

FROM THE ARCHIVE

The Disturbing Photography of Sally Mann

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At the opening last spring of “Immediate Family,” Sally Mann’s show at the Houk Friedman Gallery in New York, the winsome young subjects of the photographs aroused as much curiosity as the artist herself. Motoring among the spectators like honorees at a testimonial dinner, Mann’s three children — Emmett, 12, Jessie, 10, and Virginia, 7 — looked completely at ease with the crowd’s prying adoration. While her mother and father conversed with friends and admirers, Jessie orbited the four rooms in her red dress, fielding questions from strangers eager to know more about her parents. Beneath a portrait of himself in the water, Emmett shrugged off the stares and expressed a typical teenage frame of mind. “These shoes cost \$70,” he boasted about his opening night footwear. All three seemed unconcerned by the fact that on the surrounding white walls they could be examined, up close, totally nude.

The Mann children have endured scrutiny for some time now. Eight years ago, their mother began to chronicle their growing up — the wet beds, insect bites, nap times, their aspirations toward adulthood and their innocent savagery. And the work that resulted has changed the lives of all involved.

Sally Mann was an accomplished photographer before the series, but in these intimate black-and-white portraits, exhibited piecemeal over the last several years, she struck a vein. The fears and sheltering tenderness that any parent has felt for his or her child were realized with an eidetic clarity. A half-naked androgyne, smeared with dirt and grass stains, looks up from a leaf-strewn yard. Lithe, pale shapes move with prideful ease among thick-torsoed elders. The images seemed to speak of a familiar past that was now distant and irretrievable.

The vein has bled silver. Since the beginning of the year, Houk Friedman has taken orders for more than 300 prints, well over a half-million dollars worth of photographs, and the waiting period for delivery of new prints is at least a year. Probably no photographer in history has enjoyed such a burst of success in the art world. And it will likely continue now that Aperture has published a monograph of “Immediate Family” in conjunction with a traveling museum show, opening on Oct. 29 at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia.

Not all the scrutiny has been welcome or favorable. The nudity of the children has caused problems for many publications, including this one. When The Wall Street Journal ran a photograph of then-4-year-old Virginia, it censored her eyes, breasts and genitals with black bars. Artforum, traditionally the most radical magazine in the New York art world, refused to publish a picture of a nude Jessie swinging on a hay hook. And Mann’s images of childhood injuries — Emmett with a nosebleed, Jessie with a swollen eye — have led some critics to challenge her right to record such scenes of distress. “It May Be Art, but What About the Kids?” said the headline in an angry review in The San Diego Tribune.

Mann has so far been spared the litigation that surrounded the Robert Mapplethorpe shows. And unlike Jock Sturges, whose equipment and photographs of nude prepubescent girls were confiscated by the F.B.I., she has not been pursued by the Government on child pornography charges. But a Federal prosecutor in Roanoke, Va., from whom she sought advice, warned Mann that no fewer than eight pictures she had chosen for the traveling exhibition could subject her to arrest.

Beyond issues of artistic license, Mann's work has raised worrying personal concerns. The shield of motherhood can quickly become a sword when turned against her. If it is her solemn responsibility, as she says, "to protect my children from all harm," has she knowingly put them at risk by releasing these pictures into a world where pedophilia exists? Can young children freely give their consent for controversial portraits, even if — especially if — the artist is their parent? And apart from legal and epistemologic matters, is the work any good? Do these sensual images emerge from the behavior of her subjects or are they shaped by the taste and fantasies of the photographer for an affluent audience? Is it pandering or bravery, her willingness to photograph what other adults have seen but turned away from?

Walking through the rooms of the gallery, you could not help but wonder what Emmett, Jessie and Virginia will think about these photographs and about their mother, if not this fall, then in 5, 10 or 15 years. You can be sure that Sally Mann wonders, too.

The doorbell at the Mann home in Lexington, Va., is a small, black, wrought-iron breast. Visitors announce themselves by pressing a red nipple within the raised areola. Like the red-metal dragons that line the driveway or the 20-by-24-inch blowups of the children in the foyer or the photograph on the living room wall of Sally Mann's father, dead in his bathrobe, the doorbell seems designed to give a start to the uninitiated and to put some comic distance between the occupants and their neighbors. The same attitude of defiance is there in the cover portrait of "Immediate Family." Bare-chested with arms crossed or akimbo, the three little Manns level their gaze at the world.

Children and house both project the sensibilities of Sally Mann herself. A 41-year-old dark-haired beauty whose turned-up nose accentuates a natural hauteur, she is a cool mom. With her brood safely strapped in, she drives a black BMW 735i, very fast, and favors a subdued, asexual preppy look — turtle-necks and T-shirts, cut-off shorts, dirty Reeboks.

Lexington is a genteel town, site of Stonewall Jackson's house, Washington and Lee University and the Virginia Military Institute. Born and raised here, married to the same man for 22 years, Mann is secure enough in her surroundings to take liberties with the mores of a place only 50 miles from the headquarters of the Rev. Jerry Falwell and his Moral Majority.



"The Ditch, 1987" Sally Mann

"I think the South depends on its eccentrics," she says one summer afternoon on the back porch as Jessie and Virginia weave in and out of the house. (Emmett is away at camp.) "It loves them, and it rewards them in lots of ways. This community allows itself to be scandalized by me and by my work, but they love it. What else would they do if it wasn't for me? I take being iconoclastic sort of seriously. It's my role here."

Ex-"dirt hippies" who still grow much of their own food and until a decade and a half ago barely made enough money to pay taxes, Sally and Larry Mann are a tight couple. Both "Immediate Family" and "At Twelve," her portraits of local girls on the cusp of puberty, are dedicated to him. While she has pursued her photography career with singleminded purpose, he has been a blacksmith and a two-term City Councilman; recently, he got a law degree. His office in town is 10 minutes away, and he walks home nearly every day for lunch.

Their house has an airy mood of understated comfort, its three levels overlooking a wisteria arbor and a well-tended vegetable garden in a yard that slopes down to a creek. Rope swings and hammocks hang from ash-leaved maples. The decor includes photographs by Diane Arbus and Emmet Gowin, both important figures for Mann; walls of books; marble torsos of nude women; finches in cages and flying free; the skeletons of lizards and cats. An expansion completed this year provides each child his or her own room; Sally and Larry reside in a connecting wing, which also houses her new darkroom and offices. To meet the demand for her work, she can now afford to hire an assistant.

The slow, wet air of southern Virginia in July and August, when even the trees perspire, serves as a backdrop for Mann's idylls of leisure. "Even though I take pictures of my children, they're still about here," she says. "It exerts a hold on me that I can't define."

Mann photographs only in the summer; the rest of the year is devoted to marathon sessions of printing. "Nothing happens during the other seasons," she says with a shrug. "I suppose I could do a normal domestic picture of the kids doing their homework. But that's not what I do."

The collaboration of the children in their mother's work is apparent to anyone who spends time in their company. They are impish, argumentative participants, not robots. (When a photographer asked them what kind of portrait of their mother should accompany this article, they shouted, "Shoot her naked, shoot her naked." She did.)

"I have no objections, none," says Jessie, questioned in her mother's absence about her feelings toward the photographs. "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." But Jessie, whose heroes include Helen Keller, Martin Luther King Jr. and Madonna, has the body of a little girl and the mind of an art director. Like all the children, she will note places where her mother might photograph her. "I know what my mom likes sometimes, so I point it out to her."

Last spring, Mann decided not to publish "Immediate Family": "I thought the book could wait 10 years, when the kids won't be living in the same bodies. They'll have matured and they'll understand the implications of the pictures. I unilaterally decided." Her fait accompli provoked an uproar from the children. "They were angry I hadn't asked them." Family meetings were held. Emmett and Jessie were sent to a psychologist to make certain they understood the issues. (Virginia was thought to be too young for such an encounter.)

"Sally and Larry asked me to get 'beyond the patter,' to find out how the kids really felt about the pictures," says the psychologist, Daniel Shybunko, who found both children to be "well adjusted and self-assured. They identify with their parents, which they're supposed to do as pre-adolescents. In the course of the interview, we probed beyond that. There was some ambivalence. They certainly recognized the consequences that were negative as well as positive. It's a family that really seems to work. There's a consistency of values and life style and, as a couple, Sally and Larry are really accessible to their kids."

All three children exercised veto power over certain images: Virginia didn't want people to see her urinating; Emmett objected to a pose in which he had socks on his hands. "You know what they're really worried about?" asks Mann incredulously. "They don't want to look like dorks. They don't want to be geeks or dweebs. Nudity doesn't bother them." Her husband, who sits down briefly during his lunch break, seconds her amazement. Emmett, teased by his peers when

his topless picture ran in The Washington Post, defused their jibes by telling them that his mother pays him huge sums of money to model for her. (In fact, she pays them 25 cents a negative.) “I was horrified, but the counselor thought that was great,” says Mann with some indignation. “He should say I’m making great art.”

“Kids don’t care about that,” interjects Jessie reasonably, her arms wrapped around her mother.

“Well, kids today are weird,” insists Mann. “Art ranks way below plucking their eyebrows.” As though reminded of her mission, she begins to play with Jessie’s hair in preparation for an afternoon picture session. “What are we going to do about your hair? How about some braids? You look gorgeous in braids.” Jessie submits her head to the fussing hands with the dreamy air of indifference seen only in born actresses and fashion models.

As she writes in the introduction to “Immediate Family,” Sally Mann inherited the role of provocateur from her father, Robert Munger, a doctor who made house calls in an Aston Martin and delivered hundreds of babies in Lexington. A renowned gardener, with shrubs and trees from around the world, he was also an atheist and an amateur artist whose keen sense of the perverse delighted his two sons and daughter. For a long time he kept a white, snakelike figure on the dining-room table; only slowly did anyone realize it was petrified dog excrement.

It was he who instilled a shameless attitude toward the flesh in his daughter, photographing her nude as a girl — “terrible art pictures,” says Mann with a groan — and posing himself unclothed for a recumbent sculpture that now occupies a shelf in his wife’s den. Mann’s introduction expresses stronger memories for the black woman, Virginia Carter, who oversaw her upbringing than for her own mother. Elizabeth Munger, a dead ringer for her daughter, says, “Sally may look like me, but inside she’s her father’s child.”

This isn’t quite true. “Dad was aloof, a self-contained person,” says Mann’s brother Christopher. “Mom was the flesh-and-blood parent.” In his sister’s aggrandizement of the role of Virginia Carter, he finds a tendency to “mythologize,” to seek “dramatic” connections over more prosaic interpretations. “It doesn’t have much to do with the way the past really was,” he says.

Like her mother, whose ancestors came over on the Mayflower, Mann has an ingrained sense of propriety. The dining-room table is set with cloth napkins inside sterling-silver rings. The children have grown up with high expectations from their parents, who strictly control their television intake. During an argument one afternoon brought on by Jessie’s wish to put ketchup on her fresh trout, Mann forbids the act because “it’s common and I will not have common children.” In her self-mocking voice are overtones of sincerity.

Mann took up photography at the Putney School in Vermont; her motive, she has said in many interviews, was to be alone in the darkroom with her then-boyfriend. She next spent two years at Bennington, where she met Larry, to whom she proposed. After a year in Europe, she finished up her degree in 1974 at Hollins College, summa cum laude, and a year later took a master’s degree there — in writing, not photography. Through her mid-20’s she pursued both paths.

The photographs have kept up a continuing dialogue between Mann’s literary and visual selves. Before the birth of her children, she trained her large-format view camera to bring out the mythic resonances in landscapes. Her prints, which often contrast the paleness of flesh or stone with darker surroundings, hint at shadowy forces that can be sensed but not always seen. She wants to push this quality of ambiguity in her pictures to locate something “richer, softer, lusher” in the woods and fields around her.

Like an essayist collecting quotations, Mann ransacks the history of photography for her imagery. “I’m a shameless borrower,” she says. The influence of Norman Sieff, her photography teacher at Bennington and best known for his sepia-tinted album cover for the Band, can still be felt. At Hollins, she reprinted the glass plates of Michael Miley, Robert E. Lee’s main portrait photographer, and further immersed herself in the technology of the 19th century. A feeling of nostalgia as well as hidden danger has marked Mann’s work for years.

In 1977, she published a book of photographs on the historic architecture of Lexington, but the first images she will call “good” were taken of the new law school at Washington and Lee. Dating from 1975-77 and included in her book “Second Sight,” published in 1982, they reduce the substance of brick and iron to a blur of spooky dimnesses.

Beginning in 1979, she had three children in five years, and time for setting up a camera in the wilderness or on construction sites grew scarce. Her solution to the demands of motherhood, which have eaten away at the schedules of artistic women throughout the ages, was ingenious: with her children as subjects, making art became a kind of child care.

The family portraits began in 1984, when Jessie came home from a neighbor's, her face swollen with gnat bites. Mann put her against a wall, took a dead-on picture and called it "Damaged Child." "That picture made me aware of the potential right under my nose," she says. The next day, with Jessie's face still lumpy, she arranged props around her and took more pictures. From its inception, the family series has played around with these two antagonistic elements: factual documentary and contrived fiction.

For some time, Mann had been photographing young girls in and around Lexington, several of whose parents had been delivered into the world by her father, for the book published in 1988 as "At Twelve." She wanted to catch the tension in their bodies, eyes and gestures as they passed into the confused state when girls become women. The pictures dramatize burgeoning sexuality, while implying the more forbidden topics of incest and child abuse. Mann's laconic captions lend a parental concern, honed with a feminist edge. Some of the poses seem casual; others, carefully directed.

In her pictures of her own family — like "Damaged Child," with its implication of battering, and "Flour Paste," in which Jessie's legs resemble a burn victim's — Mann punches the buttons of her viewers. Upon discovering that she has stage-managed a scene, some people feel cheated, as if their emotions have been trifled with. "I hope you can get past that," she argues. "You learn something about yourself and your own fears. Everyone surely has all those fears that I have for my children."

Mann has been criticized for treating violence with an esthete's dispassion, for bringing out the subtle texture of blood and bruises without offering a clear political statement along the way. The imagery of death fascinates her. A picture of Virginia with a black eye moved her for a long time because "you couldn't tell if she was living or dead. It looked like one of those Victorian post-mortem photographs." In 1987, Emmett was struck by a car and thrown 50 feet. Though he escaped critical injury, Mann saw the real thing as a warning not to pretend again. Still, "Immediate Family" includes a picture from 1989 that may be the most gruesome so far: a nude Virginia seeming to have hanged herself by a rope from a tree.

The class status of her children, who are not poor but appear to be in the photographs, can also seem problematic. Suicide, child abuse and poverty are not fictions. What may be cowboy playtime for her children — pretending to be garroted — is taken away from them when transported to the realm of adult melodrama. By posing Jessie with a candy cigarette and Virginia in Lolita glasses for the picture entitled "The New Mothers," Mann gives them props whose dark associations they can't begin to understand. Rather than preserving their innocence, the photographs seem to accelerate their maturity by relying on the knowingness of the viewer. In the minds of some, her eagerness to handle contaminated material has altered the quality of the work.

"As her photographs have become more controversial, I think they've become more self-conscious," says the photography critic Ingrid Sischy, who remains an admirer of Mann's work. "When she was starting out, it was as though she were seeing her children out of the corner of her eye. As the issue has shifted to her 'right' to take these pictures, the material has seemed less authentic."

Mann plays with threatening fantasies in her tableaux, at the same time that she shows parental realism in her precautionous feelings for her children's well-being. To protect them from teasing, she hopes to keep copies of "Immediate Family" out of Lexington. She has asked bookstores in the area not to sell it and libraries to confine it to rare-book rooms.

Both Manns claim to find no threat to the children from the book. "I don't see any strong adverse effect from the pictures," says Larry Mann. "Really just the opposite. The kids are aware how the pictures are received in the art world and they're proud of them."

Sally Mann swears that if she thought for a moment that the photographs would harm the children, the series would end: “I’m responding with the only vocabulary I have to ordinary and extraordinary situations that I see around me. I have to slap my hands sometimes not to take certain pictures. But the more I look at the life of the children, the more enigmatic and fraught with danger and loss their lives become. That’s what taking any picture is about. At some point, you just weigh the risks.”

At her best, Mann releases long-repressed feelings on the part of the viewer. It doesn’t matter that Virginia is not actually asleep in “The Wet Bed”; the circles of urine that stain the sheet with the permanence of tree rings might have been created by any child. The sets of tooth marks on the arm of the adult in “Jessie Bites” were made by Mann herself, a long time after her daughter’s had faded, but the look of unrepentant anger on Jessie’s war-painted face expresses a very real frustration at an adult arm that both supports and holds her down.

“I don’t remember the things that other people remember from their childhood,” Mann says one day as she drives the children home from a photo session. “Sometimes I think the only memories I have are those that I’ve created around photographs of me as a child. Maybe I’m creating my own life. I distrust any memories I do have. They may be fictions, too.”

Mann photographs almost every day. These sessions often take over an hour as she coaxes her subjects to remain still and change poses on command. Frequently she works from a sketch and tries many variations, in the style of a portrait painter.

Her work embodies several antithetical trends in contemporary photography. By locating her material in the lives of her own family, Mann belongs among the confessional documentarians, like Tina Barney and Larry Sultan. But the construction of her photographs as fiction rather than fact, with a moody narrative linking the images, puts her in a camp with Cindy Sherman and the post-modernists. And finally, the antique look of the prints — the vignetting, shallow depth of field, blurred edges and general languor — connects her to neo-pictorialists like Bruce Weber and the Starns. Like them, she depends as much on evocation as description.

Several of the photographs in “Immediate Family” refer to more famous ones — by Robert Frank (“Tobacco Spit”), Emmet Gowin (“Fallen Child”), Dorothea Lange (“Damaged Child”) and Edward Weston (“Popsicle Drips”). But the spirit of these thefts has little in common with the critical sarcasm of appropriated art. Her “homages” are often done subconsciously and “with great affection.”

Sally Mann is very much an anomaly. Her large-format camera and thorough exploitation of black-and-white printing techniques hark back to 19th-century ideals. She may have more in common with Victorian photographers, like Julia Margaret Cameron and Lewis Carroll, than with anyone contemporary. Her work shoots straight for the heart, sometimes cloyingly so.

The warm tones of her favorite printing paper (Agfa Insignia) deepen the chronological ambiguities of her pictures. She has spent years in the darkroom, learning her craft. Ted Orland, a former assistant to Ansel Adams, rates her “among the half-dozen best printers in the country.” A sponsor of her Guggenheim Fellowship in 1987, he has known Mann for almost 20 years.

“She was one of those people who was headed for greatness if she could only hold her potential long enough,” he says. He has watched her work become increasingly personal, both in subject matter and point of view. Unlike so many young American artists who fell in love with big cameras in the 70’s, reveling in the crisp detail possible with a larger negative, Mann did not become another cool topographer.

“One of the pitfalls of the large-format is that you get caught up in the historical baggage,” Orland says. “Sally managed to take new kinds of photographs with an old piece of equipment.” For years, Sally Mann labored in rural obscurity, worried that her kinds of photographs would never find favor in the art world. Against the hard-edged documentarians of the 70’s and the media-haunted generation of the 80’s, her lush, brooding scenarios looked out of place. Her last solo

show in New York was at the now defunct Marcuse Pfeiffer Gallery, in 1988. But Mann's success in the wake of "At Twelve," and after the exhibition of some of her pictures at the Whitney Museum's 1991 Biennial, has not translated into venues at major institutions for "Immediate Family."

Self-censoring should never have to enter into an artist's or a curator's thinking, according to Edward de Grazia, a professor at Benjamin Cardozo School of Law in New York and the author of "Girls Lean Back Everywhere," a history of efforts to suppress literary and artistic expression in the United States. For a year, he has urged Mann to let him file a case that would challenge the Federal child pornography laws. He has fought in court to protect the works of Henry Miller and William Burroughs against charges of obscenity, and he feels that Mann's photographs deserve the same guarantees under the First Amendment.

"The child pornography laws, especially the Federal laws, are very dangerous for artists like Sally," he says. "She's working under an inchoate threat. Any Federal prosecutor anywhere in the country could bring a case against her in Virginia and not only seize her photos, her equipment, her Rolodexes, but also seize her children for psychiatric and physical examination. No artist should have to live under that kind of a threat."

Laws vary from state to state regarding such issues as exposure of a young girl's breasts in a photograph. But Federal laws, and those of many states, prohibit the "lascivious" exhibition of the genitals of a child under the age of 18. In many instances, a violation of the law can be a serious felony.

During a show of Mann's photographs last year at the Milwaukee Art Museum, the Rev. Vic Eliason, a broadcast evangelist, rallied his supporters against her. "He got the police and the D.A. to come down and investigate the show," she says. "It was scary because he talked about saving my children from me. It fizzled out. But it's the kind of thing that I'm afraid of."

De Grazia says: "What makes Sally such a good case is that right now her work deals squarely with this taboo subject of nude children. There isn't the slightest question that what she's doing is art, so her motives and the artistic value would be unmistakable to the Supreme Court. Her work would highlight the vagueness and overbreadth of the child pornography laws. Isn't work like this entitled to be protected under the First Amendment?"

Mann is understandably reluctant to put herself and her family in the middle of what would certainly be a long and bruising court battle. And she bristles at the word "erotic" when applied to her photographs, preferring the less charged "sensual."

"I don't think of my children, and I don't think anyone else should think of them, with any sexual thoughts," she says. "I think childhood sexuality is an oxymoron."

But the extraordinary care taken in rendering the flesh, including the attention paid to incipient sexual characteristics, is not accidental. By the cropping and "burning in" of detail, Mann presents obsessive — not casual or clinical — examinations of her young children's nakedness. And although she is by no means the first serious photographer to take pictures of children unclothed, the popularity of her work depends to some degree on this trespassed taboo.

"It may be a maternal refusal to face facts," says Mann plaintively when challenged about her fine distinctions. "I only wish that people looked at the pictures the way I do."

As Mann and I sit on the steps of the cabin at the 400-acre farm she owns with her brothers, Jessie and Virginia are splashing in the Maury River below, having stripped as soon we arrived. Most of the photographs in the family series were taken here, deep in the woods, miles from electricity. A flood has recently wrecked the place. With the wind billowing the curtains from the paneless windows behind us, Mann watches her children and talks about her fears for them and for the pictures.

"Their lives have been so fulfilling," she says sadly. "Adults have treated them with respect. They have no idea what's out there in the world. I know what to be afraid of. They don't."

“When I went to that Federal prosecutor, she said: ‘Do you know what you really have to watch for? Someone who sees these pictures and moves to Lexington and ingratiates himself into your family life. They’ll come after Jessie and Virginia because they seem so pliable, so broken in.’

“That seems far-fetched, but if you want to know my worst fear, that’s one of them.”

She remains undecided about whether her own series of pictures will continue when Jessie reaches puberty. “I swore two years ago that because she was beginning to look more like an adult woman, I was going to stop. But it would have been difficult, because she’s always naked out here.”

She knows, too, that all three will soon close her out in developing their young-adult selves, and “that could be scary.” Daniel Shybunko has told her to expect a different opinion about the pictures as they “assert their own autonomy.” That one of them could pen a “Mommie Dearest” has also crossed her mind.

A screaming fight breaks out down by the river over Virginia’s watch, and Mann, hoping the girls will sort it out themselves, tries to continue her train of thought. Her longstanding affection for the books of Nabokov has faced revision in light of her situation. “I just reread ‘Lolita,’ “ she says above the din. “I love him, of course. But I found it pretty difficult to read the second time because of what he did to that girl.”

Soon it becomes clear from the wails that Mann needs to intervene in the dispute. But by the time Jessie comes running up the stairs in tears, shouting “I hate her, Mommy” and disappearing into the woods, the opportunity for peacemaking has slipped away. Our interview falls off into awkward silence.

Ten minutes later, however, tears dried, Jessie is prowling around in the cabin, having spontaneously fashioned a skirt and bolero for herself out of green leaves, like a sprite of nature. Acting quickly to seize the moment, Mann sets up her Toyo on the tripod. Disappearing beneath the photographer’s cloth, her hands protruding as they adjust the knobs that control the accordionlike bellows, she tilts and focuses the image that appears upside down on the screen at the back of the camera. The process takes several long minutes.

Exhausted from playing in the river, Virginia meekly appears in the doorway, wrapped in a towel. Jessie stands on a bed and adjusts her costume, taking visible pleasure that she, and not her sister, has become the center of their mother’s attention. The curtains shroud her as gusts sweep through the cabin. Virginia enters anyway, climbs up in my lap and watches in rapt silence as Mann emerges from behind the camera, takes a light reading, sets the aperture and begins to call out instructions:

“Raise your head. Look out the window. Point your toe. Bend your knee. Put your chin up. Make yourself veerly uncomfortable.” (Laughter all around.) “There we go.”