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The April Gornik Conversations: Photographer Sally Gall



By April Gornik
Guest Columnist
North Haven, Long Island, NY, USA

Sally Gall is a photographer living and working in New York City. She exhibits her work regularly in galleries and her work is included in numerous museum and private collections. She has been awarded several prestigious fellowships, including two MacDowell Colony Fellowships and a Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Residency.

Gall has published two books of photographs, *The Water's Edge* (Umbrage Editions/Chronicle Books, 1995) with an essay on her work by writer James Salter, and *Subterranea*, (Umbrage Editions, 2005) with an essay on her work by two-time U.S. Poet Laureate Mark Strand. *The Water's Edge* is an anthology of photographs whose dominant theme is the interplay of water and not water. In *Subterranea*, she explores the "hidden" landscape of caves and the twilight zone between daylight and darkness.

I was pleased to visit with Sally in New York City for this Conversation.

APRIL GORNIK: Sally, you've been amazing me with your photographs for years now, in fact since 1998. But the most recent work you've done is a whole other thing, a new generation of imagery I feel like I've never seen before. Can you talk about these new photos you'll be showing at Julie Saul this September?



April Gornik

SALLY GALL: Thank you April! The new works are photographs of hanging, drying laundry; of sky, wind, and light, and of looking up into the heavens. These photos literally depict "found" laundry, clothing and bedding, hanging on lines to dry in the sun and wind, crisscrossing overhead from apartment building balconies. The photos reference many natural things: amoebas, sea creatures, blooming flowers, swarming birds, Miro paintings. I am searching for the poetry in the everyday.

APRIL GORNIK: So how do you feel about your older work now? Does it feel like your past, or time passed, or something you've passed by, or does it feel deeply and relevantly a part of your history?

SALLY GALL: While my new work looks like a departure from previous work with its super-saturated color and rectangular format (as opposed to muted color or black + white, and square format), the new photos are still about the issues I am always interested in – the sensuality of the natural world, an exploration of nature and our place within it. So I think of the new work as a continuum of a deep love and appreciation for the natural world and all its sensuality and beauty, energy and force. I happened to have added in a rather prominent human element but it all seems part and parcel of what came before.

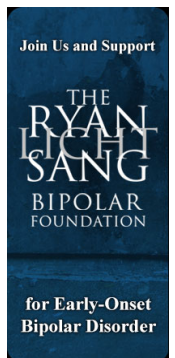


Sally Gall

APRIL GORNIK: How would you describe the notion of abstraction in your work?

SALLY GALL: I photograph something ordinary, for example a pink skirt drying on a clothesline, and transform this quotidian object into something so abstract that you don't quite know what you are looking at. Although it potentially remains semi-recognizably a pink skirt on a clothesline, through my choices of composition and perspective, and what I don't include in the frame (buildings, evidence of whereabouts, context), the pink skirt becomes a blooming flower, a jellyfish floating in the sea, an amoeba through a microscope (to me at least). By using the sky as a painterly field of color (no clouds, no sense of depth) the image becomes disembodied, untethered to its surroundings.

Photography has a great potential for abstraction by what you include within the frame and what you don't include (i.e. any reference, any context) – photography in particular because people tend to believe that what you see in a photograph is real. (OK, I



know, I know, Photoshop has semi-changed all this concept, but not entirely.)

I love abstraction that refers to the real world – and wish to make a play of color and shape and movement that has a life of its own. I am drawn to abstract painters that reference a landscape by just a few strokes of paint on a canvas...and I rise to that challenge in photography.

APRIL GORNIK: Your last bodies of work have also crossed into new territory technically. How are you enjoying working digitally? Do you think it equal to the darkroom work you did?

SALLY GALL: The question of darkroom vs. digital is like any choice of material – a means to an end. Although the technical process of achieving a print is totally different using digital means vs. analog means, it is still a means to the same end. I am still looking through a camera and taking a picture and it is the same picture either way – so the difference is how the print is made/what the print looks like. While the digital process opens some doors (you can do some things in digital printing that were next to impossible to do in analog printing, selectively changing small areas of a print for example), a black and white photograph made of silver halides suspended in a gelatin solution on a piece of paper, i.e., an analog black and white photo, is something uniquely beautiful and tonally rich and there is nothing comparable in a digital print. (Many people will disagree!) The tones in an analog print seem to rise out of the paper, as opposed to laying on the top of the paper in a pigment print. It is such a different animal that I can't compare them. But I am talking about a pigment print with a traditional darkroom print, not a photo shot digitally vs. a photo shot on film. At this moment in time I think analog is good for some things, digital good for others...and I prefer analog for black and white and digital for color. But this may be because I was a black and white photographer for so long and came to color more recently...so it's still newish.

The world is moving away from analog towards digital, so one of these days the materials one needs for the darkroom will not be available. I feel both a lament about this, and a challenge from it. When I was younger I always thought life would stay more or less the same. I did not anticipate technical revolutions (among other revolutions) that would change something so totally.

APRIL GORNIK: I wanted to ask you about scale in your work, too. There's been a huge sea change in terms of our expectations of size in photography, which I think is a legitimate part of its historical trajectory. Of course a lot of this is about technology and simply what's possible, but what are your thoughts about scale in your work and this history of photography?

SALLY GALL: For a long time it was not possible to make large photographs. Enlargers were limited as to how far they could project; light sensitive photo paper wasn't produced in large sizes. Now everything is possible, enlargers are produced for mural printing in the darkroom, big rolls of paper are available for both darkroom and large inkjet/pigment printers, and photographers have taken advantage of this. Additionally, there seems to be an idea in the art world that bigger is better, and photographs are going in the same direction. With current technology photographs can approach the same scale as paintings. In part this is a market trend, a push in the art market to make bigger works, thus bigger prices. For some images of course, a small intimate picture is a jewel unlike any other, be it a photo or a painting. For example, an analog contact print (as opposed to an enlargement) has a quality unlike any other, but contact printing has become a thing of the past as it is deemed "too small."

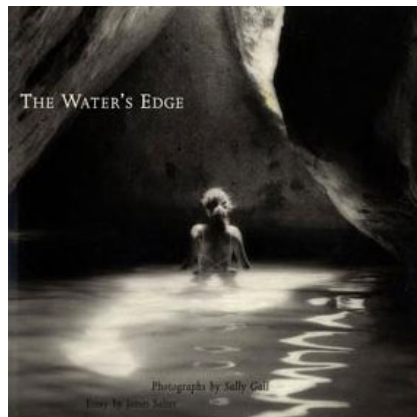
For my new work, the big scale is very important as I wish the viewer to be enveloped by the clothing and the movement. I want the viewer's body to feel immersed and engulfed by light and the color. This affect is not achieved in a smaller photograph. I tried many sizes for this body of work before I ended up with its current print size of 50x33 inches. I'm tempted to go even bigger!

APRIL GORNIK: Do you think photographs have the same "object quality" that paintings do? I ask not because I have a formed opinion, but it's something I think about a lot.

SALLY GALL: Because photographs have a relatively smooth surface, because there is no texture, no visible mark making, photographs have a different kind of object quality than does a painting. I don't think you have to have the three-dimensional painting surface to make an object. But photos are different, no doubt. A painting is particular and a photo is particular, and I admit that often I look at a painting and am envious of the object quality, the handmade marks, the actual three-dimensionality. A photograph is generally a flat piece of paper, a different kind of object altogether.



Tailwind, 2015



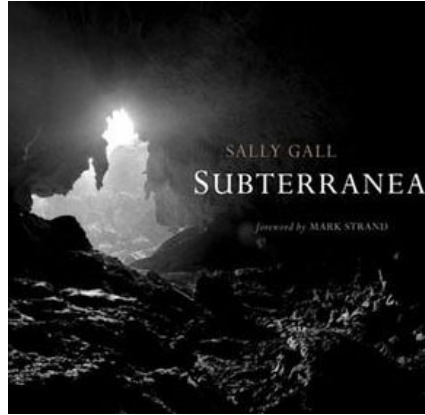
Composition #1, 2015

APRIL GORNIK: Who do you think your most important photographer predecessors are?

SALLY GALL: I can tell you what photographers and artists as I am drawn to but as to whether I am influenced by them or not, I don't know. I was "brought up" so to speak on all the classic landscape and nature photographers and I still so appreciate their work, the grand dramatic vistas, for example, made by landscape photographers of the western U.S. But I tend to be drawn most to photographers such as Minor White who was photographing grand nature but seeking a mystical/transcendental experience that involved his own personal "religious" (his words) journey. His photographs have an intimacy to them that I find compelling and would like to create in my own work. Robert Adams is another favorite photographer who is making a statement about the human encroachment and development of the west while at the same time making very beautiful (and small!) photographs describing it. They seem very "documentary" but in fact, are much more layered and evocative of meaning than simply a recording. I am moved by the work of Richard Misrach, Adam Fuss, Linda Connor, Mark Klett, among others.

APRIL GORNIK: What are some influences on your work that aren't photographic in nature?

SALLY GALL: I love Rothko. I love painters of light. I loved seeing the recent Van Gogh still life show in Philadelphia and I loved the Van Gogh drawing show at the Met. Does Van Gogh influence me? I don't know. He must...but I can't follow it in any orderly way. I tend to crave to look at painting more than any other art form. I don't know what this means as I have never wanted to be a painter. Photography calls me because it takes me out into the real physical world, and enables me interact with it – I like to move through the world and photograph. I like to take a hike with my camera. I would never be happy painting inside in a studio. But perhaps I appreciate painting so much because painters "make it up" as opposed to "finding" things. Like your work! You often use a real situation that you saw (and photographed) but then your imagination enters and you create a psychological painting that may or may not have a lot to do with the original "scene." And you envelope the viewer in a world that is a world of the imagination, though based in reality.



Just yesterday I went to see a Howard Hodgkin's exhibition and I was moved by his big sensual areas of color and brush marks... you can energetically feel the movement of the body that made those marks, and I thought to myself that even though his paintings are totally abstract, they absolutely reference the natural world and that this is what I would like to do. I would like to make photographs that elicit the same reaction I have to Hodgkin's paintings. All about being surrounded by color, movement, nature, energy, seeing. (I've always loved his work - so maybe *he* influenced my new photos.)

APRIL GORNIK: You're a big reader and culture hound as well as an artist. What are some recent books you've read or cultural experiences have you found moving?

SALLY GALL: That's a broad and big question to answer...but I can say that I love to read stories of the world and I love beautiful language. And I am drawn to writers who ascribe to the natural world emotional responses (D.H. Lawrence comes to mind as I have been reading him recently). I don't particularly care about stylists or tricky "contemporary" language, or tricky perspectives in reading – I crave narratives, big complicated stories with character and psychology. I love poetry. I love expressions of the human spirit and writing is particularly poised to capture that.



Red Poppy, 2015

APRIL GORNIK: And do these aspects of your cultural appreciation directly inspire your work?

SALLY GALL: Impossible to say...but I can say that I love living in an urban center, in New York, a rich vibrant nucleus of culture city that offers me endless opportunity to see art...theater...film...hear music...yes, I am a culture hound. I think it all swirls around together...like when I looked up at that overhead laundry hanging on a street in Sicily and thought of a Miro painting that I first saw with my mother when I was about 12 years old in the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. It was like a dream memory that came alive overhead.

Links:

Sally Gall
Julie Saul Gallery

April Gornik

April Gornik is best known for her landscape paintings. Her work is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art and many significant private collections. She has been awarded the Lifetime Achievement in the

Arts Award from Guild Hall Academy of the Arts and the Award of Excellence for Artistic Contributions to the Fight Against AIDS from amfAR.

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