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## Minnesota photographer Alec Soth swam through a pile of 500,000 pictures to find himself

Alicia Eler : 20-25 minutes : 1/27/2022

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The year was 2018, and photographer Alec Soth felt charged up, ready to respond to the political divisiveness that was changing America.

He would follow the path of Abraham Lincoln's funeral train, which carried the assassinated president's body from Washington, D.C., to Springfield, Ill., after the Civil War. But after two trips, the project felt forced, and he retreated. A false start.

He tried again as a rambling diary of sorts, but then the pandemic hit. On the third attempt, he landed on a new project, buying old photos as he traveled around the country and letting them lead the way to new ones.

The project is encapsulated in a [photo book coming in February](#) and an [exhibition opening Friday at Weinstein Hammons Gallery in Minneapolis](#) in conjunction with shows in New York City and San Francisco.

"A Pound of Pictures" is best described as a photo project about photography. Each image by Soth holds a surprising, thoughtful story, whether it's a picture of a portrait of [Buddhist teacher Pema Chödrön](#) and a bottle of pills parked on a dashboard, or a motel bed covered with snapshots of young women (not a serial killer reference).

Along this journey of collecting amateur photographs while taking his own, Soth found himself again. This interview has been edited for clarity.

**Q:** Why make a photo book about the idea of photography?

**A:** In poetry, there's a traditional form called "[Ars Poetica](#)" which is essentially a poem about poetry. I'm also a fan of the book "[Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art](#)," which is a comic book about how comic books work. I wanted to do something similar with photography. It's not about the medium generally, but photography as I experience it. It's about my process, and also some of my creative influences.

On my travels, I met with artists like [Sophie Calle](#), [Nan Goldin](#), [Duane Michals](#) and [Sid Kaplan](#). There are references to these encounters in the book, but sometimes they are quite subtle. I only show Goldin's bed, for example. It's about my elders, traveling with younger people, visiting amateur photographers, thinking about the medium ... trying not

to hold the handlebars too tight, thinking about America a little bit, but trying to find joy in flowers and stuff like that, too.

**Q:** How long were you on the road?

**A:** I started in 2018. Probably something like 10 or so trips of various lengths. We had these stops and starts because of the pandemic and the changing course of the project.

**Q:** Even with pictures of people, there is this distance. How come?

**A:** I think it's kind of me. The [last project I did, I was working in interior spaces with people](#), but it's a bit of an outlier in my work. Distance is kind of my jam.

**Q:** Did the pandemic affect that sensibility?

**A:** At first it affected everything. And particularly photographing — anyone who wasn't middle-aged white guys — stressed me out. I do think there is this weird mix of like intimacy and distance that seems to be a through line in my work.

There is an exception in this book, [my daughter](#). But generally they're not people I know. I don't spend weeks living with them or anything. But there's a flash of something that hopefully feels intimate, like catching someone's eyes and staring into them for a minute.

**Q:** What's the concept behind collecting other people's pictures?

**A:** Molly, this barista at my local Dogwood Coffee who was studying photography, I asked her if she wanted to go on a trip with me. So we started heading down the Mississippi, my old stomping grounds [from his breakthrough project "[Sleeping by the Mississippi](#)"].

We were in Winona and stopped in this antique store, and this guy had a box of photos. I bought some pictures from him. One started leading me on this journey — it was a photo of a man and his head was photographed from five different sides. Collecting pictures became something that I did along with taking pictures.

At one place I went to in Pennsylvania, a guy had a half-million photos in his home. I spent eight hours going through pictures and I bought more great pictures. I realized this is more than I will ever take in my life and they are all superior to anything that I will do. But of course they don't have any context, they aren't anchored in any way. They're floating out there.

The funny thing about this medium — you can have accidental masterpieces all the time, which is pretty different from filmmaking.

**Q:** Why did you have that formal, catchy Lincoln project in mind initially if that's not how you work?

**A:** It reminds me of, in the year 2000, the Minnesota Historical Society or someone was giving a grant for people to document the state. I was like, "I propose to photograph World

War II veterans." I didn't get that grant and I was relieved — it was not me, it was me trying to be a certain kind of photographer. I think something about that Trump time period brought out this part of me that wanted to try to be this political whatever — statement-y photographer — and it's just ... it's not what I am.

### **A Pound of Pictures**

**When:** Noon-5 p.m. Tue.-Sat. or by appointment beginning Jan. 28.

**Where:** Weinstein Hammons Gallery, 908 W. 46th St., Mpls.

**Info:** 612-822-1722 or [weinsteinhammons.com](https://www.weinsteinhammons.com).