

A Year of Quiet Contemplation Led to the Rebirth of Alec Soth's Photography

After taking a break from photography, Alec Soth has returned to capture the quietness and lyricism of people residing in their own homes.

Photographs by Alec Soth Text by Jordan G. Teicher

Feb. 28, 2019

After meditating during a flight to Helsinki, Alec Soth took a walk, sat down by a lake, and had an experience that could only be described as transcendental.

"It's goofy talking about such a thing, but there were tears running down my face, the whole package," he said. "Afterwards, walking back to my hotel, every time I saw someone I was like, 'I love that person.' It was probably not unlike what people experience on LSD."

The experience in 2016, he said, changed the way he saw the world and, by extension, how he viewed his creative life. Mr. Soth had been a successful photographer for more than a decade. He had first drawn wide acclaim after his 2004 book, "Sleeping by the Mississippi," and built a reputation as a skilled chronicler of American life in the tradition of photographers like Walker Evans and Robert Frank. He was, as the New York Times critic Hilarie M. Sheets once noted, especially adept at "finding chemistry with strangers," particularly "loners and dreamers" he met in his travels.

"One thing about my photographs is that they're generally considered sad, or somber, or moody, or lonely — those kinds of adjectives," he said. "At this moment, I was so incredibly happy and was so happy for many months afterward, I thought, 'Do I want to put sad, mooney pictures out in to the world right now?'"

His answer? No.

He took one last magazine assignment — a story on a laughter yoga workshop in India for The New York Times Magazine — and then made a series of changes in his life. He stopped working. He stopped traveling. He stopped making photos of people. His intent, he said, was to live more in the moment rather than try to possess it.

For most of a year, Mr. Soth spent much of his time in a rundown farmhouse near his home in Minneapolis, making a few photographs here and there, but mostly meditating and pursuing an entirely different and private kind of art making. He was "wildly happy and quite satisfied" by his radical shift.

"I'd go out there and I'd sweep the dust into shapes and watch the light move across the wall and build these snowman-like things outside," he said. "It's hard to describe."

He thought his photography career might be over. But after a year of quiet contemplation, Mr. Soth decided to return to the life he knew. This time, he resolved to figure out how to photograph people in a way that felt right.

Mr. Soth became a photographer in the early 1990s, during his last year of college at Sarah Lawrence. Initially, shyness prevented him from photographing people at all.

"We think of the photographer as having most of the power in the exchange, but because of my fear, it was much more balanced," he said. "Over time as that fear was reduced and my skills as a photographer became more sophisticated, I definitely had more and more power. Then there was a point at which I realized, 'Wow, what am I doing with this power? Am I fully considering the other person?'"

During an art residency in San Francisco in 2017, Mr. Soth had a breakthrough when the choreographer Anna Halprin, who was 97 at the time, invited him to photograph her at her home. The portrait he made was stylistically similar to many of his earlier photographs, but the experience, he said, felt entirely new.

"It felt like coming home to photography," he said. "I wanted to have more experiences like that."

For the next year, Mr. Soth did just that. During his travels, he reached out to locals and asked them to arrange portrait sessions with people who, in his words, "know how to inhabit space." Over the course of a few hours, he'd photograph them, usually alone, in their homes. He used natural light almost exclusively — a challenge when using a large-format camera — in an effort to slow down the process. Sometimes he'd photograph his subject's home with no human presence at all.

Mr. Soth's collection of these photos, "I Know How Furiously Your Heart Is Beating," which MACK will publish in March, takes its name from Wallace Stevens's poem "The Gray Room." The poem, Mr. Soth said, reflects the spirit of his attempt to capture "the beauty and mystery that can happen in a brief encounter in an interior space."

Even for a photographer whose work might generally be described as more poetic than prosaic, Mr. Soth's new book is notable for its quietness and lyricism. Still, Mr. Soth admits, some of the portraits resemble his previous work, despite his newfound approach to portraiture. Are these scenes of people willingly posing in their underwear or lying in bed, he wonders, really any different from scenes he might have subtly exerted his power to conjure in the past?

Similar questions continue to nag him as he resumes his magazine work and finds himself in situations where photography's inherent power imbalance makes itself readily apparent. He may not always make the right choice, he said, but after everything he's experienced in the last three years, he believes he's now at least a little more aware of the "limitations and contradictions" of photography.

"I'm trying to be a little bit more thoughtful," he said.
