



# ART REVIEW: Sally Gall Photographs Catch New Worlds in Billows of Cloth

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by Peter Malone

[Sally Gall](#)'s photographs, currently on view at the [Julie Saul Gallery](#) in Chelsea, soar over one of the more intimidating hurdles an artist may confront in today's highly competitive and increasingly interdisciplinary art world.

As a steady trend toward figurative work takes the pressure off the purely abstract painter and the purely conceptual artist—once the core population of the avant-garde—and puts it squarely on the shoulders of picture makers working with recognizable imagery, the task of embracing a subject in an approach that won't deteriorate into gimmickry grows daunting.

For photographers it is a particularly troublesome issue. Cameras are now a basic feature of the ubiquitous smartphone, often used as a replacement for the once ubiquitous pencil. A lot of admittedly interesting work has been produced using these cameras, though perhaps at the expense of those sensibilities that compel artists to remain committed to the fundamentals of photography.

For many who remain committed to these sensibilities and fundamentals, the worst of both worlds now imperils their practice. How in this highly competitive field do photographers—who think and work in synch with the camera's historical methodology—gestate meaning in their pictures without appearing to slide into overly clever solutions, heavy-handed irony or other superficial affectations?

What is so impressive about Gall's work in this exhibition is how it shows her overcoming this challenge while using clearly traditional methods. Gall's idea is simple, so simple that prior to actually seeing the pictures any description of them would likely render them contrived and trifling. Why they succeed is precisely because they are the product of first peering through a lens, not by grasping at a preconceived idea and then trying to follow through.

More impressive still is the fact that Gall's pictures rely on no pre-production staging nor post-production manipulation. In technical terms, her work is the result of travel, awareness and the carefully timed drop of a shutter—old and time-honored techniques.

What you see in the gallery is what a child might see lying on the ground below hanging laundry, which is exactly how her pictures are made. Applying a meticulous sense of composition and a sharp eye for nuance in color, textures and light, Gall manages to freeze fleeting billows of cloth in a manner that can resemble stormy landscapes, flowers, jellyfish, digitized weather maps, ocean waves, encyclopedic arrays of mysterious specimens, abstract paintings, hybrids of figuration and abstraction—the range is extraordinary. And yet viewers can easily shift the perspective back to the

actual laundry by merely refocusing attention on the facts before them.



“Oceania” by Sally Gall, 2015. Pigment print, 26 x 40, 33 x 50 inches, edition of 10. Courtesy of Julie Saul Gallery.

*Tailwind* (2015) creates a tension between the symmetrical trio of lines on the right side of the picture and swells of cloth on the left. The lines (the actual clothes lines) keep the viewer tied to the circumstance of looking up at real objects. Yet the cloth, apparently backlit by the sun directly overhead, deforms through its presented perspective into a landscape spread below rolling clouds. Between the sky and the ground, so to speak, there is the suggestion of a disembodied head with puffed-out cheeks, reminiscent of mythological depictions of the west wind. Oddly enough, such zephyr-like personifications in mythological painting are often accompanied by billowing drapery. Hence Gall’s imagery circumambulates the reality of the shot, while the forms easily lend themselves to fanciful interpretation.



“Tailwind” by Sally Gall, 2015. Pigment print, 26 x 40, 33 x 50 inches, edition of 10. Courtesy of Julie Saul Gallery.

Move to another picture and Gall’s extraordinary ability to repeat this effect begins to demonstrate the fecundity of her vision. *Convergence* (2015) is a sky blue field interrupted by one near-vertical element offset by a diagonal element. The floral implication of each element is unmistakable, as both display greener, earthier tones at the stem and intense reds, blues and lavenders where the blossom would appear. The size and movement of the upper sections open and cluster much like flowers. The lower ends twist and tighten, though more so on the right diagonal than on the left vertical.



“Convergence” by Sally Gall, 2015. Pigment print, 26 x 40, 33 x 50 inches, edition of 10. Courtesy of Julie Saul Gallery.

As with *Tailwind*, the viewer is never too far from a quick adjustment back to the mundane reality of

dresses hanging in someone's backyard. *Convergence* also suggests the expansive compositions of painter [Morris Louis](#), with their opposing diagonal intrusions into virgin canvas. Perhaps wary of the connection, Gall has shrewdly moved to frame the shot so as to minimize the symmetry—showing the artist's awareness of potential readings—and adjusted the image with a subtle touch to allow the greatest range of possible readings.

In creating this series, Gall could not rely only on her eye. Months of travel were essential. She travels a great deal and takes her time doing so. These pictures are the product of more than a year spent in Cuba, Croatia and Italy, all likely places where laundry may be found drying by old school methods. We have learned from the long history of traveling photographers that it takes such lengths of time to complete the mass of work necessary to cull a highly selective group of exceptional shots. Digital photography makes this aspect much less expensive and thus far more available for increasingly esoteric use.

In that sense, Gall's work represents an advancement of the genre's digital model. But more importantly, in the magic they produce, and by their bearing witness to the simple beauty that often thrives in humble surroundings, these images are a metaphor for our connection to nature, for the ordinary sources of extraordinary art, and for the natural optimism of childhood.



"Blooms" by Sally Gall, 2015. Pigment print, 26 x 40, 33 x 50 inches, edition of 10.  
Courtesy of Julie Saul Gallery.

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**BASIC FACTS:** "Sally Gall: Aerial" is on view September 8 to October 22, 2016 at Julie Saul Gallery, 535 West 22nd Street, New York, NY 10011. [www.saulgallery.com](http://www.saulgallery.com)

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