

SALLY GALL

looking up

STEVE MILLER: *I saw your show Aerial and it blew me away. No one would guess that it's laundry. Without any context for the series, a number of people guess sea creatures first. Was that an intentional enigma?*

SALLY GALL: When I started making this body of work, I thought of the clothing as being otherworldly and animalistic, and very much like creatures in the ocean (the ocean being the blue canvas of sky). When I showed some of this new work to people they responded with "what am I looking at?" which was very surprising to me. While I was shooting I kept thinking of abstract painters such as Joan Miro and his "creatures". I was aware that I was transforming the clothing I was photographing into something other than itself and it was the act of transformation that was compelling, not necessarily the references.

STEVE: *I think part of the enigma is the lack of scale and uncertainty.*

SALLY: When I started the series, I was making photographs that were much more literal than abstract as I included architecture, pieces of buildings and balconies . . . and clothespins . . . but as I kept photographing I started eliminating context. I wanted to make the photos more disembodied. It made photographing difficult because I had to find subject matter that met my criteria perfectly – clothing not hanging too close to a building for example. (I was mainly photographing in alleyways and narrow streets of the historic centers of small towns in southern Italy and Sicily). I photograph what I see and I compose in the field, so these are all real found situations.

STEVE: *That's interesting. It answers a lot of questions about that lack of scale and specificity. You don't know where you are and I think that's part of the enigmatic, mysterious and successful quality of the work.*

Portrait by Nina Subin.





Above: Sally Gall, *Efflorescence*, 2013; Following Spread: *Squall*, 2014.

SALLY: The body of work morphed from realism into total abstraction . It started as a literal description of the laundry itself with an interest in exploring the humanity on view, the bits of buildings, and the sense of “who wore those jeans”? “Did the guy live in that building”? “Whose nightgown is that”? “Who is the party girl” etc. But then I started moving into abstraction and began referencing, as you said, sea creatures, flowers, botanicals. One viewer said about one of the photos that has a number of different woolen objects (scarves, hats) hanging on a line, “It looks like the animals in the zoo are fighting with each other.”

STEVE: *Most of your work is black and white, so to see this color was like looking at a different artist.*

SALLY: I shot in black and white at the beginning, and I realized it wasn’t working. I love black and white photography more than anything, but this body of work is about brilliant color; eye candy. The work is all about bright sun , luminosity, and saturated color.

STEVE: *The way you use black and white in your earlier work is as an intentional tool to bring it towards abstraction, to take it away from the reality factor. And now you’ve achieved the same effect in color.*

SALLY: Thanks for saying that, I don’t know if I ever thought about it like that but yes, you’re right. When I shot in black and white, they looked too realistic even, which is ironic as black and white is inherently abstract.

STEVE: *The color pushes it towards the abstraction you were trying to achieve with black and white! When I saw the show, I immediately thought of your book, The Water’s Edge, because this work easily slides between edges. The edges of painterly abstraction, a score of musical notes, the viewer’s emotional projection onto a Rorschach blot because we all name it the thing that we think it is based on our experience, the representation of the deep sea and the space of billowing clouds. In your mind, are any of these descriptions more accurate than another?*

SALLY: You’re my perfect viewer! I was thinking particularly of the sea. I’m looking up rather than down, and I thought of the vast expansive of blue as a sky or as the sea. I thought of the imagery as sea life in the deep blue sea or celestial objects in the heavens.

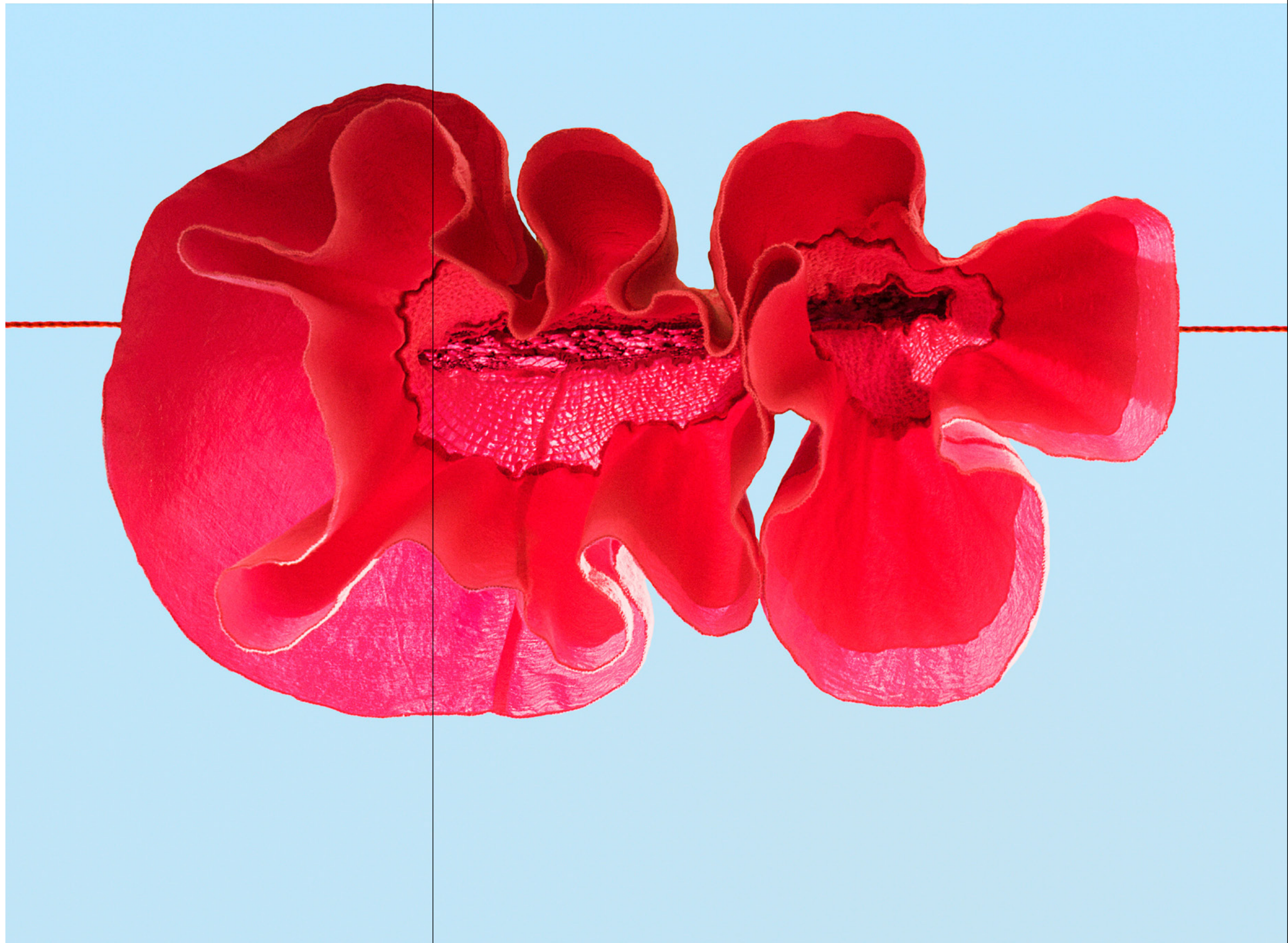
STEVE: *In your earlier work, you’re always traveling, going to unexplored territory ending up in a place that you knew was unexpected or unexplored. Is that relevant to this work?*



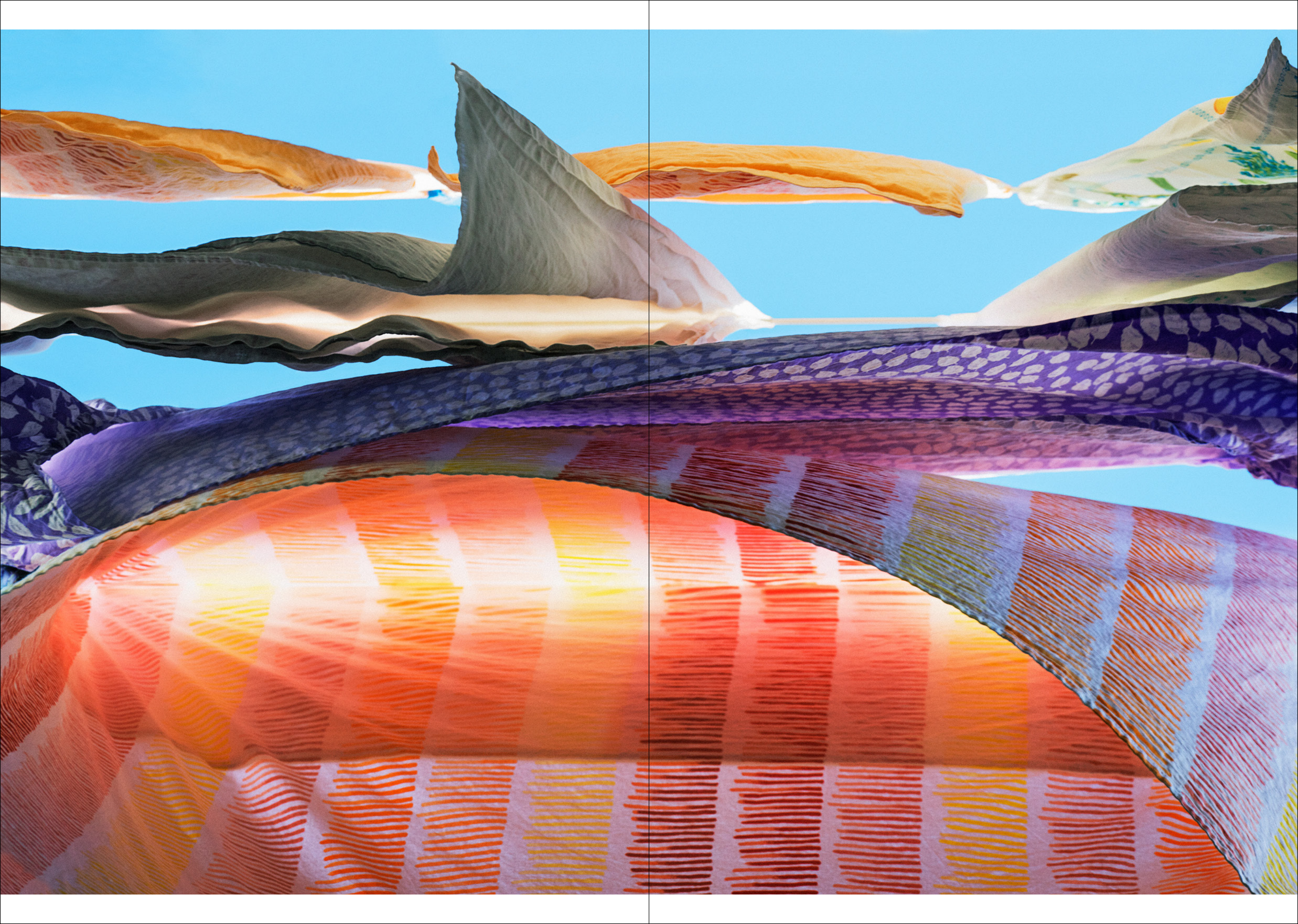
SALLY: Totally. One hundred percent. We have a bungalow in Italy where we've been spending summers for a while now and every year we try and go on an Italian adventure somewhere we have not been. My husband wanted to go to Sicily, so we decided to do a three-week journey driving around the entire Island. I didn't have a notion of photographing anything specific; it was a cultural trip. One day we were in Syracuse, sightseeing in the old town. It was a beautiful afternoon and I wandered around with my camera just looking. I was walking through the super narrow streets, and as I'm admiring the ornate architecture around me, I keep seeing all this flapping color overhead. Without really focusing on it, I kept thinking, what is all that colorful movement? I had a point and shoot camera so I took some very casual pictures, and continued my way. When I came back to New York and looked at those pictures, I thought, "what is that?" And I liked it so much that I kept talking to my husband about it and he said, "Maybe you ought just to go right back there, literally get on a plane and go back to Syracuse". So I did. I shot the initiating "snapshots" when we were in Sicily in September and in February I went back to Sicily for two weeks, to the same exact location where I'd taken those first pictures, and thus the project began. I didn't plan this body of work ahead of time at all. If I hadn't taken a walk on that afternoon, on that particular day, I never would have done this project. I only realized in going back and trying to reshoot it, that the day on which I made those first "snapshots", I had the perfect conditions, a stiff wind and an incredibly blue sky on a massively bright day. If I hadn't had that particular weather on that particular day, I would have never made those few snapshots, thus I would have never made this body of work. (And so began my frustration of trying to replicate that day which was very hard to do since I can't plan the weather! Nor can I plan when people hang their clothing out to dry, particularly their "interesting" clothing). *Aerial* started by the fortuitous accidental seeing of something compelling – as opposed to having a concept or idea ahead of time . . . and being able to take a journey with the seeing.

STEVE: *How does serendipity play into your process?*

SALLY: What I love about photography is the act of discovery and with interacting with the physical world. I like wandering around looking and discovering. I could never be a painter in a studio, as much as I love painting. And I could never work like so many photographers work today on conceptual projects that are created with Photoshop, manipulating images or using existing imagery.



Above: Sally Gall, *Red Poppy*, 2014; Following Spread: *Composition #1*, 2014.





Above: Sally Mann, *Squall*, 2014. Following Spread: *Oceania*, 2014.

I like to be out in the physical world. So this body of work is a perfect example of what I like about photography; and yes, it is all about serendipity.

STEVE: *How many images does it take to make a show?*

SALLY: That's a good question. In this particular body of work, I made a huge amount of photographs because I started very literally and worked through to abstraction, thus abandoning many pictures along the way.

STEVE: *What are the chances of getting the conditions that you just described? That seems impossible.*

SALLY: It was. When I went back in February, I went for two weeks and at least half the days there was no wind, so I couldn't do anything. And for the other few days that I had wind, I had cloudy skies and it didn't work. So I had two days out of fourteen that I really shot.

STEVE: *So the two days that were your good days, did you get a lot of images those days?*

SALLY: Only a handful!

STEVE: *Fourteen days to get a handful of images. Sitting there, you must be in your process.*

SALLY: I'm totally in my process, it is all about heightened looking. I went back again to Syracuse and Sicily several times over a 2 year period but I also made a few pictures in Cuba. Last spring we wanted to go someplace warm where we had never been before and I thought, I'd love to take a few more laundry pictures wherever I go.

STEVE: *How were the clothes in Cuba?*

SALLY: They were surprisingly tattered unfortunately . . . There are a couple of photos in the show which I shot in Cuba, including one of a perfectly white frilly young girl's communion dress that looks like it's ascending to the heavens.

STEVE: *Your work has a strong connection to nature. This body of work is compelling because of its simplicity and your ability to trap nature in a new way; you physically and metaphorically capture the wind in a series of clouds appearing as laundry. Only now nature has been re-colored by cloth and a humble subject becomes a profound expression, especially because you are holding a moment as you described. Are these the connections for you?*

SALLY: I love what you just said. Somebody asked me,



"You always photograph nature, and now you're photographing clothing, what happened?", and that's actually not true! These photos are about light and wind and sky; an article of clothing becomes part of nature. I love to look at the sky and whatever is in it (clouds, contrails). I like to look up. It's a different perspective, who looks up?

STEVE: *In your book, Subterranea, I really like something that Mark Strand says. This is very interesting in terms of your new work because this is about being underground and this new work is about being in the sky. He says, "What is beneath or within? What we think of the dark or the hidden? The other life, the one that we know exists, but with rare exceptions ever see, becomes in Sally Mann's photographs if not entirely known, then at least familiar." I like this quote in terms of your newer work and think it's relevant because we are looking up women's dresses and there's a fascination with wondering what's underneath all of that, especially as a kid, wondering what's hidden there. And now it's in full bloom and fully revealed in a very metaphorical and beautiful way. How are looking up at the sky, looking up at the surface water, looking up a woman's dress, all related?*

SALLY: Yes, there is something comic about looking up somebody's skirt. It's something mysterious, something you don't always see but there it is in plain sight in my hanging skirts. The *New Yorker* (Vince Aletti) published a small text on the exhibition and titled it "The Sly Eroticism of Laundry on the Line". I love that title! I love the idea of sly eroticism. My 22-year-old niece told me she felt like she was a kid in a "blanket fort". I thought that was such a great response. It took me back to my childhood, putting sheets/blankets over a table and crawling underneath and hiding, hiding within masses of fabric.

STEVE: *That's what really makes the work successful to me because it operates on all these levels without being specific. The emptiness of the work is what makes it your most full. Is there anything else?*

SALLY: I'm a photographer of the real world. Usually I choose to photograph the sensuality of the natural world, particularly places of solitude in nature. I like to go hiking in the mountains and the desert. I like the meditative qualities of the ocean. So making this body of work was very different because I was going into towns and seeking humanity. I love making images that are both dynamic and contemplative, that allow the viewer to be taken to other places.



Sally Mann, *Convergence*, 2014.