

Alec Soth at Sean Kelly Gallery

3-3 minutes : 2/3/2022

Photographer Alec Soth's exhibition here, "A Pound of Pictures," reflects more than the artist's desire to harness experience through perception: He wants to grasp it in his hand. Matter, according to philosopher Henri Bergson, comprises "an aggregate of 'images'," which themselves lie between the thing itself and its representation. Throughout this show we see depictions of icons (Buddha, Abraham Lincoln); indexes (water vapor billowing into the sky); photographs of photographs; and reflections of landscapes, still lifes, and portraits—all recurrences of matter that pile up as one wanders through the exhibition.

In *Tim and Vanessa's. Gilbertsville, Pennsylvania*, 2019, we encounter an indoor space bathed in natural light and crawling with lush greenery. A large wooden table is covered with stacks of pictures, behind which a terra-cotta statue of a soldier stands, seemingly looking down at the plethora of images before it. Soth pairs this work with a list, a stack of vinyl words on a wall that describes what's in the works on display. This visual and semiotic constellation points to how photography serves our innate need to collect things—not merely for the sake of acquisition, but as tokens of life experiences. However, this work is not a postmodern wink at the medium itself. Nor is it about "ubiquity" in the way that art by Erik Kessels or Penelope Umbrico is. For Soth, this reflexive approach to making photographs is a sublime phenomenology that, when considered collectively, can culminate in anxiety-producing cosmic illuminations.

When flipping through the show's accompanying monograph, a remarkable thing happens: Stuck within its pages are several small loose photographs—one depicts a water-skier suspended in midair, while another captures a sleeping woman with two framed portraits leaning against her. These photos are gifts from the artist himself, offerings that conflate his own imagery with works by seemingly countless anonymous authors. Photographers and collectors are gatherers of experience, and of the peculiar "weight"—emotional, sensorial, temporal—this accumulation bears. Within this heft, Soth suggests, are dormant cosmologies full of meaning, just waiting to be drawn out and connected.

— Colin Edgington