



## Photographic Art and Ethics: When Does Artistic Creativity Become the Exploitation of Children?



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Art foregrounds creativity, imagination, and often includes materials that are meant to shock us out of our ordinary approaches to the world and life. But when does art transgress ethical boundaries normally thought to be operative in relationships among human agents? This debate about the relationship between artistic creativity and ethical norms is on display in the controversy surrounding the work of Sally Mann. Mann is an American photographer famous for her artworks consisting of large black and white photos. She is the mother of three children—Emmett, Jessie, and Virginia—who played the protagonists in her third, and most controversial, photographic book, *Immediate Family* (1992). Included in the work were 65 pictures of her children carrying on in their everyday lives from the mid-1980s until they reached puberty; causing the bulk of the controversy were 13 pictures of her children in the nude, then aged eleven, nine, and five years old. These naked and often-vulnerable posed pictures of her children caused critics to raise concerns about the work involving child exploitation and child pornography.

One of such critics is Valerie Osbourne. After viewing a picture of Jessie posed on the ground only in rubber galoshes and panties included in *Immediate Family*, she writes that

She appears so vulnerable and so frail, yet her gaze is so enticing. The image is taken from above, objectifying her. Her gaze falls directly into the lens as if beckoning the viewer to come join her. The name again suggests something sexual and playful; “Dirty Jessie.” This image becomes the most sexual due to the positioning of the camera above her, and the semi-modest touching of her nipples. (Osbourne, 2006)

In this critique, Osbourne points out a common charge among Sally Mann’s critics: her work relies on or emphasizes the sexualization of her children. Others have also condemned her work as being ‘unnecessary’ and “problematic” (Cohen, 2018). Critics are also concerned about the repercussions the photographs would have on the children as they grow older. From posing with cigarettes and “lolita” glasses to pretending to be garroted or strangled in Mann’s photographs, detractors wondered whether Mann was providing them with “props whose dark associations they [couldn’t] begin to understand. Rather than preserving their innocence, the photographs seem[ed] to accelerate their maturity by relying on the knowingness of the viewer” (Woodward, 1992). In fact, after seeking advice from a federal prosecutor, Mann was informed that no less than eight of her pictures could be cause for her arrest (Woodward, 1992). While she may not intended these photographs to be taken in a sexualized fashion, some worry that overzealous or disturbed individuals might see them in



this way. This may have been the case when one male fan of her work wrote to her editors, journalists, and the children's school seeking more information about Mann's children. Others worry about whether any consent given by her children was valid due to their very young age and lack of them truly understanding the repercussions that being featured in such photographs might bring. They also speculated whether her status as their parent could have unduly influenced her children's willingness to take part in this artistic project.

Mann defended her work by stating that she had originally not planned to publish the photo books until her children were older and were no longer children. She says in an interview with the *New York Times* that such a delay was rejected by her children; they were angered, she reports, by her unilateral plan to delay publication. To placate them, she compromised and promised that she would publish the book only after they had met with a psychologist in order to make sure they understood their decision fully. She also gave the children veto power over the pictures included in the photobook; 13 year-old Emmett used his veto to remove a picture of him with socks on his hands and 7-year-old Virginia rejected a picture of her urinating. Furthermore, individual interviews conducted with the children when the book was published and they corroborated their willingness to be portrayed in *Immediate Family*. Jessie was quoted as saying in her interview that "I have no objections, none. The few times I don't like it is when I have a friend over and I'm just in my room and Mom says, 'Picture time,' and I don't really want to do it" (Woodward, 1992). Furthermore, Mann vowed that if she ever thought even for a moment that the pictures would harm her children, she would immediately stop. She argued that her photographs had nothing morbid or exploitative in them and only wished that people could see them as she saw them, natural, just like the pictures she had from her childhood taken by her dad.

Although there has not been any legal actions taken against Sally Mann and her photographs, that has not stopped her critics from protesting the book's release and continued availability. The director of Belfast Exposed photography gallery, Pauline Hadaway, says, "naked or not, exhibitions of children can be precarious, and what is OK or not can be arbitrarily decided" (Jenkins, 2010). Where does creativity in photographic art end and exploitation of children begin?

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What values are in conflict in the artworks of Sally Mann?
2. Do you think it is important—or even possible—to get informed consent from her children for their photos to be included in Mann's book?
3. What general limits should our concerns over the exploitation of children put on artistic creativity? How far can artists go in using children in their artworks?
4. If you find Mann's use of her children in her art troubling, is there anything she could have done to produce similar works in an ethical fashion?



**Further Information:**

Cohen, Alina. "Why Sally Mann's Photographs of Her Children Can Still Make Viewers Uncomfortable." *Artsy*, January 4, 2018. Available at: [www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-sally-mann-s-photographs-children-viewers-uncomfortable](http://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-sally-mann-s-photographs-children-viewers-uncomfortable)

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Osborn, Valerie. "Sally Mann's 'Immediate Family' – The Unflinching and Unafraid Childhood (2006)." *ASX*, October 26, 2006. Available at: [www.americansuburbx.com/2009/11/theory-sally-manns-immediate-family.html](http://www.americansuburbx.com/2009/11/theory-sally-manns-immediate-family.html)

Woodward, Richard B. "The Disturbing Photography of Sally Mann." *The New York Times, New York Times*, September 27, 1992. Available at: [www.nytimes.com/1992/09/27/magazine/the-disturbing-photography-of-sally-mann.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1992/09/27/magazine/the-disturbing-photography-of-sally-mann.html)

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