a great interview.

SM: Well, let's hope we have some of that luck tonight.

CR: So let's just start way back. When did you fall in love with photography?

SM: We are going way back. I was seventeen. I was at Putney.

CR: Somebody had a camera?

SM: A boyfriend had a camera.

CR: Oh, I love this story. The reason you became a photographer was because you liked to take your boyfriend into the darkroom.

SM: That is exactly right. Where else could you go?

CR: But you just knew you loved it or did you start taking pictures and people said, "This is pretty good"?

SM: No, nobody said it was good. It wasn't good. It was awful. I liked writing more back then.

CR: You still like writing.

SM: I like *having written*. I'm not sure you could say I like writing.

CR: So after all of these years, how would you like to be perceived?

SM: Well, of course I want to be remembered as a loving mother and wife—

CR: We've got all of that. Your love for your family can be seen in your photographs.

SM: I like to think so, but different eyes see things different ways, you know that. Anyway, as an artist I'd like to think I'd be seen as someone who wanted to provide tangible proof that in my sweet and ordinary life I was able to, I don't know, find moments of transcendent immortality just within the everyday, because that's pretty much where I work.

CR: Transcendent mortality.

SM: Immortality. And mortality too, while we're talking.

CR: That would be better wouldn't it? Transcendent mortality would be great.

So, do you think you are getting better? Has your experience propelled you or is it a different kind of growth?

SM: No, I find that the more I work, the harder it gets and the more difficult it is to just feel the joy of taking a picture. I am lately much more interested in making work that is in service to an overarching concept. I feel that I need to *say* something, not just save it or take a picture of it, but actually make photography work, although not in a documentary way. So that makes it harder and takes a little bit of the joy out of it. And right now, I'm wrestling with that. I've picked up the Leica again, just to take pictures to see what they look like, which is something I haven't done for years.

CR: Oh terrific. And there is a project you are working on now about the Great Dismal Swamp.

SM: Yeah, that's within a larger project, about the legacy of slavery.

CR: And what did the Great Dismal Swamp mean to the legacy of—

SM: —slavery? Well, it was a place of refuge.

CR: People would hide there?

SM: Yeah. There was some high ground in the center of the Dismal Swamp where slaves could go, if they could get to it without being eaten by the alligators and without being caught by the slave hunters. They formed whole communities with

stores and churches and commerce and all kinds of stuff. So it was a place of refuge, as stygian as it was.

CR: And this is part of a larger project on slavery that you're doing?

SM: Yes, but it's sort of inchoate right at the moment. It's going to be the centerpiece of my show at the National Gallery in 2018.

CR: And what's that show going to be like?

SM: It's an exploration—and the curator could say it better than me—of how the South has woven through my work from the very beginning with the emphasis on family and land and death and defeat and ruin and decay—those uniquely Southern themes.

CR: So we can see, through the arc of your work, the history of the South.

SM: Yes, that's the idea at the moment. And the centerpiece of the show is going to be these pictures of black men that I've been working on for ten years or so, these pictures from the Dismal Swamp, and pictures of little clapboard churches. I'm interested in things that offered hope to the slaves. The rivers were of course a double-edged sword because they were the transport into America, but they were also the one reliable way out, either in the water or crossing it.

CR: They were brought to slavery by water.

SM: Mostly on the James River. Anyway, that's just one part, it will also include family pictures and a bunch of new color family pictures that have never been printed before, and then the Deep South landscapes, the battlefield pictures, the black men, and a room that's going to loosely revolve around the idea of mortality. So, it will touch on all those Southern themes.

CR: When you take a photograph, whether it's a face, a landscape, a church, whatever it may be, what's going through your mind?

SM: The experience of getting a good picture is pretty much the same, irrespective of what the picture is. It's like a little tuning fork trembling in your body; you feel it in the same way.

CR: You feel it?

SM: I feel it.

CR: And when you look at images in the darkroom, does it always hold true?

SM: Yes. If I haven't screwed it up somehow. But don't forget, we're talking about a tenth of a second. In that tenth of a second, particularly with people, you can miss it. With the landscapes, you're usually okay.

CR: This is what you said in *Hold Still*, "I existed in a welter of creativity—sleepless, anxious, and self-doubting, pressing for both perfection and impiety, like some ungodly cross between a hummingbird and a bulldozer."

SM: Someone said to me the other day, "You're like a cross between Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman." I like the hummingbird and the bulldozer better.

CR: But tell us how you feel. Live within that quote that you made.

SM: Well, first of all, I have to confess that "impiety and perfection" came from Flaubert.

CR: You stole from Flaubert?

SM: Yes, yes, who wouldn't?

CR: Well, I guess they say a poor writer borrows, a great writer steals. But is your creativity often joined by doubt?

SM: Is there ever any creativity that isn't wedded to doubt?

CR: What ambitions do you have for the future?

SM: That's the thing, ambition never goes away—you'd think that at some point you would calm down a little, maybe even appreciate some of the things that have been accomplished. It makes me think about a story by Henry James: there is a writer named Dencombe, he's on his deathbed, but at the peak of his career. He's never made a misstep; everything he's done has been perfect, and yet he begs for one more chance to do something good. He has that wonderful line—it's my mantra, "We work in the dark—we do what we can.... Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task." And for me, it's become this little military march; I think of it all the time. "We work in the dark—we do what we can.... Our doubt is our passion." And that's it. My doubt is my passion, my doubt is my task.

CR: Your doubt of what?

SM: Everything, myself: I can be cripplingly insecure.

CR: You began your career as a writer, how does your affinity for literature influence the way you make images or develop a body of work?

SM: You know, it's been really interesting. It took me five years to write the book, and now I've gone back to being a photographer, and I didn't think there was any relationship between the two. In the writing of the book, everything had to be man-hauled out of my guts; it wasn't anything like photography. With photography, it's a question of making choices. That's what photography's all about. You choose exactly what you want to take pictures of. With writing, you have to create the choices and then refine them. So it's just an entirely different

thing. But, now that I'm back to printing again for the first time in ages, I am finding a remarkable parallel between photography and writing: the print emerging in the developer is much like my memories for Hold Still swimming to the surface and becoming visible. That same impulse is happening, but visually, right in front of me.

CR: In your book, you describe your friendship with Cy Twombly. And you have a new body of photographs related to that friendship as well.

SM: Yes. My friendship with Cy Twombly went way back. It was a good friendship, an important friendship. There was a lot of humor in it. A fair amount of intimacy. We talked about art, we talked about his art.

CR: The idea of intimacy is very important and interesting to me. Someone said to me recently about interviewing, "You create a chemistry of intimacy." So I think the idea of intimacy is important. What do you mean by it?

SM: I think the idea of chemistry is important. There's a certain chemistry that happens between people. And with Cy, it was apparent almost—in that Malcolm Gladwell *blink*.

CR: At first glance.

SM: It happened almost immediately, but it really helps that we had such similar backgrounds. We grew up in the same town. We had exactly the same childhood experiences. And all those experiences really help to form a bond. And you almost know it instantly—at least I did with Cy. He and I were very close.

CR: Let's talk about photography and memory.

SM: Yeah, that's a tricky one isn't it?

CR: You discuss it in your book.

SM: Well, I have lots of thoughts about memory. One is that I think memory is probably—and I didn't talk about this so much in the book—richer than reality. There are always places that you remember vividly, with Proustian evocation, and when you go back, they turn out to be a pale replica of what your memory is of that place. This happens to anyone who goes back to their childhood bedroom or something. It's just not the way you remember it. But I have a theory about photographs displacing and subverting memory; undercutting and actually destroying memories.

CR: And with the pervasiveness of smart phones and Instagram and all of that, we're so anxious to record, that we don't drink deeply of the experience.

SM: Yes, I know. Would a snapshot of the church at Combray have done what that madeleine did? Is an image—a one-dimensional, flat, little, faded, deckle-edged image—ever going to give you the sensory tactile taste and smell of a madeleine? Photography is an impoverishing act, actually.

CR: An impoverishing act?

SM: Yeah. Because it steals from your memory.

CR: Steals from your memory?

SM: Well, taking snapshots is different from making a great photograph—there's a distinction. Great pictures are not stealing from memories, they're enriching imagination.

CR: So what's the point of photography?

SM: Well, there are pictures that if you didn't have them, you wouldn't remember that moment. But there are also pictures that, because you have them, you don't remember the dimensionality of the moment. That makes sense to you right?

CR: It does. But I think when photography is great, there is an essence to it. And the essence of the great ones—you, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Richard Avedon, Robert Frank, and photographers of that caliber—is that you teach us to look at things in interesting new ways. You show us images that make us think about the experience of that thing. That's what you do. In the same way that a painting does that.

SM: Thank you. I am very interested in enriching and enlivening the quotidian. And sometimes I think it's just my particular way of looking at something.