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### Invisible Line, Fists full of Love

There is a strong intersection between my own artwork and the work of Sally Mann. We both make use of our children's image. I believe that our work is born of a deep, caring connection between parent and child. That relationship is what drives the work. In this paper I will attempt to draw parallels between our work and the theory of Care Ethics. The questions that I am asking are as follows. Where is the line between caring and abuse? Can a line even be drawn? And, why do we as artists (and society) feel the need to push that line?

In the past I have always enjoyed ruminating on big ideas. Semiotics, Simulationism or even Ethics were topics that I devoted time to just because they were fun and interesting to me. In 2003 I had put a fair amount of contemporary theory into my undergraduate work. The work had been well received. I had been lavishly praised for essentially illustrating some fairly rudimentary concepts pertaining to the topic of Semiotics. When I was accepted into the graduate program, I figured I would continue along this path. It seemed to me that contemporary art was really pretty easy to make once you understood the institutionally acceptable hierarchy of contemporary topics. The merit of a student's artwork was judged, in large part, by his or her choice of topic. If I simply picked a topic such as identity, politics, the body, technology, gender identification, or reflexive art (art about art history), knew and alluded to some of the prominent historical symbols that illustrated these ideas, and paid enough homage to the thinkers that professed these concepts while still managing to avoid overly didactic illustrations, I would, no doubt, fit right into the institutional system. I would easily garner the same praise from my peers and professors that I had come to know throughout my earlier studies. It would have worked too.

However, as luck would have it, shortly after being accepted into the graduate program, I quite unexpectedly found myself about to become a new father. This prospect both excited and terrified me. I had always comfortably operated within the world of abstract ideas and symbols. Symbols and ideas are nice because they are there for the mind when the mind wants them. They are not tangible and I do not have to believe in them in order to talk about them. I could think about them or not. Furthermore, I could do no real damage to an idea. My ruminations were of no substantial consequence to the world. They were safe, much like my artwork had been up until that point.

A baby, however, isn't an abstract. A child isn't a symbol. A child is as real as it gets. I couldn't put this child away and then pick her back up when I felt like it. My actions and my ideas had an instantaneous and lasting impact on the life of this tiny being. Furthermore, this person reflected back to me my own identity in an unequivocally visceral fashion. I could see myself in her quite literally. My identity was interwoven with hers. To damage to her was to damage to myself and vice versa. The impending arrival of my daughter and resulting change in my own identity was all I could think about during that time.

I went to the parenting sections of local bookstores looking for books on fatherhood. I found an entire library of books dedicated to prenatal care, postpartum care (and depression), breast-feeding, belly time, how to juggle working and mothering, etc. Without fail, these books were written to and geared for the rearing of a child by the mother. On the topic of fatherhood there was only a couple of old dusty books written 30 years ago by Bill Cosby. It occurred to me then that the relationship between child and father had gone almost completely unexplored and undefined over the past 30 years. During this time there had been a radical shift in the societal role of women and mothers as they redefined the identity of the female, but men had really failed, thus far, to redefine themselves in the face of the changing landscape of the culture.

It finally occurred to me that family-dynamics, something so simple and seemingly outside of the spectrum of important contemporary thought (yet at the forefront of my mind), might be exactly the topic that I needed to address in my thesis work.

There had always been one particular image that had stuck in my mind when I thought about children within the context of fine art. One photograph that I had seen many years prior at the UICA of Grand Rapids. It is rare that an image or an artist sticks with me for any amount of time, but this one had. The image was *Damaged Child* from Sally Mann's *Immediate Family* portfolio. This image became my initial inspiration. It is a simple enough image and the title that Mann gives it, does nothing more than to describe exactly what has been documented.

I started researching Mann and *Immediate Family* with some fervor once I decided to use my own daughter as fodder for imagery. Mann's photographs represented the most obvious precedence within contemporary art for the ideas that I was about to explore. I was surprised to find out that this particular

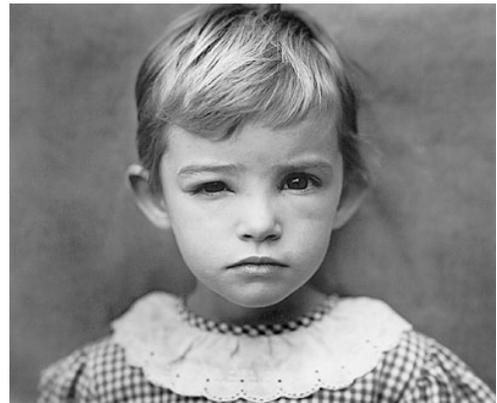
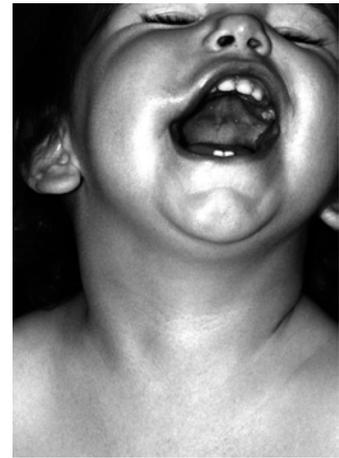


image of the damaged child was the image that had unlocked an entire body of work for the artist. It was the first image in what would become *Immediate Family*. As Mann tells it in the documentary *What Remains*, “One day Jesse came home with a gnat bite on her face and it was all swollen up. Actually it had bruised. It really looked like she had been beaten up. Up until that point I had thought the children were snapshot material, but she was so striking that it occurred to me that right here, right under my nose, was a picture. I mean a real picture. I just put her up against the wall and documented it. So that’s how I started. As soon as I realized that there was art right under my nose that I was missing, I started seeing things differently.”

Mann was right. There was something intrinsically beautiful about this damaged child—something striking, something true. Some years later when my own little girl came home after suffering a similar bite to the face I couldn't help but be compelled to snap a similar photograph—my homage to Sally Mann.



As I thumbed through *Immediate Family* in its entirety, I was instantly seduced by both the ideas and the images that were presented. Mann writes, “There’s the paradox: we see the beauty and we see the dark side of things; the cornfields and the fully sails, but the sashes as well. The Japanese have a word for this dual perception: *mono no aware*. It means something like “beauty tinged with sadness.” How is it that we must hold what we love tight to us, against our very bones, knowing we must also, when the time comes, let it go?” (4)

My template was set. I knew what sort of work I needed to do. The work was to be from the male perspective, but required the same unflinching, honest attention to the truths of family and growing up. As Mann put it, “We are spinning a story of what it is to grow up. It is a complicated story and sometimes we try to take on the grand themes: anger, love, death, sensuality, and beauty. But we tell it all without fear and without shame.” (5)

What had not occurred to me at the time were the ramifications of such imagery. As I stated earlier, children are not inert symbols. They are living, breathing, feeling and thinking beings. The damage that a parent can do to his child is infinitely more devastating than that of the insect’s bite. It is perhaps appropriate then that as I come to the end of my graduate experience, as I stare at the library of images that I have created, and as they stare back at me, I find myself writing a paper on the intersection of ethics and visual representation. For me ethics and visual representation share a common bond. What is important in both instances is how do

they relate to me? That is what can get lost in a seminar when I find myself debating big ideas. It is all well and good to debate for the sake of synthesis, but in the end what matters most is what I do with this information once I leave the classroom and walk out into the world? How does it inform my behavior and, most importantly as it pertains to my profession, how does it inform my imagery? Ethics in particular is problematic for me. Whenever I spend much time ruminating on the topic, I find myself quickly trapped in a circle of relativism. That relativism quickly spirals into a nihilistic attitude, culminating in a debilitating internal debate about self-imposed iconoclasm (no lie). I like sharp, unbroken lines drawn between right and wrong and when they are not, I suffer a very real schism. When this happens, the only way out of the paralysis is to again simplify and perhaps over simplify the problem.

The reason I draw my child, the reason that Sally Mann photographed hers, is a delightfully simple one. We care deeply for our progeny. Between a parent and a child there is an undeniable connection. It is that very strong relationship that compels the artist and drives the work forward. Ours is a work that is born out of a deep and abiding love for our children. As John B. Ravenal states in his essay found in the book *The Flesh and The Spirit*, “These images are fragments of the everyday elevated by the camera to symbols of childhood. And as one mother’s attempt to record her children’s youth before it passes, they are also emblems of parenthood, of amazement at the perfection of children who are only on temporary loan, and of love made fierce by the realization protecting them from life’s unpredictable flow is an often futile labor.” (25)

Though the images are undoubtedly born of a caring parent, there is an interesting thing that happens when an artist portrays the intimacy between him or herself and their children. In an effort to get close to the truth, to honor the child as a total being, there is a price to be paid. Mann states clearly in her interview from the documentary *Blood Ties* that the ethical ramifications of

her work continue to weigh heavily on her when she reflects, “As some of you know I photograph my family, my children in particular. I have seldom shied away from photographing what was before me. As a consequence, many of the pictures are intimate and revelatory. There are many pictures in which my children are nude, or hurt, or sick or angry. The children are participants who have been, since infancy, enveloped in my creative process. We are spinning a story based on fact but embracing the fiction of what it is to grow up. I have until now told it without fear and without shame, but increasingly I am uncertain as to the ultimate consequences of this work.”

Interestingly, this statement is at the same time an admission that this work may be in some way ethically problematic and a defense against the ethical debate. The artist’s intent is clear, her justifications in place, and built into the statement she has already laid the groundwork for defensible position when she insinuates that her children were willing and consenting participants in the creation of these pictures. As Michel Foucault points out when addressing the intersection of law, children and sex in *The Politics of Sexuality*, consent and the age of consent very clearly complicates matters of morality. He states it as such, “It is supposed that they (children) are not capable of talking about themselves, of being sufficiently lucid about themselves. They are unable to express their feelings. Therefore they are not believed. They are thought to be incapable of sexuality and they are not thought to be capable of speaking about it. But, after all, listening to a child, hearing him speak, hearing him explain what his relations actually are with someone, adult or not, provided one listens with enough sympathy, must allow one to establish more or less what degree of violence if any was used or what degree of consent was given. And to suppose that a child is incapable of explaining what happened and incapable of giving his consent are two abuses that are intolerable, quite unacceptable.” (284)

The proverbial elephant in the room when dealing with intimate, familial images of children is child pornography. Sally Mann's work is particularly unnerving because it is photographic. An image presented through the photographic lens, though framed and focused by the human eye, still represents a certificate of authenticity. The lens is the ultimate dispassionate, objective, observer. It does not have any vested interest in subject matter. It simply records what is there before it. The closer one gets to a feeling of "this actually happened",

the more problematic images of nude or injured children seem to become.

Other artists such as Marlene Dumas often depict children in chilling scenarios. However, because these images are further removed from "the real" by way of translation of paint to canvas, the observer is somewhat distanced from the actuality of the conceivable trauma. It is interesting to me



that when I look at Sally Mann's black and white prints from *Immediate Family* there is no internal alarms set off. However, when I look at very similar images of the very same children, only as full-color prints, from her portfolio *Family Color*, I am immediately uncomfortable.

Can images such as these, though born out of love, be ethical? Moreover, are these images ethical in every context? That is to say, these images are personal, intimate and familial. That is what makes them so arresting. Should they be subject to and weighed by different frameworks of ethics based on where they are shown and who is looking? It seems to me that images such as these operate very differently when they are the private collection of a mother as opposed to when they are published, mass produced and shown to the world. As Susan Sontag repeatedly points out in her book *Regarding The Pain of Others*, the same image can be contextualized and re-contextualized, many times over, to suit the needs and tastes of the viewer depending on his or her own desires or politics. It seems to me, however, that given the nature of

the subject matter of *Immediate Family*, the relationship between parent and child, the most suitable ethical filter through which to investigate these images is that of Care Ethics.

Care Ethics represents a relatively new perspective on ethics; however, some experts argue that Care Ethics is nothing more than a rearticulating and updating of the Greek Virtue Ethic model (Held, p.19). Care Ethics has its roots in critiques by Carol Gilligan of Lawrence Kohlberg's conclusions from his studies of patterns of moral maturation of young boys. Kohlberg suggested there were various levels of moral development. The lowest form was a sort of primitive egoism starting from infancy. The highest form of moral development culminated in a supreme Kantian objectivity that is characterized as impartial, impersonal, detached and formally rational.

Gilligan challenged this hierarchy of ethics through a feminist perspective. This perspective considered the dispassionate moral Kantian ideal to bare a distinctly masculine bias. She simply asked, why is the dispassionate observer the supposed ideal? She stated that in her own studies she began to discern "another voice" from that of the impartial ethics of justice. This voice was often heard from women or girls. While Kohlberg interpreted the way in which many, particularly girls, tended to approach problems emphasizing relationships as a sort of arrested-development inhibiting the female subjects from reaching a more impartial, universal plane, Gilligan claimed that girls were not exhibiting a lower-level of ethical reasoning, but an entirely different one. This female model of ethical reasoning de-emphasizes the largely mythical (and flawed) notion of the objective neutral observer and instead insisted that human beings sense of ethics originates and is developed out of close, caring relationships with one another. In place of the old dispassionate model, she recommended a new model that stressed involvement in the situation, with an attitude of care for all involved. As such, the importance of relationships between people in their practical reasoning within the context of each individual circumstance,

with a commitment to dialogue as the primary means of moral deliberation is highlighted rather than the traditional approach of stressing abstract principles (Allmark p. 19) Solutions to problems become flexible are founded on a willingness to compromise and accommodate so that the needs of all *involved* may be met.

The goal in Care Ethics is to care and to be cared for. A caring network of family, friends & neighbors becomes the foundation for an ever-expanding care-network in which the same principles apply to larger social systems. A person learns how to care by being cared for within the microcosm of family and then later applies this acquired care-skill to the world (Held, p. 9)

I often find myself in line with feminist viewpoints and many aspects of the care ethical model are no exception. Here is what I like about the care ethic model. I think Gilligan's questioning of the Kantian ideal is insightful. While I personally feel that my moral/ethical compass generally points pretty true north, I have to acknowledge that I do not make my ethical decisions dispassionately. My caring relationship to those involved always weighs heavily in my decision making process when faced with an ethical conundrum. Furthermore, I tend to think that my own personal drive for an ethical existence is derived from a compassionate sense of empathy as opposed to a rational understanding of or fear of law (social or animal). Also, I think it is wise to take into consideration the full context of each and every individual situation. We operate in real space and time, not an abstract, timeless universe. This for me goes a long way to solving the problem of relativism by simply accepting it.

Where things get dicey with this particular model is within the concept of care itself. There are a lot of ways to care. This model does not seem to discern exactly how to care. Nor does it seem to take into account our capacity to exploit one another. We do not, after all, live in a caring world. It's a really nice notion that we can all be caring, empathetic individuals,

however, that's just not the case. Some lack the skills necessary to care. Caring can often become enabling.

Today I was lying on the couch with my daughter when she turned and looked at me and said, "Dad, get me my sippy-cup." When I blankly stared back at her, she realized her mistake and said, "Please Dad. Its right over there." I looked across the room and saw her cup sitting on the kitchen table. I paused for a moment and then told her maybe she ought to go get it herself. From a care ethic point of view I may have done the wrong thing by not catering to her need for a sippy-cup. However, my reasoning was simple enough. I care enough to teach my child how to care for herself. I wonder sometimes to myself, in a pure care ethic model, would my daughter ever be motivated to wipe her own butt? The point that I'm making is while all caring is good; some caring must be inherently better than other caring. Moreover, some caring even involves in-action as opposed to action. The care ethic model does attempt to resolve this issue by emphasizing caring for needs over interests, but in all, I found the line between need and interest to be vague at best. Ironically I found that discerning the difference between need and interest seemed to require a fairly dispassionate, objective, rational mindset.

This nebulous notion of caring makes the entire model hard for me to really take seriously. The other problem I see with the care ethic model is its looseness of rules. This model leaves room for just about anything to be justifiable within the right context. One simply has to argue I took this action out of caring. Sally Mann took her photographs out of caring. She often justifies the images within the context of feminist rational. When questioned about the many photographs depicting her children's injuries she had this to say, "Women see blood as 'blood ties' as family, while men think of violence. They often don't take into account the width of the abyss when flesh and blood part (Ravenal p. 175). This statement has some truth to it, but when I

see a photograph of Emmett bleeding profusely from the nose I can't help but wonder if the artist cared more for the child or the metaphor his image would come to represent.

I guess in the end it should come as no surprise that an artwork and an ethical model born from the same human compulsion would both produce the same sorts of questions. Sally Mann, in my mind, honors her children as full-fledged human beings by documenting her children with an unflinching eye. Even when her children displayed the sensual foundations of sexuality Mann did not hesitate. Children are sensual beings. However, in honoring them, loving them, caring to depict them as real people, did she at the same time do them some injustice? Did she do the world some injustice by normalizing us to these sorts of depictions? While I think Sally Mann and virtually any writer on care ethics would agree that child pornography is wholly immoral, one has to also take into account that the line between caring, familial images of children can be dangerously close to that of pornography and exploitation. In the end, Sally Mann did take photographs of her children in various states of undress and discomfort. She did publish these photographs and thus opened these images up to possible misuses (does anyone think that a pedophile wouldn't love these images?), and she did make a ton of money doing it. Decency and indecency are not cut and dry. As Michel Foucault puts it when talking about laws aimed at legislating sexual conduct, "But this legislation was characterized by the odd fact that it was never capable of saying exactly what it was punishing. *Attentats* (attacks) were punished; and *attentat* was never defined. *Outrages* (outrageous acts) were punished; nobody ever said what an *outrage* was. The law was intended to defend *pudeur* (decency); nobody ever knew what *pudeur* was. In practice, whenever a legislative intervention into the sphere of sexuality had to be justified, the law on *pudeur* was always invoked. And it may be said that all the legislation on sexuality introduced since the nineteenth century in France is a set of laws on *pudeur*."

In conclusion, I am still left with the same questions as I set forth at the beginning of this paper. While I am certain that abuse can and often does arise out of a caring mindset, I am not exactly certain as to what that abuse is exactly in the case of Sally Mann's photographs. I am uncertain whether or not there is a victim. If there is a victim, I'm not certain if it is the children who were possibly exploited though they were consensual to the process of the making of the imagery, or if rather, it is the public (who is also consensual) who has been further normalized to images that possibly sexualize and brutalize children. In an effort to do justice to the subject matter, has a line of decency been crossed?

My own work, for which I have always thought of as somewhat tamer than that of Sally Mann's work, was itself subject to investigations by social workers recently. It was decided that there was nothing nefarious (or nefarious enough) to bring down the ire of the judicial system. However, I must consider that perhaps I was dangerously close to that line that no one can see. I now question my own ethical behavior. I suppose in ethics there are no easy answers. If the answers were easy, there would be no need to question. The benefit of ethics, if there is one, is not within an answer derived but rather in the compulsion to question itself.

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- Interview conducted with Dr. John Rolph on April 10, 2012. Dr. Rolph is a licensed psychologist who has worked with children in schools and psychiatric hospitals since the 1980's. The information gleaned from Dr. Rolph was helpful in my research but was not directly cited in the paper or presentation.

# Invisible Lines, Fists Full of Love

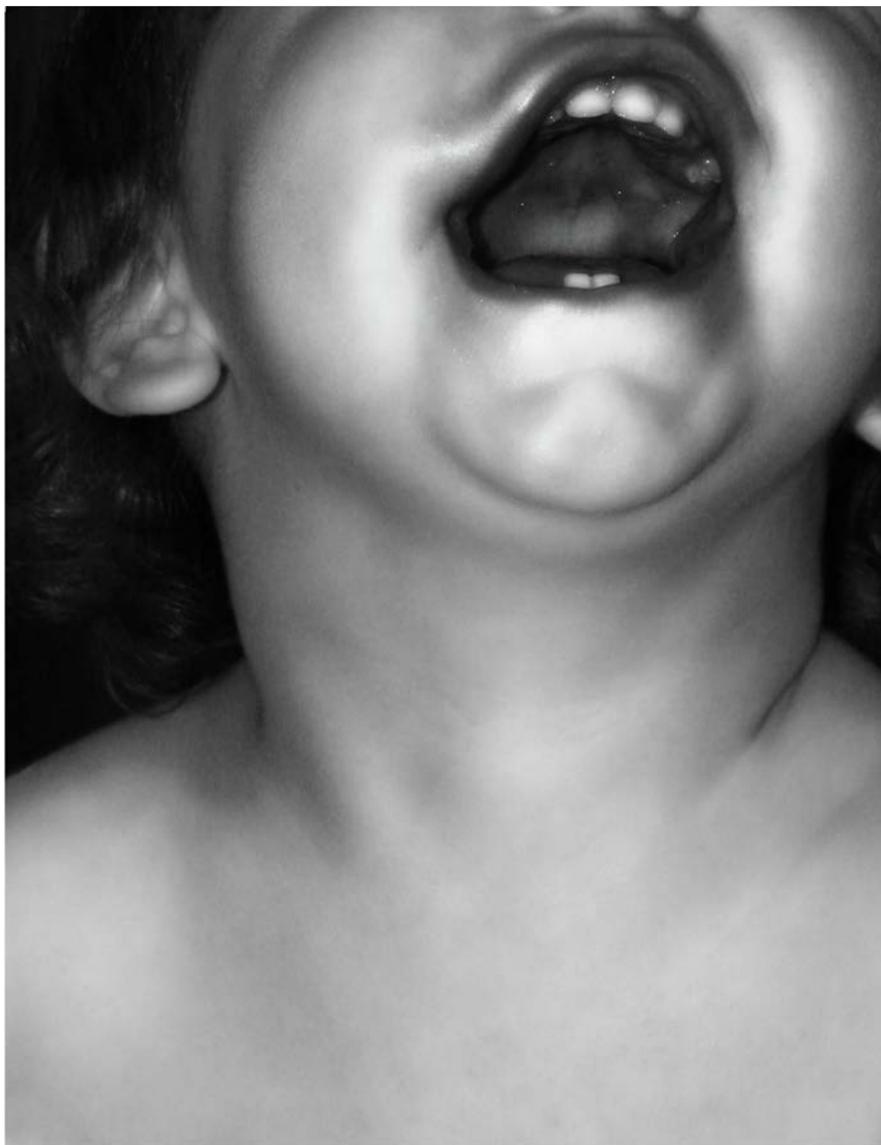
The intersection of my own work, Sally Mann's photographs and Care Ethics

As some of you know, I photograph my family, my children in particular. I have seldom shied away from photographing what was before me. As a consequence, many of the pictures are intimate and revelatory. There are many pictures in which my children are nude, or hurt, or sick or angry. The children are participants who have been, since infancy, enveloped in my creative process. We are spinning a story based on fact but embracing the fiction of what it is to grow up. I have until now told it without shame, but increasingly I am uncertain as to the ultimate consequences of this work.

-Sally Mann























Sunday Funnies, 1991





The Hot Dog, 1989





Virginia at 3, 1988



# Care Ethics







# Care Ethics

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The Last Time Emmett Modeled Nude, 1987







