

## Alec Soth, A Pound of Pictures @Sean Kelly - Collector Daily

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**JTF (just the facts):** A total of 28 color photographs, framed in whitewashed wood and unmatted, and hung against white walls in the main gallery space, the entry area, and the offices. 23 of the works are archival pigment prints mounted on Dibond covered with Lenox 100 paper, made between 2019 and 2021. Physical sizes of these prints range from roughly 20x25 to 52x65 inches (or the reverse), and all of the prints are available in editions of 9+4AP. The show also includes 5 found photographs, each mounted and framed. (Installation shots below.)

A monograph of this body of work has recently been published by MACK Books ([here](#)). Hardcover, 25.3 x 31 cm, 156 pages, with 66 color reproductions. Includes five randomised replica vernacular photographs. (Cover shot below.)

Concurrent gallery exhibitions of this work are also on view at Weinstein Hammons Gallery in Minneapolis ([here](#)) and Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco ([here](#)).

**Comments/Context:** We're often told – by art school teachers, by gallery owners, by curators, and by other sources of critical feedback – that a successful photographic project should be organized around a clear set of organizing principles. Photographers are encouraged to pick a single subject, a conceptual idea, a stylistic theme, or some other well-defined framework, and then to build a body of work up inside those self-constructed walls. For many, this structure offers a way to bound the problem of making art, and inherently creates a sense of cohesion and connection between the resulting works. It can also provide a more obvious sense of when a project begins and ends, as deciding when something is “done” is an age old artistic challenge.

Alec Soth's newest project started out with just such a central focus – Abraham Lincoln, and in particular, the path of the 1865 funeral train that carried Lincoln's body from Washington, D.C., to his home of Springfield, Illinois. And in many ways, this subject seems like a promisingly Sothian endeavor – essentially Midwestern (sticking with his roots as a Minnesotan), road-trip driven (bouncing from place to place in his car, as he has done so many times before), and timely in terms of our American mood (looking back to a great American president who tried to bridge times of division and polarization.) It feels like the kind of project that would fit Soth's skills well, and that he could embrace with his own personal sense of understated photographic compassion and humility.

But for whatever reason, after spending months taking trips and making pictures, Soth realized that the project just wasn't coalescing like he thought it would, and like countless struggling photographers before him, he was faced with a "what do I do now?" moment. Soldier on, hoping for a break, while trudging along after a goal that now seems unreachable? Or toss it all overboard and begin again, thereby admitting that precious time has been wasted? It is these moments of uncertainty, self-doubt, and confusion that test artists of all kinds, and the solutions they ultimately invent tell us quite a bit about who they are, as both artists and people.

Soth's path forward, which eventually came together as *A Pound of Pictures*, was rooted in a surprisingly intimate and inward-looking re-evaluation process. As a 50-something photographer, with an enviable history of photographic successes, books published, and prestigious galleries and agencies representing him around the world, Soth doesn't seem like the kind of photographer that would be having too many second thoughts about his approach to the medium. But to break free from the rut of the Lincoln project, Soth patiently (and methodically) worked to re-catalyze the essential spark of delight that he derives from being a human with a camera. To try to get back to that truth, and to peel away some of the mindsets that had distracted him, he set himself up with a range of smaller ideas to follow, pushing himself to look out at the world around him with the voraciously curious and open eyes that have always been at the heart of his photographic vision.

Remnants of the Lincoln project pop up now and again in *A Pound of Pictures*, like glimpses of branches later pruned, so he didn't entirely reject everything that he had made during that initial effort, but culled it down to a few worthy samples. A tender portrait of a couple at Lincoln's tomb is representative of the kind of engaged encounter with strangers that Soth does with such consistent authenticity and warmth, and the puzzling image of a Lincoln bust that Soth purchased strapped into the seat of a car alludes to a subject that felt increasingly pulled in and constrained.

Since the days of his passionately followed blog, when he would often post poems and make connections between poetry and photography, Soth has used poetry as a link-maker. In this case, Lincoln led him back to Walt Whitman (who had written about Lincoln's tomb), who seemingly encouraged Soth to get back out on the road and re-embrace America – during the dark days of the pandemic, we all needed the exuberant exhortations of Whitman to get us out of our collective funk. Armed with his many-sided lists of potential subjects to be on the lookout for (taped to his steering wheel, and found at the beginning of the exhibit and on the cover of the associated monograph), he ventured out on the road once again, without any one over-arching plan to guide him.

With the benefit of a short distance of hindsight, we can now see that Soth gravitated towards a number of ideas that now seem if not directly connected, at least related and thematically similar. As the eventual title of the project indicates, one path Soth followed was into the world of vernacular photographs, and digging through flea markets and thrift

stores in search of overlooked and forgotten images and the unmediated connections they represent seems to have become a repeated (and creatively refreshing) activity. What he found, in addition to one particular woman who sold photographs by the pound, was a renewed sense of the durable power of these photographs. Even at their most random, they tell personal stories, capture important moments, and poignantly reach for context and meaning, even when long separated from their original owners.

Four of Soth's photographs in the show find him wrestling with these vernacular legacies and resonances. In one encounter, he tracks down a couple selling vernacular photos on eBay, and visits their home in Pennsylvania, where thousands of images are sorted into boxes; his photograph of their table, densely covered with piles of prints (many in boxes marked FAMILY) and surrounded by the falling tendrils of green plants and the watchful eyes of a Xian temple guard, is envelopingly intimate and layered, like an inviting door into a new world. In another, he finds a cache of discarded photographs and VHS tapes in an abandoned home in Mississippi; Soth's picture touchingly values the images of baptisms, babies, and family moments tossed on the dirty ground, noting the muted sorrow embedded in leaving behind moments that were meant to be saved. In a third, he captures a seller of vernacular photographs with a box of photos on his lap, talking on the phone with the cord wrapped around a pen and surrounded by stacks of papers; whatever is in that box (and we never do see) brims with a kind of special optimism that feels like it might be an entry point into something wonderful. And in a fourth photograph, Soth lays out several pounds of his stockpiled vernacular finds on the green bedspread of a hotel room bed in South Dakota, the endless faces of women looking back at us expecting to be seen and known, but offering up no answers. From these images, it's clear that vernacular photos have drawn Soth under their quietly seductive spell, and the show (and its photobook form) also includes a small handful of vernacular prints drawn from Soth's multiplying hoard of discoveries, as if each could add its own unspoken story to his longer linked chain.

In a second group of works, we see Soth actively trying to slough off the accumulated impediments to creativity that he felt were fencing him in, not only by wandering and allowing serendipity to influence his path, but by also deliberately embracing alternate, less professionalized artistic perspectives. He travels with some of his students and interns, trying to see the world through their younger eyes; he also hits the road with his teenage daughter, bringing her vantage point into his thinking; and he seeks out various amateur artistic groups and camera clubs around the country, where the joy of creating feels purer and less bounded by stifling criticism.

Soth's photographs of these moments of trying to get out from under himself feel genuine and full of inquiring interest. He watches closely from the driver's seat as his younger companion draws a splash of roadside flowers through the wet window, seemingly looking back and forth between the moving hand and the scene outside, and tracking the process of artistic translation and transformation. He applies a similar degree of attentive patience to watching a life drawing class in Philadelphia, his long exposure turning the gestures of

the artist in the foreground into a swirl of blurred motion. And while we might assume Soth would be bored by a mundane camera club meeting in Pennsylvania, he seems to have been renewed by its humble supportiveness; his picture of the proceedings captures the seemingly comfortable discussion of a featured bird photograph, the darkened room centering our attention on the community aspect of sharing pictures. And Soth's road trip to the Grand Canyon with his daughter doesn't feature a vast natural vista of the famous place, but instead a portrait of Carmen in the hotel bedroom underneath an image of the rocks outside, the sidelong self-portrait of Soth captured in the round mirror blending his craft with her unimpressed mood. All of these photographs attest to a real desire to relearn to see, at least somewhat, and by celebrating (and steeping himself in) the amateur artistic instinct, he might thereby unlock some ways of approaching photography that he had inadvertently left behind.

Another through line pulsing through a handful of the pictures in this show is a bridge from Whitman to Buddhism, and a broader search for comfort, confidence, and renewal (from a spiritual force) in the face of creeping self-doubt. Soth visited a number of Buddhist temples around the country during his many trips, and seems to have arrived at each location with particular receptiveness. At a monastery in Memphis, he channels the ghost of William Eggleston, making a composition that gathers the golden serenity of a Buddha statue undergoing restoration with the messy complexity of paint cans, sponges, and rusty turpentine. And at a community garden around the corner from a monastery in Pittsburgh, he notices the gentle work of Stuart as he cradles the head of flower, his Buddhist prayer beads dangling around his wrist. In both pictures, Soth is reaching out to connect, and making photographs that subtly document that process of vulnerable inquiry.

All of the photographs in this show are accompanied by a short audio clip, reachable through the visitor's smartphone, that offers Soth talking for a few moments about each picture, filling in backstories and musing about his motivations. As we might expect, these snippets are understatedly friendly, insightful, and transparent, bringing us inside each picture – they're not to be missed. One clip explains the logic behind a picture of a moth sitting on a slice of orange. While butterflies are to be found on Soth's written hit list of subjects to be searching for, the reason is intriguing. Soth says that making photographs is like catching butterflies in a net, alluding to the inherent fragility and delicacy of that process, and the very real challenges of keeping the butterfly alive while still catching it; the implied lesson is that it's awfully easy to kill the enchantment in a scene by photographing it. Soth's brown and black moth has a beautiful circular pattern, but one wing is a bit tattered, almost as if the process of making the picture couldn't help but rough up its edge.

This theme of fragility recurs in other forms throughout the show, from attention paid to roadside flowers and the mottled shadows on a wall behind the tumble of hair in a streetside portrait, to seeing the legendary printer/photographer Sid Kaplan in his scuffed light table and the easy-going grace in a woman selling flowers in a vacant lot. Each of these photographs has a generosity that seems to acknowledge the ephemerality and

mystery of these moments, while leaving space for us to enter each picture to investigate for ourselves.

All along the way in this show, we seem to be following Soth as he thinks himself through the traps in his own process. Two new images find him revisiting his own images from the past (one of Niagara Falls, the other of a woman with cat-eye makeup), as if walking in his own footsteps and updating those artistic impulses might teach him something. We also see him following his wide ranging curiosity to the subject of waterskiing, and a particular ski jump on a lake in Michigan, only to find Soth choosing a serenely calm image with no actual skier, thereby encouraging us to envision him or her flying off the jump for ourselves. (One of the vernacular inclusions in the show does give us a jumper, for handy substitution.) And in another audio clip, Soth explains that he included a twilight image of a building in Queens (with two lighted windows) just because he thought it was beautiful. Few photographers these days would admit to the simple pleasures of pictorial beauty, which is why such a plainspoken statement from Soth feels so refreshing and real – as part of his examination of what it means to him to be a photographer, he's deliberately allowed himself to enjoy beauty once again, even if some might scoff. Good for him.

For many, many photographers, following this many paths, tangents, and improvisations simultaneously would likely lead to an artistic muddle, but what is presented in *A Pound of Pictures* is far from random or disconnected. In fact, there is some magic to be found in the ways these pictures come together to talk to each other, and I think that energy emanates from Soth's honesty about being a bit adrift and gamely taking up the search for answers. Nearly every picture in this show is both a question and a potential response, an experiment and its mostly promising results. Faced with his Lincoln blockage, it would have been precariously easy for Soth to mindlessly push ahead and just churn out a bunch of pictures that look like pictures made by Alec Soth. Instead, what he's done here is open himself up to a new round of tests and trials, in an effort to rediscover and reanimate what an Alec Soth photograph is. When the Lincoln effort went off the rails, the friction of that moment seems to have been the kick in the pants he needed to begin a cathartic (and likely scary) process of rethinking what it means to him to be out in the world with a camera.

What this says about Soth as an artist is that he isn't bound by a single central vision that he's committed to following (at all costs). His process for overcoming his temporary artistic obstruction was to pursue many ends simultaneously, even if they were seemingly unrelated or even contradictory. He sensitively embraced the complexity around him, stitching together his various incremental learnings, and in his self-deprecating and circumspect way, seems to have been willing to embrace potential answers from unlikely sources. We might just say he used some good old-fashioned common sense, but that over-simplifies what was a decently sophisticated adaptation to a changing world. Instead of becoming a prisoner to his own artistic fame, he distilled his past and present into a new foundation on which he can now build.

So *A Pound of Pictures* is, for those that want to dig into its psychologies, really a show about re-imagining the process of being a photographer. It gathers together a number of superlative photographs, that are only really connected by Soth's multivalent approach to thinking and problem solving. And while on the surface that might seem vague and esoteric, tagging along as Soth follows his various trails of bread crumbs is a thoroughly engaging artistic experience. In many ways, he's delivered his most personal body of work in at least a decade, and that risk-taking openness feels encouragingly contagious.

**Collector's POV:** The prints in this show range in price from \$12000 to \$38000. Soth's photographs have begun to appear in the secondary markets with more regularity in recent years, with recent prices ranging between roughly \$2000 and \$115000.