

# Alec Soth Returns to Share His Spiritual Reawakening with Us

The renowned photographer explores unexpected happiness in a new show, "I Know How Furiously Your Heart Is Beating"

By **Erik Tormoen** - March 20, 2019



"Kenji, New Orleans," 2018

By Alec Soth/Courtesy Weinstein Hammons Gallery

**Internationally acclaimed photographer Alec Soth** is known for snapping portraits of certain melancholy. Of gloom. Of the sweet, unsensational, sad tenacity of living. You might sense some of that, but there's also joyous rebirth in [I Know How Furiously Your Heart Is Beating](#), his new show at the [Weinstein Hammons Gallery](#) in south Minneapolis.

Portraits are sunny. Rooms gracefully composed. They're huge, vivid images of real people, in languid states, in their actual homes. Peripheral details betray their identities, stockpiled or fastidiously curated—although there's nothing sinister about that; it's more spiritual than anthropological.

If you know Soth, the half-naked intimacy he forms with his subjects will make these photos feel on par with the rest of his work. Yet something's different. The native Minneapolis resident had a life-changing moment a couple years ago, after meditating in Helsinki.

He's been putting that epiphany into words for everyone from Minnesota Public Radio to *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*. It was the kind of experience that awakens love for everyone you pass on the street. He's not precious about it; he calls it "a big woo-woo moment." But after it happened, he stopped taking photos for a year—or, at least, only inside an old farmhouse close to home, with no intention of showing anyone his happiness-fueled compositions of light and dust.

We don't compensate reclusive creatives well, unfortunately. So, Soth returned to work—stepping back into his role as the photographer who documents the abstractly human, the "unphotographable," by posing unlikely or underseen people he meets around the world, on their wedding day, on Ash Wednesday, on a fussy family sofa, slumped in bars, entangled in newborns, typically on the fringes, sometimes evoking Edward Hopper Americana, and strikingly weirder, sharper than the commercially brightened faces we're used to seeing. Except now, as Soth told his partnering galleries, he was changed.

*I Know How Furiously Your Heart Is Beating* also shows in New York, San Francisco, and Berlin. And it's a book. But it's worth stopping in at Weinstein Hammons to stand before the richer-than-life vignettes from California, Texas, Minnesota, Louisiana, Ohio.

Granted, Soth himself doesn't sound wholly convinced his new stuff is different enough to visualize his inner shift. As before, you can nearly drown in the minutiae. Textures of skin and clothing rise to the surface, thanks to his old Ansel Adams camera—a device built to render the pits and expanses of America's most godforsaken landscapes. But, like the natural light he chose to work with here, a strange rapture does break through.



"Anna, Kentfield, California," 2017

By Alec Soth/Courtesy Weinstein Hammons Gallery

Take one example. It attracted clusters during the show's buzzy reception on March 15. That's possibly because it fits the formula that has earned Soth so much praise over 10-plus years. He has photographed through window panes before, and he uses this technique again to shoot Anna, a retired dancer in her 90s. She rests her limbs in a sun-kissed chair, in her California home. Reflections float over her—ghostly reflections of a tree, it appears, in her backyard. Her gaze is calm. She's wise to the camera. Leafy vines have grown down the wood-paneled wall behind her, along a stone fireplace that's been left to dim hibernation. Her rumpled, seafoam kimono, the wooden chest hiding nearby, even the broom leaning against a wall—everything conveys a life long-lived. Yet it doesn't define Anna. Her gaze communicates the unpredictable, ongoing self.

Even across the gulf of air, tossing between her and the camera—through the intervening fuzz that washes over a chair and condenses against the window—her gaze connects. Said another way: The pink, foregrounded flower that Soth has blurred into an impressionistic smudge tells us a little about her, but it's her eyes that maintain control.

The gaze, the repose, the odd clothes. They're all hallmarks of Soth's work since 2004's *Sleeping by the Mississippi*.



This time, though, he says he's using "just a little more light and air." It's "less manipulative," "quieter." He yielded some authority over poses. His melancholy is softer, closer to the nostalgic soul of that tree hovering beside Anna. He asked himself, according to *The New York Times*, "Do I want to put sad, mokey pictures out into the world right now?"

After all, his Helsinki moment was anything but mokey. It conjured "this sudden realization that everything in the universe was connected." These new photos, paradoxically, suggest we can see that interconnectedness in distances—between objects, and even between parts of the body. Soth's extra attention to light and air works in neat double fashion here: It highlights the depths of space while wrapping everything in the same less-than-palpable fabric.



"Cammy's View," Salt Lake City, 2018

By Alec Soth/Courtesy Weinstein Hammons Gallery

Take another example: a mid-range portrait, where focus fluctuates across the body of a middle-aged Cincinnati woman named Nancy. Her paisley blouse fades. Her thumb appears to be dissolving. Her right eye is grainier than her clearly focused left eye—concentrating our empathy into one focal point. Isolating her left eye, in other words, from her indigo shirt, her rainbow bed sheets, her black cat, even her facial symmetry. (It's as if the double-slit theory of physics applies to her gaze, too—filtering her self more potently through one eye than two.)

Surrounding details make up, but never pin down, who we are. There are wide gaps. There is light, and air.

Sometimes, the absence of any body hints at this unphotographable essence underneath the raiment of stuff. Pages of music, notating Prince's "Little Red Corvette," sing alone atop a piano in Minneapolis. In Salt Lake City, there's a windowsill saddled with religious tomes, where a loose parakeet looks out at the trees.

The feeling of the work matched the day of the reception: a mild spring, a bit overcast, opening its eyes, and soft, with just a wisp separating the indoors from the outdoors, and plenty of gentle light.

Weinstein Hammons Gallery  
908 W. 46th St., Minneapolis

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