



PHOTOS

## Alec Soth's New Book Captures the 'Beautiful Mystery of Other Human Beings'

**A spiritual experience in Helsinki inspired the artist to take a year off from photography and rethink his method, his return to the format takes on a refreshingly simplistic approach.**

By **ELLIS JONES**; photos by **Alec Soth** | 13 March 2019, 4:00am

Alec Soth, 'Nick. Los Angeles.' from *I Know How Furiously Your Heart Is Beating* (2019). Courtesy of the artist and MACK.

**Alec Soth** doesn't require much of an introduction these days, but here is a very, very short one: he's an award-winning Magnum photographer with a long list of successful exhibitions and book releases under his belt. With his latest book, *I Know How Furiously Your Heart Is Beating*, fans of his work will see, as he explained to me by phone recently, a "stripping away of 'look how fancy I am'" in favour of a more simplistic approach and focus: portraits of people and interior spaces.

I caught up with him to chat about his upcoming book, documenting intense encounters with strangers and the spiritual experience that influenced his work – and also caused him to question if he still wanted to be a photographer.

**VICE: First off, how would you describe your new book?**

**Alec Soth:** The problem with describing the new book is that I can very easily describe it – and you might be bored. It's happened to me where friends have said, "Oh what's your new book about?" And I have to say, "Well, it's portraits made in interior spaces, or it's interior spaces." And that doesn't get one fired up to see the work, but that's in fact what it is. I really wanted to sort of simplify things, to make very straightforward pictures in the way that I did when I first started photography and had this kind of purity of an encounter, particularly a portraiture encounter, so I was photographing people in their homes and domestic spaces, but then sometimes I felt free to photograph the space itself as well.

**I would imagine that when you get to your level as a photographer, it might be difficult to let yourself do that – to just make portraits and nice interiors. To let yourself just be with people... That, perhaps, that kind of straightforward work isn't OK to do now.**

Yeah, though I would say that a person who has no reputation who's trying to make their way in the photography world wouldn't want to do work like this because they'd be afraid that they'd be ignored. So it's an all-around problem of the commercialisation of photography as well. Everyone's trying to plant their stake in the ground. If this were the world of poetry that we were talking about – where no one makes any money, and there's less galleries and art fairs and that kind of stuff happening around it – you can write your poem about the snowy field and it's OK. You know, there have been a lot of snowy field poems.



Alec Soth, 'Yuko. Berlin.' from *I Know How Furiously Your Heart is Beating* (2019). Courtesy of the artist and MACK.

**In the book you talk about how you rethought your creative process when it comes to photography, that you stopped taking photos, that you stopped travelling for more than a year. What brought that period of reflection on?**

It sounds like this was planned out, but nothing was planned out. It wasn't like I said to myself, *I'm gonna take a year off photography because I'm frustrated* or what have you. I had a very positive experience – a kind of eye-opening, quasi-spiritual experience that sort of changed the way I saw the world and my photographs. I felt like, I don't want to participate in the world of commercialising pictures of people. I just wanted to stay out of that game. And I wanted to stop travelling. I didn't want to work for magazines. I was just happy being at home doing my own thing. After a year of that, I thought, *I can't do this forever. I either need to live in a monastery or participate in the world again*. And this book represents my way of participating in the world and photographing people and interacting, but trying to do so with a slightly different approach – a slightly softer approach.

**Did you know from that moment that you were going to start making a new set of work and it was going to become a book?**

I had that spiritual experience and I thought, *Do I want to be a photographer anymore?* There's a part of me that sees photography as a way of separating

for a period of time. And then I got asked to do a kind of experimental project in San Francisco by my gallery. It was really wide open. I had these encounters with dancers and other people in San Francisco, and I said OK, I'm ready to start playing around with this again, but the plan was to just make photographs and to just enjoy that process and to not turn it into some big project. Then I was halfway through making this work, and all the old instincts kicked in and I started turning it into something more. But it's not like previous work – it's less narrative driven, it's not located in one geographical location, it's much looser. It functions much more like a book of poems than it does a book about a place.



Alec Soth, 'Ute's Books. Odessa.' from *I Know How Furiously Your Heart is Beating* (2019). Courtesy of the artist and MACK.

**In the book, there was one portrait that really caught my attention: the older man, shirtless, sitting on the couch. How do you come across the people that you decide to shoot?**

They're almost all strangers. I didn't really pick the locations in terms of the geographical areas, I would just get invited somewhere. I'd find someone who could help me find people in advance of going there, then I'd explain what I'm looking for – which is very hard to explain, because it's mostly just an

In this particular case – the man that you're referring to – I connected with this woman who sets up dance parties in old folks' homes, like in their apartments. So I went to this one house, the friend of that guy on the couch, and he was there and he was just a really delightful character. He was dancing and showing me his tattoos, and that's how that transpired.

**When you're shooting these portraits, is it more of a fly on the wall situation?**

Oh my god, no. I'm using this large format camera. It's kind of cumbersome and it's very, very present. And usually the rooms are small. For me – and portraiture has always been this way – it's about the person, yes, but also this encounter. The energy that exists between us and in the room and the light dancing around the room and all those factors. It's the fleeting beauty of this intense encounter that's somewhat sustained for an hour or a couple of hours...

**If I were a photographer and doing these kinds of portraits, I'd want to show the character their portrait as soon as I could – and in person – to see them experience it for the first time. How does that process usually work for you?**

Well it's film, so it's a really slow process. It really changes the dynamic. I've worked in a pre-digital era, so I'm very used to this, so I would always tell people that I'd send them a copy, but it's going to take months, potentially, because this film is not conventional. Like, I'm in Warsaw, I have to fly home to Minnesota, and then the film gets shipped to New York to get processed, and then it gets shipped back, and then we have to scan it. And of course I'm photographing a lot of different people. It's a slow and tedious process. But then I send them a print, and I rarely know what happens. Sometimes I get a response, other times I

framing the picture, deciding when to click the shutter, choosing which picture to use... So I realise that I have more power in the exchange. That's part of the thing that's haunted me over the years, is that power. I could do this in a different way, where I send people pictures and then ask them, "Which one is your favourite?" I haven't reached that level, ethically, yet. And this is something that I'm constantly questioning. It's like all of us with all of our ethical questions: Do we eat meat? Are we vegetarian? Are we vegan? Are we driving cars? Do we use gasoline? All this stuff... I'm trying to be more conscientious, but at the same time make something that I see is beautiful and thus I have to shape it in certain ways.

**At the end of the book you list the first name and the city for each portrait, but that's it. Because there was a lack of information available about these people I found myself giving them each their own backstory. I'm assuming that was a really purposeful decision.**

This issue of how much information to reveal is one of the great challenges of photography for me, and has been my whole career. I've struggled with it for every project. In some previous books, I've had notes at the end of the book where you get some information, but I tend to never put it next to the picture. Photography is not filmmaking. You're leaving bigger gaps for the viewer to bring themselves to... to project onto the picture what they want. In this particular project, I very much wanted to do that. Because of course if I'd provided all sorts of information I would be selecting and curating that information as well, which would shape the viewer's experience. Though leaving it out is just another way of shaping it. Just as I think these pictures are as much about my encounter with the person as the person themselves... I want it to be about the viewer's encounter with the person, the viewer's encounter with the image and less about the informational aspects of that encounter.

**more loose and natural. Will this current way of working influence your future work, or do you see yourself possibly going back to themes?**

I've been thinking a lot about ageing. You know, I'm approaching 50 and entering a slightly different category of life. One thing that really struck me recently was the death of the poet Mary Oliver. It's something she said in an interview that was replayed upon her death. She noticed that as she got older her poems got shorter and shorter, and I've been reflecting on that because this book has significantly fewer pictures than previous books, which I was really adamant about. It's funny, because I used to make this joke about how many pictures a photo book should have, and it should be your age. Like, you should only do a book of 80 pictures when you're 80 years old. My number's going down now as I get older. It's just the stripping away of "look how fancy I am" and "look how clever I am", and let's just sink into the heart of the matter – what a beautiful mystery other human beings are.

***I Know How Furiously Your Heart is Beating by Alec Soth will be published by MACK on March 15, 2019.***