

Trolling for Strangers to Befriend



Works from Mr. Soth's exhibition at the High Museum in Atlanta.

By **Hilarie M. Sheets**

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ALEC SOTH has created a photographic career out of finding chemistry with strangers. On his frequent road trips through America, he's drawn to loners and dreamers he spots from his car; sometimes he will do several pass-bys before striking up a conversation. Often that will lead to a portrait session with his large-format 8-by-10 view camera.

"It's the bird flying around that swoops down and grabs the worm and then flies off," said Mr. Soth, 39, who winced slightly at the ethical implications of that image. "But I have good intentions, and people very often enjoy that interaction. It's almost like, finally, someone showed up and we can talk."

Mr. Soth's lush, painterly large-scale color prints, which reflect a striking intimacy and comfort between subject and photographer, first gained attention from the art world in 2004. A self-described "complete nobody" at the time, Mr. Soth, a Minnesota native, had made a self-printed book called "Sleeping by the Mississippi." It included landscapes and portraits shot over five years on car trips alongside the river's meandering path from Winona, Minn., to Baton Rouge, La., and drew on the American literary theme of the Mississippi as a metaphor for wandering and freedom.

After seeing a copy of the book, curators for the 2004 Whitney Biennial put him in the show; his image "Charles," of a man in a flight suit standing on the roof of his house holding a model airplane in each hand, was used on the Biennial poster. An avalanche of coverage followed, touting him as one of the great discoveries of the show. This attention led to a more professional publication of the book by Steidl, along with representation by Gagosian Gallery and international assignments that precipitated his joining Magnum Photos.

Today Mr. Soth, who lives with his wife and two children in Minneapolis, projects an affable kind of Midwestern demeanor beneath a thick beard and baseball cap. He said he felt fortunate to have found success doing the thing he loves, but also discomfort with the glare of exposure.

That ambivalence plays a role in his new exhibition, “Black Line of Woods,” opening next Saturday at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, which explores the idea of retreating from the world through the habitats of monks, hermits and survivalists. It’s part of the museum’s “Picturing the South” series, for which photographers are invited to make a body of work responding in some way to the region.

The High’s curator of photography, Julian Cox, said he had thought Mr. Soth would be a natural for the commission based on the lyrical sensibility of his pictures from the Southern leg of “Sleeping by the Mississippi” and approached him in 2007. “He follows his own nose without a carefully choreographed plan, which is reflected in most every project he’s done,” Mr. Cox said. “His work doesn’t betray any direct influence of Robert Frank or other major figures in that idiom of the American road trip, but it’s a huge part of how he operates.”

As Mr. Soth began to research the South he became intrigued with Eric Rudolph, the so-called Olympic Park bomber, who hid out for almost five years in a North Carolina forest before he was finally arrested in 2003. The first image in the exhibition was taken at dusk in a desolate parking lot bordered by a dark forest where Mr. Rudolph was eventually apprehended.

“Even though he was a bad guy, it was this boy fantasy about hiding, and there’s something really romantic about that,” said Mr. Soth, who grew up in rural Minnesota, where the woods behind his house were both a playground and a forbidding place after dark. As the project took form, he found his title, “Black Line of Woods,” from Flannery O’Connor, whose estate in Georgia he sneaked into one night to photograph.

“She’s talking about where culture ends,” he said. “I wanted this work to be about the longing to escape.”

Alec Soth, in baseball cap, travels American highways in search of people with specific characteristics.
Soth Studio



Mr. Soth has done four more photographic books, including most recently “Last Days of W” (Little Brown Mushroom), which portrays a country exhausted by George W. Bush’s presidency and was exhibited earlier this year at Gagosian.

That project, like all his work, took a serial form. “I long for the narrative arc and true storytelling,” Mr. Soth said. When he’s on the road he tries to let each picture lead him to the next; taped to his steering wheel is a list of things to watch for while he’s driving. A list composed for his current project included beards, birdwatchers, mushroom hunters, men’s retreats, after the rain, figures from behind, suitcases, tall people (especially skinny), targets, tents, treehouses and tree lines. Thus the photo of the tall bearded monk standing amid a forest of soaring barren tree trunks and the image of a giantlike man with a suitcase walking away on an overgrown path.

The word camouflage was also on the list, triggering Mr. Soth to pull up to a man in a camouflage Army jacket sitting on steps outside a building in Knoxville, Tenn. Mr. Soth introduced himself, pointing out his Minnesota license plate, and explained that he was doing a project that had something to do with wanting to run away.

“The conversation develops however it develops,” said Mr. Soth, who asked the man to show him where he had slept the previous night before taking his picture in a little pocket of brush up on a hill with signs for a Waffle House and a Shell station visible through the leaves.

Setting up his cumbersome camera on a tripod and disappearing under a dark cloth for some 20 minutes as he installs the large negative in the back and fiddles with the focus is an essential part of the process. “It isn’t that thing where you pull out a small camera and people get nervous,” Mr. Soth said. “They’re waiting around long enough that they settle a

bit. That person's standing there, but you're hidden and you can just stare at them, moving the loupe over their face and watch to see if something happens as they move around." When he sees what he likes, he says "Freeze" and takes the shot. Because each 8-by-10-inch negative plate costs \$20, he may not take more than two frames in a session.

As Mr. Soth became immersed in the culture of survivalists and collected literature about changing one's identity, he expanded the current project beyond the pictures in the South for the High. In a book to be published next year by Steidl, conceived almost as an instruction manual for dropping out of society, Mr. Soth documents people across America living outside the mainstream on the desert, in caves and their personal mythologies.

"Part of the work is about the failure of running away, too," he said, noting that there's always some level of engagement with the world, like the monk he saw talking on a cellphone.

Mr. Cox said that Mr. Soth "is very much out there on his own and in some fashion behaving like the subject matter of his pictures," adding: "He communes with his subjects and his environment through the ritual of the photographic act. He's a very natural type of communicator. That's part of his magic formula for having his subjects turn themselves over to him."

For Mr. Soth, who said he had been painfully shy throughout his youth, this rapport did not come easily. He felt pressure during college at Sarah Lawrence in the early 1990s to pursue the trend of staged photography, but he loved the work of Diane Arbus and wanted to photograph people.

After graduating, he started going to parks and taught himself how to approach strangers, often parents with their children. "Those early photo shoots were a lot like therapy," Mr. Soth said. Some of these images will be shown for the first time in "From Here to There," a large survey show at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis scheduled to open in September 2010.

"I'm famous for sweating when I photograph people, which doesn't seem to happen when I'm photographing landscapes," he added. "My own awkwardness comforts people, I think. It's part of the exchange."