

SEAN KELLY

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ARTFORUM

Alec Soth



Alec Soth, *The Unabomber's View*, 2006, black-and-white ink-jet print, 30 x 24".

View, 2006, on the other hand, reveals a straightforwardly attractive vista of trees and sky. Yet this is not just a bucolic scene, but rather the natural domain recoded through the specter of the infamous anarcho-primitivist Ted Kaczynski. Several works focus on tools and shelter. A spooky 2007 black-and-white image, 2007_05zl0072, reveals what appears to be a camouflage apparatus, perhaps a survivalist device, in a forest—flora covering an infrastructure subtly resembling the outlines of an upright body. Two pictures from 2008 (Utah and 2008_08zl0238) depict domiciles built into cavities within large rock outcroppings in the desert; the latter image shows a somewhat more “upscale” edifice, equipped with a satellite dish. Another 2008 picture, 2008_08zl0215, portrays the interior of a cave: The rock is coated in white paint, and a metal bar holds coat hangers, bereft of clothes. A gorgeous untitled 2006 image of a man dressed in black monk’s clothing standing alone amid bare trees succinctly captures the Thoreau-like transcendence of the individual amid nature, yet a troubling ambiguity lingers: Is this a holy person engaged in benign reverie, or something more pernicious? As observed in *Somewhere to Disappear*, 2011, a documentary film about Soth’s project (directed by Laure Flammarion and Arnaud Uyttenhove) that accompanies the exhibition, the photographer happened upon a young man resembling a skinhead who slept among rock formations in the desert with a rifle at his side; in a portrait of him from 2008, 2008_08zl0107, he stands naked, except for boots, in a small pond—the swastika on his arm the only disruptive sign in the pastoral scene. He seems at ease with himself, with his surroundings, even with Soth.

The initial photograph encountered in Alec Soth’s “Broken Manual,” Roman, the nocturnal hermit, 2006, embodies the tension between disclosure and concealment that underpins this exhibition, which comprises a series of photographs and a new installation generated from Soth’s journeys to remote areas of the United States in search of men—from eccentric loners to paranoid survivalists—who have excommunicated themselves from society. Roman’s ancient, bearded visage surfaces reluctantly from a grainy black-and-white miasma—he is a ghostly afterimage of himself. With a subtly quizzical expression, he seems to ask the photographer: What compels you to offer me, as image, to the world? Delivering Roman from a purgatory of isolation into the scene of social reception and spectatorship, the photo exposes a thin line between trust and distrust that is also manifested in other pictures here.

Some of Soth’s images, such as Edsel’s hideaway, spring, 2006, in which we observe a man, back turned to the camera, standing in a thicket through which we can just discern signs for a Waffle House and Shell gas station in the distance, suggest the immediacy of a snapshot taken at an opportune moment. The Unabomber’s

A limited-edition book conceived as a guide for retreating from civilization contains the images in the exhibition with a text “coauthored” by Soth and his alter ego, Lester B. Morrison, an apparently invented person. In the exhibition, it is displayed inside the cavity of another book on a large stack of innocuous publications. A plethora of research materials is posted on the wall behind, including a pamphlet titled “Improvised Weapons of the American Underground,” an article on “Marshal South—desert writer, prophet, nonconformist,” and the 1985 book *How to Disappear Completely and Never Be Found* by Doug Richmond. Together these materials evoke, indirectly, the dark, conspiratorial side of Emerson’s philosophy of self-reliance and nonconformism, and his suspicions about society.

While there may be a neo-Romantic impulse lurking behind Soth’s project, his austere beautiful images do not seek to remystify these men or their lifestyles. Rather, the photographs strike a canny balance between absorbed curiosity and meticulously calibrated detachment, suggesting Soth’s estranged intimacy with his profoundly alienated subjects.