

NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP

NCAC Decries Art Censorship at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth

January 9, 2024

As an organization defending freedom of speech, thought, and inquiry, the National Coalition Against Censorship condemns the police seizure of artworks from the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth as apparent evidence in a criminal investigation of child abuse. The works in question, by the celebrated American photographer Sally Mann, include images of the artist's own children in the nude. The allegation that these works are child sexual abuse material is not just disingenuous, it is deeply dangerous to the freedom of the millions of Americans who wish to document the growth of their own children without the threat of government prosecution. Furthermore, it assumes the perspective of the pedophile, and degrades the seriousness of real incidents of child abuse.

Among the works reportedly seized by Texas authorities are *The Perfect Tomato* (1990), a black and white photo in which Mann's daughter appears to hold a ballet pose in the nude, arms outstretched, atop a cluttered picnic table. As Mann notes in subsequent writings, the only object in focus is one of a series of tomatoes on the table, at the bottom of the frame. Another work, *Popsicle Drips* (1985) shows the nude frontal torso of Mann's son, smeared with the messy residue of an apparently melted dessert. Shown within the group exhibition at the Modern Art Museum at Fort Worth titled *Diaries of Home*, which explores "multilayered concepts of family, community, and home" through documentary photography, many viewers may find Mann's images familiar and reminiscent of the spirited and unpredictable antics of childhood.

Others, however, are determined to view these images as innately sexual, and punish the artist for their own perverse interpretation of the works. The formal criminal investigation was launched following criticism from government officials in Tarrant County, Texas. Tarrant County Judge Tim O'Hare alluded that the images are "indecent" and constitute a potential criminal violation. It was described as a "radical perversion" by Tarrant County Republican Party Chairman Bo French, while House District 91 State Representative-elect David Lowe likened Mann to a predator. It is especially concerning that the criminal complaint was filed by Judge O'Hare, because government officials have a duty to respect and uphold the First Amendment—which includes robust protection for artistic expression.

It is alarming that the very idea of a mother's photographic documentation of her children, which has neither sexual context nor sexual content, could be considered criminal behavior. Photographs of naked infants and young children are present throughout art history—including contemporary art—and in the photo albums of families across the country and around the

world. Furthermore, Sally Mann is not only a mother; she is an award-winning photographer who has been creating acclaimed work for decades. She has been recognized by institutions including the Guggenheim Fellowship, National Endowment for the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. She was named “America’s Best Photographer” by *Time* magazine in 2001. In 2018, her work was the focus of a solo exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC; and in 2022 she was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Mann’s work, just like that of many artists, may raise questions for some viewers, but any discussion of those questions has now been preempted by disingenuous claims of child sexual abuse and the spectacle of a sensationalized criminal investigation. Such a seizure and investigation can only contribute to the perverse and troubling perception that all images of naked children are inherently sexual, thereby reinforcing the very sexualization of children that critics purport to oppose. In the process, they demean the severity of real child sexual abuse.

The National Coalition Against Censorship calls upon Texas authorities to cease their baseless investigation and return Mann’s work for display at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth.