

Alec Soth Mines the Poetic Possibility of Photographs

Natalie Haddad : 5-6 minutes : 2/16/2022



Alec Soth, "Tim and Vanessa's. Gilbertsville, Pennsylvania" (2019), archival pigment print, image/paper: 52 x 65 inches, edition of 9 with 4 APs (all images © Alec Soth, courtesy Sean Kelly, New York)

A Pound of Pictures, Alec Soth's newest body of work for the book and the wall, asks viewers to consider the weight of photography in at least two ways: as a literal mass of accumulating material in the world, and as a compulsion to continue adding to that mass — to make pictures that speak of experience as much as they memorialize it. Though not flesh and blood, pictures can certainly take on complex lives of their own. Like people, they take up space and ask for attention. They can be damaged and discarded, rejected and forgotten. They can also educate. We often love them.

Beyond the exclusive confines of fine art photography, there are flea markets and specialty shops, where a collector (such as Soth) can quite literally buy pictures by the pound, often grouped by theme or motif, with the original context of their making largely inaccessible. Soth presents different stages of this experience in his photographs: boxes waiting to be sifted through; a purveyor holding his inventory while negotiating a sale; a

day's haul strewn out on a bed, pictures being grouped and regrouped again, new contexts being tested and considered. Abundance is everywhere in these pictures — their frames seem ready to overflow.



Alec Soth, "Niagara Falls, Ontario" (2019), archival pigment print,
image/paper: 52 x 65 inches, edition of 9 with 4 APs

Though making pictures about pictures, and about the process of making them, is not a terrain that Soth has discovered for us all, he seems to have discovered it for himself. His previous series, *I Know How Furiously Your Heart Is Beating*, was comprised mostly of interiors and was primarily concerned with the exchange between photographer and sitter. The moving and sensitive portraits he created were of people in their homes, the space around them conveying their interiority as much as the contours of their face or the depth of their eyes. In this new series he is on the road, the pictures evidence of his mobility, and perhaps this is what gives the images their sense of looseness and fluidity. For although a thematic thread is discernible with some patience — which these pictures both ask for and reward — the absence of an obvious narrative connection seems partly to be the point. A picture of a moth perched atop an orange in dialogue with one in which a bust of Abraham Lincoln is strapped into the backseat of a car, beside boxes of what are presumably photographs, is a reminder that we need not force these works together like pieces of a puzzle. The pictures find commonality as expressions of discrete experiences, of a scene that invited creation.

In the past Soth has stated his desire to be motivated less by the need for cohesion than by attentiveness to a moment that seems full of poetic possibility. The exhibition's 28 pictures seem to realize that desire. They're composed to focus our attention onto the act

of looking as we move from image to image, while the sequencing on the wall suggests associative meanings that take us beyond a single frame without absorbing it into a larger whole.

As viewers invest works with meaning, and as we respond to these pictures with reveries of our own, we make them larger, *heavier*, though not with mass so much as with metaphor or memory. Between a young man sketching a patch of flowers from the seat of a car and a portrait of a couple sitting on a stone ledge above a sidewalk, the specificity of the scenes, and of the subjects as people, opens up a space for the poetic possibility that Soth has pursued. The joy of the exhibition is that it allows Soth, and us, to create meaning for these works beyond what is given.

Alec Soth, "Plastic Arts Club. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania" (2019), archival pigment print, image/paper: 40 x 50 inches; edition of 9 with 4 APs

Alec Soth, "White Bear Lake, Minnesota" (2019), archival pigment print, image/paper: 40 x 32 inches, edition of 9 with 4 APs

[Alec Soth: A Pound of Pictures](#) continues at Sean Kelly Gallery (475 Tenth Avenue, Manhattan) through February 26.

An accompanying publication, [A Pound of Pictures](#), is published by MACK Books and is available online from Sean Kelly Gallery and MACK Books.

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