
EXHIBITIONS, INTERVIEWS, PORTRAIT

ALEC SOTH, AMERICAN, MEDIA SPACE

“Photography is a language.” Alec Soth on his first UK exhibition Gathered Leaves

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All images from the exhibition Gathered Leaves © Alec Soth, courtesy Science Museum

Regarded as the leading contemporary American photographer, Alec Soth's first major UK exhibition opened this week. BJP talks to Soth about the remarkable lengths he goes to in the name of photography.

“Everyone can take great pictures,” Alec Soth tells BJP at the opening of his first UK exhibition, *Gathered Leaves*, at London’s Science Museum. “What’s hard is taking a collection of great pictures and making them work together. It’s like language: everyone can speak but putting the words together is the real challenge.”

Gathered Leaves meets that challenge head on. This is his new exhibition in London’s Science Museum, displaying a comprehensive set of pictures from a photographer widely considered the greatest contemporary explorer of the American psyche. Derived from his four books *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, *Niagara*, *Broken Manual* and *Songbook*, the work combines portraiture, landscapes and interiors, presented with a smattering of inspirational material. Though the subject matter ranges from portentous wide shots of waterfalls to bearded men clutching model planes to naked Neo-Nazi hermits it’s easy to deduce Soth’s common thread: we’re witnessing the less-travelled America.

Soth’s work has taken him across the whole of the US, though it’s what are derisively called ‘the flyover states’ that firmly hold his attention. This is his “big middle”, a seen here as a constantly shifting morass of economic stagnation, religious fervour and down-at-heel eccentricity, all under oppressively massive slate grey skies. His subjects gaze into the lens as if challenging the viewer, often brandishing fetishistic objects that summarise their personalities.



© Kate Elliott, courtesy Science Museum

In the powerful *Bonnie (with a photograph of an angel)*, Port Gibson, Mississippi 2000, an impressively beehived woman sits clutching an ornate photograph of an ‘angel’ – a vaguely person shaped wisp of cloud. We cannot help but judge her for her kitsch faith, but her sincere expression resists our mockery. A prime example of Soth’s talent in capturing the essence of his subject, her angel photograph gains its own divinity as a spot of bright blue in a sea of faded pastels.

The exhibition is peppered with these strange people, silently captured amidst the tangled detritus of their lives. Aside from his compositional and technical skills, you quickly develop an appreciation of Soth’s skill in finding subjects who, perhaps for want of a better description, are ‘kinda funny lookin’.



© Kate Elliott, courtesy Science Museum

His talent for unearthing the obscure reaches its zenith in the remarkable *Broken Manual*. Inspired by research into a fugitive on the run in the Appalachian wilderness, Soth immersed himself in understanding Americans who've abandoned civilisation. The result is a collection of photographs, taken between 2006 and 2010, that explore the practicalities and psychologies of men (and it appears to only be men) who've left the modern world behind. Hidden away in caves, woodland shacks and abandoned houses his subjects are a motley crew of monks, hermits, eco-warriors, runaways and survivalists.

Soth emphasises their solitude, often showing them as tiny figures dwarfed by the wilderness around them and in some instances appearing to actually physically melt into the greenery. In the centre of a room are a collection of context-providing underground literature, filled with practical advice pertaining to everything from mushroom foraging to the construction of home-made stun grenades. Even though none of his subjects look particularly happy with their lot, the collection is laced with primal romanticism. Who hasn't fantasised about dropping everything and making a break for the wild?

After four years of nervously knocking on heavily boarded up shacks Soth realised he needed to reconnect with the wider world. The result is his most recent work, *Songbook*. Created in collaboration with writer Brad Zellar, the two made cross-country trips posing as reporters for a fictional newspaper, voraciously hunting down local interest stories. The fruit of their labour were seven publications, each focussed on a particular state and eventually compiled into a book. Shot in black and white, they're a microcosm of modern American culture, all infused with emotion and subtle storytelling. Shots like *Dance N Style. Sandusky, Ohio*, showing a grandfatherly man practising his dance moves brim over with personality. The energy captured on film draws you in, all but demanding the viewer construct their own narrative to fill in the blanks.



Alec Soth exhibition © Kate Elliott, courtesy Science Museum

I spoke with Soth, curious to know how he thought his unvarnished Americana would be received by British audiences. “Without a doubt there’s a difference to how people internationally respond to the pictures, which is very interesting to me. Even within America people on the east coast respond differently to people on the west coast. This is just fine by me – I don’t have a specific agenda – I’m happy to have multiple interpretations. I love being in this institution that’s accessible to all these different kinds of people.”

Gathered Leaves underlines why Alec Soth is widely considered to be one of the best photographic artists in the world. His assertion that the mark of a great photographer isn't taking one amazing photo but assembling an amazing collection is proved many times over in this compelling, intelligently curated and deeply entertaining exhibition.

Gathered Leaves: Photographs by Alec Soth is running at the Science Museum's Media Space until 28 March 2016. For tickets and more information, click [here](#).