

THIS IS NOT A FASHION PHOTO

Alec Soth Reports

by Vince Aletti

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Alec Soth's Photography Is Unexpectedly Stylish



"Brian, Williston, North Dakota" 2012. Photo by Alec Soth.



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As with many of his previous projects, Alec Soth's latest body of work involved taking his camera out on the road. The pictures in "Songbook," his exhibition at Sean Kelly and the excellent Mack book that accompanies and expands upon it, were made in Florida, Texas, Colorado, California, and other states where he could imagine himself a photographer on assignment for a small-town newspaper. (Several editions of his own LBM Dispatch, a collaboration with the writer Brad Zeller, were self-published between 2012 and 2014 and are included at Kelly in vitrines.) In search of community and off-line, human connection, he photographed at proms, beauty contests, and home games, making black-and-white pictures so deadpan they might have been found in the files of local dailies. But Soth isn't just tweaking vernacular conventions, he's tapping into the history of American photography at its most engaged and artful, from Dorothea Lange to Joel Sternfeld. Though hardly an objective reporter, Soth maintains a matter-of-fact stance that keeps him at a critical distance from the people and places in his pictures, and his brief captions don't attempt to explain them. Many of his most intriguing images are odd and enigmatic, but the one I've chosen is fairly straightforward. Brian, seated on an oil drum in Williston, North Dakota, first appeared on the cover of an issue of the New York Times Magazine, introducing an article on the booming oil industry. His clothing, his boots, and his face are soaked or spattered with oil, but he appears nonchalant, even jaunty, and that Kangol-like helmet gives him an old-school B-boy attitude. Workwear has always inspired designers, and there's something about the way he wears it that suggests how elegant utilitarian outfits can be on the right guy.

Songbook is on view at Sean Kelly Gallery, 475 Tenth Avenue, at 36th Street, through March 14.