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This photographer set out to document U.S. divisiveness but ended up finding connectedness

Kenneth Dickerman : 5-6 minutes : 2/21/2022

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'Niagara Falls, Ontario', from "A Pound of Pictures" (MACK, 2022). (Alec Soth)

Why create art? Why make photographs? There are many answers to those questions, but one seems to be universal: to share our visions with our fellow human beings. I've said it before and I'll say it again, I have always been attracted to artwork — music, film, literature — that helps situate me in the universe. It feels like this is at least one of the motivations for many artists, including photographer Alec Soth.

Soth's latest book, "[A Pound of Pictures](#)" (MACK, 2022), is a great example of the above. Soth has always been an introspective guy who freely gifts us with his observations — both in his books of photographs as well as his various social media presences, including his latest video offerings on his YouTube [channel](#).

Following along with Soth as his photographic journey has unfolded over the years is not unlike keeping in touch with a friend who is excited to let you in on their latest discovery. Sometimes the discoveries have a dark edge — when he ponders isolation in “[Broken Manual](#)” or in the ruminations on love and relationships undergirding “[Niagara](#)” — others lighter, if no less introspective, such as “[Dog Days, Bogota](#)” (which he made on a trip he and his wife took to adopt their daughter) and more recently “[I Know How Furiously Your Heart is Beating](#).”

Dark or light, serious or fun, Soth is always looking for connections, searching his (and by extension our) place in the universe. And he’s still at it in “A Pound of Pictures.” This time, he takes us along a meandering journey across the United States. As he does this, Soth also meditates on the very nature of the act of photography itself.

Soth says the initial impetus for the work in “A Pound of Pictures” was an idea that he had to follow the route of Abraham Lincoln’s funeral train from Washington to the president’s hometown, Springfield, Ill. He wanted to do that as a way to, as he says in the afterword to the book, “mourn the divisiveness of America.”

That would have been a fascinating story, but the concept just didn’t gel for Soth. So he switched gears, continuing to travel but this time in a less structured way. Whereas his first idea took inspiration from Walt Whitman’s elegy for Lincoln in “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” the new project was refocused on Whitman’s exultation from “Song of the Open Road”:

“From this hour I ordain myself loos’d of limits and imaginary lines,

Going where I list [...]

Out of the dark confinement! out from behind the screen!”

I particularly like the following lines in the book’s afterward, because I think they are a particularly succinct description of what you’ve just experienced while thumbing through its pages:

“My process is like web-surfing in the real world. The goal is to be carried by a wave of curiosity and free association. Visiting a market in upstate New York, I see a jar of honey. Later that day I find myself thinking about beekeeper boxes. Are they painted certain colors to attract the bees? Is the dark interior similar to the chamber of my large format camera? Before I know it a beekeeper is guiding me by tractor to his magnificent backwoods brood.”

Soth meanders around the United States in a freewheeling way, going where the winds take him. As he does this, he encounters so much that is eye-opening or, at the very least, provokes questions to think about. Whether truth exists in a constant form is an ageless question. Maybe it’s always shifting, like blades of grass swept this way or that, depending on the direction of the wind. And maybe being open to drifting and changing course, like

Soth does in the pages of “A Pound of Pictures,” is an effective way of trying to grasp its elusive nature.

One of the things that brings me great joy in writing about photographic works for In Sight is those instances when I feel like I can bring books or projects to a wide swath of people and think there is something to be gleaned for everyone. I think “A Pound of Pictures” fits into that pretty well. Whether you are an astute photo enthusiast (there are many “Easter eggs” throughout the book, references to photographers like Stephen Shore, William Eggleston and other abound) or just interested in photography in general, I don’t think you’ll be disappointed by this work.

You can buy the book, [here](#). And you can see more of Soth’s work on his website, [here](#).

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