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The Eighteenth-Century Origins of Sally Mann's "New Child"

Sally Mann's 1992 series, *Immediate Family*, of sixty-five gelatin silver prints captures her three young children—Emmett, Virginia, and Jessie—in various stages of nudity while delighting in the pleasures of childhood games, including roller-skating, swimming, and fishing. Critics have argued that Mann's overtly sexualized depictions of her children transgress the traditional, unsullied representation of youth in art history. The abandonment of proper social norms for the comportment of children in Mann's work parallels similarly transgressive themes explored by other twentieth-century photographers, including Diane Arbus and Nan Goldin. Arbus and Goldin reveal the world of outsiders in their depictions of club goers, transvestites, and prostitutes, typically overlooked by their contemporaries. The lack of social decorum in Mann's work distracts scholars from the foundation of philosophies about children and child rearing rooted in eighteenth-century philosophies put forth in John Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile*. In this paper, I identify the correlation between theories about children posited by Locke and Rousseau to Mann's depiction of children in *Immediate Family*. Aiding this comparison, I explain how Locke and Rousseau's theories instructing parents on child rearing alter the way children are represented in art history. Children depicted prior to the literature of Locke and Rousseau in the seventeenth century from artists including Anthony van Dyck and Peter Paul Rubens contrast Mann's children through their formal posture reminiscent of adults. Images preceding the publication of Locke's and Rousseau's ideas, including eighteenth-century paintings by Thomas Gainsborough and William Hogarth, are comparable to Mann's children by exhibiting blissful moments of life, like the simple chance of a butterfly. Mann's *Immediate Family* should not be criticized for the lack of decorum but instead be interpreted within the context of the "new child" of the eighteenth century established by the writings from Locke and Rousseau.