






Art

Alec Soth Spent a Year Meditating and Nearly Quit Photography. Now He's Back.

Jacqui Palumbo Mar 29, 2019 1:35 pm   



Alec Soth *Sonya and Dombrovsky. Odessa., 2018*
Fraenkel Gallery

When I dialed photographer Alec Soth's studio number from New York, I found myself wishing I were in Minneapolis. An interview befitting his latest monograph, *I Know How Furiously Your Heart Is Beating* (2019), would have ideally taken place in person in the abandoned farmhouse he bought a few years ago. There, in the place where he reassessed his photography practice, and nearly gave it up altogether, I would gaze upon the interior details—light coming through the window; a book, half-open—that would, together, build a



rather an equal exchange, to reveal something true about one another.

In reality, Soth was in Minneapolis preparing for four shows opening in New York, San Francisco, Minneapolis, and Berlin, and I was in a small phone booth in my office in Manhattan, somewhat nervous because I wanted this interview to be meaningful. A decade ago, I was introduced to Soth's work in an undergraduate photo-book course, and I vividly recalled that feeling of having discovered something private and special, a sentiment shared widely by young, aspiring photographers (at Soth's recent opening at Sean Kelly Gallery, they lined up for autographs, wide-eyed, holding his new book like a sacred text).



Alec Soth *The Blue Room. New Orleans, 2018*
Weinstein Hammons Gallery



Alec Soth *Yuko. Berlin., 2018*
Fraenkel Gallery

I Know How Furiously Your Heart Is Beating marks a new chapter in Soth's photography. The series, a collection of portraits and interior scenes created during informal encounters with subjects, comes in the



before recalibrating his approach to photography entirely. I wanted to speak with Soth about conveying the inner lives of his sitters, something he's sought after for over 15 years. What *can* a photograph really tell us about a person? That question underpins his latest work.

Soth entered the art world in the early aughts with portraits of people living in small towns that hinge on intimacy and solitude; the images color the settings as vividly as their residents. There's a tidal pull to his work: the current of the Mississippi River guiding him from place to place for *Sleeping by the Mississippi* (2004); or passion and loneliness flowing and crashing together in *Niagara* (2006). But Soth doesn't just observe—he's a presence in the images, too. You can sense him in his subjects' ineffable gaze. But they aren't just looking at him—they're looking at *you*, too.



Alec Soth *Anna. Kentfield, California., 2017*
Fraenkel Gallery

Soth told me that as someone who “lives mostly in [his] own head,” he always has to push himself to connect with other people. “Every once in awhile it occurs to me again how strange this is that I do what I do,” he said, laughing. “It still doesn’t make sense.” (As a journalist who has to



interacting with other people almost started turning into the subject of the work itself.” His solitary nature ebbs and flows with each body of work. He turned inward for *Broken Manual* (2010), photographing people committed to seclusion, like monks and hermits, in remote locations. In *Songbook* (2015), the pendulum swung, and he assumed the role of a local newspaper reporter, traveling state by state to capture the idiosyncrasies of small communities in lyrical black-and-white images.

But after *Songbook*, Soth retreated again, and he almost didn’t return. After he bought the farmhouse, sometime in 2015, he began making work that he kept secret from the world—even his own studio. “But I realized that work was shit,” he said. Then, meditation led him to a mind-altering, spiritual experience, and he began to question if he could keep making photographs.



Meditation, Soth realized, made him “want to connect with the world,” he recalled. “And photography, I’ve often thought, is a way of separating myself from the world. Even though it causes me to go out into the world and engage, there’s this piece of glass, and I’m stopping time rather than existing in time. So I pulled back and I stopped traveling and I stopped photographing people.”

But he didn’t give up his camera entirely. For a year, Soth continued to meditate, and entered an exploratory period in his work, watching the light move across the walls of the farmhouse and trying to draw it, or making sculptures out of dust. He took pictures of his creations and hung them on the walls of his studio.

He was happy. But he could tell that the people close to him who saw the work “weren’t responding to it,” he said. He didn’t “have a desire to put this stuff out in the world, really.”



Alec Soth *Ute's Books, Odessa, 2018*
Weinstein Hammons Gallery



Alec Soth *Vince, New York City, 2018*
Sean Kelly Gallery

But then a unique opportunity arose. His San Francisco rep, Fraenkel Gallery (where some of the new work is currently on view, as well as at Look Galerie in Berlin and Weinstein Hammons Gallery in Minneapolis), set up an experimental space for Soth to hold 90-minute sessions with dancers and performers, completely silently, making pictures together. There was a boundless nature to the shoots: His subjects showed up, willing and open to collaborate, and then they simply experienced one another, with an emphasis on play. Even when he had to leave the confines of the space to photograph postmodern dancer Anna Halprin in her home—at 98 years old, she was too elderly to come to Fraenkel Gallery—Soth brought that same ethos with him.

“I thought, ‘This is what I want to do,’” Soth explained. “I don’t want to work in the way I worked in the past; I just want to have these encounters and see where it takes me.”

And so *I Know How Furiously Your Heart Is Beating* began to take shape. After declining to travel for lectures and events for a year, Soth began

without a clearly demarcated project in mind, was a new experience for the photographer, and a welcome one. “I’m trying to figure out who they are, and trying to figure out who I am,” he said of the sessions. “It’s this kind of dance.”



Alec Soth *Nick. Los Angeles., 2018*
Fraenkel Gallery

It’s a different kind of intimacy than that of *Niagara*, where Soth’s subjects evoked a sense of heartbreak and malaise, against the backdrop of an impoverished American town. You are drawn in, inexorably, but sometimes it feels like you should look away. Coming off of *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, he said, *Niagara* had an intensity, a “different energy,” and “it wasn’t necessarily a happier energy.” He explained: “I was trying to turn up the volume on my encounters. And that was good, but it was also fraught, a little bit, psychologically. I guess it’s more intimate in one way, but it’s also just tougher.”



of *I Know How Furiously Your Heart Is Beating*; it's a quiet mystery instead of one that demands you to find the clues. Subjects, like Halprin in California and Keni in New Orleans, sit comfortably in their homes, as the light plays a supporting role. A single flower in a blue room or a library of worn books can set the mood of a scene, creating an encounter of its own. In a portrait of a couple in Odessa, Ukraine, Sonya gazes at the camera as she lies against Dombrovsky, but there's no feeling of unease. While the series's title, taken from a Wallace Stevens poem, implies the closeness of a quiet encounter, it could also signal deep empathy for another person's anxieties.



Alec Soth, *Michelle. Berlin*. from *I Know How Furiously Your Heart is Beating*, 2019. Courtesy if the artist and MACK.

“There are some stories behind the pictures, but I left more of that out than any project in the past,” Soth said. “So you’re trying to figure out what’s happening with this person, what’s inside of them.”



convey a deep truth about a person, pointing to Garry Winogrand's quote that photographs don't contain a narrative; they only describe light hitting a surface. When I asked Soth if he still felt that way after this project, he paused. He has since refined his ideas, he conceded, but he still doesn't believe that images reveal a whole lot of information. It *is* just light, recorded, "which is one form of energy," he said, "but there's another form of energy, which is the energy of the social interaction, of the engagement."

At this point in the conversation, Soth paused, trying to recall the famous Diane Arbus quote about the mystery of photographs. I looked up the exact wording and read it to him: "A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you, the less you know."





Alec Soth *Cammy's View. Salt Lake City, 2018*
Fraenkel Gallery

“Yeah, exactly,” he replied. “A photograph is a mystery, and I still feel that way. It doesn’t reveal a ton of information, but it kind of unleashes this exchange of energy, first between myself and the subject, and then later, hopefully, between the subject and the audience looking at the picture.”

That kind of magic has remained fixed in Soth’s work, but Soth himself is in a state of flux—about photography as a medium, the balance of his practice, and the way he makes portraits. The question he is asked the most, about how he approaches people, does not have a definitive answer. It changes with each project, and yes, it does still give him anxiety, though that has shifted, too, over the years.

Soth may have had an epiphany that decisively changed him, but how he negotiates that into his approach in the long-term still remains a work-in-progress. When I asked him if there’s anything about his practice that he’d still like to change, he answered: “I’m still unresolved about everything. There is no answer.”

Jacqui Palumbo is a Senior Editor at Artsy.



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