

## Alec Soth: A Pound of Pictures

By Jean Dykstra : 5-7 minutes : 2/1/2022

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Alec Soth, *Tim and Vanessa's. Gilbertsville, Pennsylvania*, 2019. Archival pigment print, 52 x 65 inches. Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

On View

### Sean Kelly Gallery

January 14–February 26, 2022

New York

Judging from Alec Soth's latest exhibition at Sean Kelly Gallery, the global pandemic did little to dampen the photographer's well-known wanderlust. Between 2018 and 2021, he drove around the country making photographs and thinking about photographs. There is nothing in these pictures that suggests the ravages of COVID-19 or the havoc wrought by

the Trump presidency, but the intimacy and lightness of spirit that colored his previous series, *I Know How Furiously Your Heart Is Beating* (2019), has given way to a more subdued, reflective mood.

Soth has spoken in interviews over the years about his fraught relationship to the medium, and in particular the ethical complications of portraiture. There are a few straightforward portraits on view here, including one of his daughter (an arresting picture that's rich in photographic references, from the round, lens-like mirror and the oversized black-and-white landscape photograph on the wall to the fact that he's included himself in the photograph, a rare self-portrait). But more often his subjects look away from the camera, like *Stuart, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania* (2021), who bends down to look at an echinacea blossom, offering us the top of his head. Or they're absorbed in their own world, like the woman in *King and Sheridan, Tulsa, Oklahoma* (2021), who sits on an empty Tulsa street corner under a grayish sky gathering cast-off flowers into bundles, presumably to sell them; a few feet away from her sit dozens of pairs of second-hand shoes. The scene is a little bleak, except for the way the woman holds up the flowers and gazes at them, smiling, lost in thought.

The title of the show is a reference to a dealer Soth came across who sells photographs by the pound. Soth's own pictures consider the metaphorical and emotional weight of photographs but also the nature of his engagement with his subjects and what it means to make photographs. There are pictures of people taking pictures (including a woman taking a selfie in front of Niagara Falls, an earlier subject of Soth's); pictures that reference other photographers (William Eggleston, Jeff Wall, Francesca Woodman); and pictures of boxes and piles of photographs. Neil, the subject of a 2019 image, is wedged tightly between two sets of shelves overflowing with papers and books and other detritus; he's talking on an old-school, landline phone with a pen twisted into its coiled cord (though he's photographed so that his face is cropped out of the picture), and he has a cardboard box on his lap labeled "photos." Everything about the photograph suggests both obsolescence and too-muchness. But who wouldn't be curious about the photos in that box? Maybe the pictures spread out on the hotel bed in *The Coachlight, Mitchell, South Dakota*, (2020), came from a box like that—amateur portraits, class photos, discarded family snapshots—so many pictures, all of which were presumably precious to someone at some point. How does one make meaning out of all these photographs, much less add to their number?

That seems to be the question simmering below the surface of this series. Soth's photographs offer an answer: namely, that looking closely and with attention is a worthy pursuit. Particularly when the resulting images—the illuminated windows of a lonesome apartment building in Queens or an empty light box glowing in Sid Kaplan's darkroom—are so full of wonder and genuine curiosity. One of the threads running loosely through this work is an interest in other ways of seeing and in the pure, unfettered absorption of the amateur artist. Soth photographed a young man (Cooper, a former student) sketching a spray of flowers from inside a car, students engrossed in a life-drawing class, and two

members of a camera club assessing a photograph of a bird. People looking closely and with attention, in other words, for the joy of it.

In some ways, these photographs read as an effort on Soth's part to recapture that feeling, to make photographs without following an overarching storyline. He originally structured the project by following the route of Abraham Lincoln's funeral train from Washington, D.C., to Springfield, Illinois. Eventually, that conceit fell by the wayside, and his approach became more meandering, the connections between the photographs looser. Lincoln did make his way into the work, in a roundabout way, in the form of a bust that Soth bought and then photographed strapped into his car and in his picture of a moth resting on a piece of an orange. It's an oblique reference to a famous photograph of Walt Whitman posed with a butterfly on his finger; in 1865, Whitman wrote an elegy to Abraham Lincoln during the period of nationwide mourning after the president was assassinated. The photograph, *Philadelphia, Pennsylvania* (2021), finds a delicate balance between attraction and repulsion. The moth's wing is tattered, but an eye spot sits at its center, a diversionary camouflage for the moth and, for the photographer, a low-key metaphor for the act of looking.