

After self-imposed hiatus, famed Minnesota photographer Alec Soth returns

His show opens Friday at Weinstein Hammons Gallery in Minneapolis.

By Alicia Eler (<http://www.startribune.com/alicia-eler/424327523/>) Star Tribune |

MARCH 15, 2019 — 12:43AM

Alec Soth is back to being afraid of people.

“Early on when I was photographing, the power dynamic was more balanced because of my fear,” the renowned portraitist said in his St. Paul studio last week. “Also, I wasn’t making money from the pictures. Then over time I accrued more and more power in that dynamic and it became uncomfortable.”

Soth wanted to feel like he used to, before he began traveling the world for such clients as the New York Times. Before he became a favorite of the museum and gallery world. Before his images mattered as much.



The Alec Soth works “Anna, Kentfield, California, 2017” left, and “Galina, Odessa, 2018.”

This month, he returns from an extended hiatus in a big way, starting with a hometown opening Friday at Weinstein Hammons Gallery in Minneapolis for his latest project, [“I Know How Furiously Your Heart Is Beating.”](https://alecsoth.com/photography/projects/i-know-how-furiously-your-heart-is-beating) (<https://alecsoth.com/photography/projects/i-know-how-furiously-your-heart-is-beating>).

The series includes 70 intimate photos, focusing on people and interior spaces in domestic settings around the world. Sixteen will make their public debut in Minneapolis, with three more gallery shows opening in [New York](https://skny.com/exhibitions/alec-soth5) (<https://skny.com/exhibitions/alec-soth5>), [San Francisco](https://fraenkellgallery.com/artists/alec-soth) (<https://fraenkellgallery.com/artists/alec-soth>) and [Berlin](https://loock.info/en/exhibitions/) (<https://loock.info/en/exhibitions/>) later this month, alongside [a new book from prestigious London publisher Mack Books](https://mackbooks.co.uk/collections/coming-soon/products/i-know-how-furiously-your-heart-is-beating-br-alec-soth) (<https://mackbooks.co.uk/collections/coming-soon/products/i-know-how-furiously-your-heart-is-beating-br-alec-soth>).

The journey to this series has taken several years, in part because Soth works intuitively and emotionally. His photos roll with his feelings, but they aren’t autobiographical.

“I am kind of an ‘emo’ photographer,” he said. “I just hide it a little.”

The tension he felt — between connecting with his subjects, and maintaining a certain distance from them — has been the beating heart of Soth’s art since he first gained international acclaim through his 2004 American photobook [“Sleeping by the Mississippi.”](https://www.magnumphotos.com/arts-culture/alec-soth-sleeping-by-the-mississippi/) (<https://www.magnumphotos.com/arts-culture/alec-soth-sleeping-by-the-mississippi/>) which grew out of an epic series of road trips by the painfully shy young photographer.

It was this project that initially struck Walker Art Center senior visual art curator Siri Engberg, who in 2010 organized [the first U.S. survey of his work](https://walkerart.org/calendar/2010/from-here-to-there-alec-soths-america) (<https://walkerart.org/calendar/2010/from-here-to-there-alec-soths-america>).

“They were photos that had a real honesty to them and a sense of connection between photographer and subject,” she said. “Even if it was a stranger, or an empty room, or a landscape, he seemed to really have a purpose in terms of making that connection.”

Soth was included in the 2004 Whitney Biennial, joined the [prestigious Magnum Photos agency](https://www.magnumphotos.com/photographer/alec-soth/) (<https://www.magnumphotos.com/photographer/alec-soth/>), and was compared to such celebrated artists as William Eggleston, Peter Hujar and Walker Evans.

But as his fame grew, so did the power imbalance that he felt in his work.

Meditation realization

In 2016 all these feelings culminated in a spiritual awakening that struck him like a lightning bolt.

Soth had just gotten off a flight to Finland. Jet-lagged, he went for a long walk, then sat by a lake to meditate. It “was like a drug experience, totally life-changing,” as he suddenly understood some of the existential questions burdening him.

He realized “I was attracted to photography because of this distance [I could create], and for me that meditation experience was the collapse of that distance — like ‘Oh, that’s all my imagination creating that distance.’ I could actually see that there is no distance.”

Where his earlier work seemed to come from a place of isolation or loneliness at times, he now felt a sense of relief — happiness even.

He stopped taking editorial photo assignments. He pretty much quit taking pictures. He started making art and sculpture in an abandoned farmhouse he’d purchased an hour from the Twin Cities.

While the monk-like lifestyle was attractive to him, after a year it didn’t feel sustainable. He chose to jump back into the world of commerce, and return to photography full time, but with a fresh perspective.

He wanted to tilt the metaphorical power dynamic seesaw to a more equal place, and make it a “little less predatory.”

A dance that ‘I am leading’

For this series, friends and colleagues referred him to potential subjects. Meetings were set up in advance. The hunt that had fatigued him became a thing of the past.

The new book begins and ends with dancers: [Anna Halprin](https://www.annahalprin.org/) (<https://www.annahalprin.org/>), 97, and her student [Simone Forti](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simone_Forti) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simone_Forti), 84.

He said Halprin helped him become more accepting of photography’s limitations, including the fact that the energy he feels while hanging out with a subject will shift when the photo shoot begins.

“There’s in-between, contradictions, and you do the best you can. Just get on with it.”

He recalled a conversation:

Alec: “Don’t you think photography is the opposite of dance because it is stopping time?”

Anna: “No. In dance, when you stop — it’s the essence of everything you’ve just done.”

(Not coincidentally, Soth prefers older women as therapists, though the downside is that they retire on him.)

There was one exception to his not-hunting-for-subjects rule: Nick, a guy he happened to meet while staying at an Airbnb in the Hollywood Hills.

He photographed Nick through a window, dreamily lounging on a bed, a passage from the Bible tattooed on his chest, radiant L.A. sunshine streaming in. Out-of-focus purple flowers are draped across the window. Soth is faintly visible as a reflection in the glass — maintaining a distance, but making the viewer conscious of his presence.

“If this [photograph] is a dance, I am leading,” he said. “There is an element of collaboration, and I am listening and responding to what the person said and what they want, but we are not constructing the picture together. Also, they have no concept of what the picture looks like through the lens, how the lens treats the subject, which is all in my head.”

Trying to recapture a feeling

The new images capture a vulnerability that Soth, now 49, felt as a young photographer.

“Sleeping by the Mississippi” came to him easily. Hardly anyone said no to being photographed. There was a free-flowingness as he wandered south, using the Mississippi River as his guide. He also had nothing to lose — he was still an unknown artist.

His follow-up, “Niagara” (2006) (<https://unobtainium-photobook.com/product/niagara-by-alec-soth/>), had a different vibe. He traveled to the epic falls to take pictures of people there, much like the honeymooners and suicide jumpers who go there with specific intent. He experienced a “lot of bad luck,” with people thinking he was an intruder and calling the police.

For 2010’s “Broken Manual,” (<https://www.magnumphotos.com/theory-and-practice/broken-manual-alec-soth-aaron-schuman/>) he sought out people who chose to live in isolation off the grid. His 2014 project “Songbook” offered journalistic photos decontextualized from their original stories.

Social media holds that same sort of connecting-at-a-distance sensation that Soth both enjoys and frets about. He’s very active on Instagram at [@littlebrownmushroom](https://www.instagram.com/littlebrownmushroom/) (<https://www.instagram.com/littlebrownmushroom/>), where he posts photos from his archive, poems, realizations and promotional materials related to the new work.

He first got into social media back in 2006, when his son, Gus, was born. (He also has a daughter, Carmen.) He figured he’d be at home with the baby, so he took to [blogging about photography](https://alecsothblog.wordpress.com/) (<https://alecsothblog.wordpress.com/>). Long comment threads kept him company, but these platforms soon died out with the rise of Facebook.

“Facebook I wanted nothing to do with,” he said. “It was just like, ‘Will you be my friend?’ It felt like college.”

He didn’t get into Instagram until he realized he could use it to experiment with visual storytelling. Although Instagram offers a comfortable distance, the hearts and likes are far from his once-busy blogging life. “I pine for the glory days of the blog,” he said.

While “I Know How Furiously Your Heart Is Beating” has a more personable quality than past projects, Soth seemed agitated when we met. He had just returned from Marfa, Texas, where he’d had a few tough social interactions. College was on his mind because of a dream the night before. He was trying to sort through the dream, itching for someone to talk to about it.

He tried to recall the sense of lightness he felt as a young and inexperienced photographer for the Lillie Suburban Newspapers chain. The assignment was to shoot Keanu Reeves, who was in town to make the 1996 film “Feeling Minnesota.”

Soth was so terrified, the actor had to tell him to come closer to get the picture. Perhaps he wasn’t close enough to hear Reeves’ heart beating, but he could surely feel his own.