

Alec Soth @ Fraenkel | | Squarecylinder.com – Art Reviews | Art Museums

6-8 minutes

by Renny Pritikin



Tim and Vanessa's Gilbertsville, Pennsylvania, 2019, pigment print, 56 3/8 x 69 3/8 inches

When Alec Soth burst on the scene in 2004, it was immediately apparent to those paying attention that his work was masterful and completely his own. Operating within the narrative documentary tradition, he combines a great eye with a near-perfect representation of an often-neglected aspect of American life: that of rural Midwesterners whose lives are shaped by poverty and freezing temperatures. His ambition is not political activism, but a humanism suffused with the oddness of life's random moments, captured in pictures in which the lives of his subjects coincide with those of viewers to forge a unique visual and psychological experience.

His new suite of works, *A Pound of Pictures*, showing simultaneously at Fraenkel and at galleries in New York and Minneapolis, is the product of several road trips around the

country between 2018 and 2021. It presents an armchair detective's dream of interrelated themes to disentangle. The title comes from Soth's discovery of a service in Los Angeles that sells found images by the pound. Intrigued by the idea of photographs valued by sheer weight and papery materiality, Soth invested heavily. His haul makes periodic appearances in the exhibition: as piles of found images that he rephotographed and small, framed individual selections that seem to flit around, Tinkerbelle-like, as comments on Soth's own work.



Nan's bed, Brooklyn, New York, 2018, pigment print, 27 x 33 inches

People have always been Soth's chief métier, but also floating through this exhibition are mini-essays on various themes: the rectangle in architecture and design; the aesthetics of bedrooms in homes and hotels; the natural world, especially flowers and clouds; and the shapes of bodies in repose. The approach is a touch more formal and less humanistic than we're used to from Soth.

One of the first photographs in the exhibition depicts Nan Goldin's bedroom wherein two famous Peter Hujar portraits hang. Formal devices—a headboard, a folded quilt and two square prints—establish the composition. The bed is empty, but the photographs show two languid bodies, including that of David Wojnarowicz. So, while the room is redolent of the despair of the AIDS crisis at its peak, it's the two prints forming a rectangle that ensnare our eyes. Nearby, a small, framed snapshot from Soth's by-the-pound purchase shows a frail human figure on water skis flying off a ramp into the unknown, like Wojnarowicz and so many others. Other images in the exhibition revisit the human body

in various configurations: in bed, under sheets and on the beach, with contradictory evocations of youthful sexuality and morbidity operating simultaneously.



Niagara Falls, Ontario, 2019, pigment print, 56 3/8 x 69 3/8 inches

Niagara Falls, Ontario captures a group of nine tourists. All of them face the water except for one woman taking a selfie and another inexplicably and intensively engaged with Soth's camera. The choreography (of people lined up along a fence) is so perfect as to appear staged, and the imaginary triangle, formed between the womens' faces, the eye of the camera and the viewer, is electrifying. *Queens, New York* is a dramatic portrait of an older brick apartment building at dusk. Only two of the windows are lit, but they merge with the darkened ones to create a symphony of rectangles: air conditioners, security bars, window parts, roof tiles, painted exterior walls. Without depicting even one person, it reaches the tragicomic heights of the great comix artist Chris Ware's narrative stories of buildings and their occupants.

Fort Worth, Texas extends the linearity seen in *Niagara*. In this simple composition, a line of yellow flowers forms the foreground against what could be (but isn't) a painted backdrop of white clouds in a blue sky, echoing the flowers in a U-shaped configuration.

It's a typical Soth moment in which an uncanny image results when our minds re-enact the mechanics of perception. He finds poetic resonance between the way tourists line up and the way wildflowers grow beneath a cloud-filled sky. The intuitive and emotional rhyming between the two images is a Soth signature.



Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2021, pigment print, 23 x 28 inches

The show's tour-de-force, *Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*, appears to be an outlier, but it may not be. Here, a moth perches on an orange slice set on a concrete floor. A circular mark on the insect's wing replicates a larger animal's eye in order to frighten off predators. It makes for an uncanny confluence among the photographer's eye, the camera's eye, the "eye" on the wing, and our own eyes. The image includes a squared-off bottom corner of the room, reiterating the artist's ongoing meditation on survival within the rigid biological givens of our bodies and the social structures in which we find ourselves.

In Fraenkel's backroom, an excellent small show argues for Soth's place among the illustrious figures in photography. All the images are of people taking pictures of people. There's a rare nude self-portrait by Diane Arbus and a great pair of shots of Richard Avedon shooting Lee Friedlander and vice versa. A self-portrait by Nan Goldin in which she looks out a window from a dark room, her face lit from the left by daylight, references Vermeer, and ties into Soth's "portrait" of Goldin via her bedroom. Several other pictures by Friedlander, of people taking his picture, echo the attention Soth pays to the dynamics between photographer and model. The tacit message conveyed is that Soth should be seen as a successor to Friedlander and his cohorts.

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Alec Soth: "A Pound of Pictures" @ [Fraenkel Gallery](#) through March 26, 2022.

About the author:

Renny Pritikin was the chief curator at The Contemporary Jewish Museum in San

Francisco from 2014 to 2018. Before that, he was the director of the Richard Nelson Gallery at UC Davis and the founding chief curator at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts beginning in 1992. For 11 years, he was also a senior adjunct professor at California College of the Arts, where he taught in the graduate program in Curatorial Practice.

Pritikin has given lecture tours in museums in Japan as a guest of the State Department, and in New Zealand as a Fulbright Scholar, and visited Israel as a Koret Israel Prize winner. The Prelinger Library published his new book of poems, *Westerns and Dramas*, in 2020.