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COLLECTOR DAILY

Alec Soth, I Know How Furiously Your Heart Is Beating
@Sean Kelly



JTF (just the facts): A total of 22 color photographs floating in white frames. Twenty-one are exhibited on the outer walls of the ground floor gallery, and on both sides of two partitions, with one situated over the director's desk. All are archival pigment prints, dated either 2017 or 2018, and available in editions of 9+4AP. Sizes of prints in exhibition are as follows: 30×24 inches (4); 24×30 (3); 32×40 (1); 40×32 (5); 50×40 (7); 60×48 (2). (Installation shots below.)

A companion volume, published in 2019 by MACK ([here](#)), has an afterword/interview between the photographer and the writer/editor Hanya Yanagihara (12×13 inches, unpaginated, 35 color plates). \$65 cloth hardcover. (Cover and spread shots below.)

Comments/Context: With every exhibition by Alec Soth, I keep hoping that my reaction to the photographs will at last catch up to my high estimation of him as a person. So many aspects of his career as an artist are admirable: his sensitivity toward the people he portrays; self-questioning intelligence; work ethic; dedication to the craft of photographic book-making; generosity with the media and the public; and willingness to depart from practices that have availed him in the past.

A portrait and landscape photographer squarely in the tradition of Walker Evans, Diane Arbus, and William Eggleston, he has always shown deep respect for this heritage, shying away from postmodern strategies or Photoshopped simulations that would cut him off from what he loves about photography: its ambiguous

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participation in the real world. At the same time his frustrations with the unwritten rules of documentary, its emphasis on impartiality and the value of the undoctored image as the ultimate product, have led him to look for solutions other than merely hanging photographs on the wall. *Broken Manual* (2006-10, reviewed here), his messy installation of books, texts, and prints on the theme of the troubled American male, was his most radical answer.

I Know How Furiously Your Heart is Beating is a renewal of faith rather than an act of dissidence. A book of portraits and interiors, it quietly affirms the belief that the still photograph can reveal truths about people. Made over one year during travels in the U.S., the U.K., and Europe, the series represents a wish to return to basics—to do away with anecdotal material and explanatory backgrounds, features of his first acclaimed series, *Sleeping by the Mississippi* (2004)—so that he might grow closer to everyone who poses in front of his view camera. In interviews he has cited the practice of meditation, its call to empty the mind, as the operating philosophy behind these contemplative pictures in color.

They are certainly a departure from *Songbook* (2015, reviewed here), his exuberant black-and-white series about American community life. There are no cheerleaders doing the splits here, and the only dancer (*Yuko, Berlin*) is unsmiling and standing solidly in place against a wall. A white-haired woman moving a blurred array of stones around a table (*Simone, Los Angeles*) and a man who stands in front of a Picasso painting with a handkerchief over his eye (*Dan-Georg, Dusseldorf*) are the sole action figures. More people are shown lying on sofas and beds than sitting in chairs.

Soth has cited Peter Hujar as a guiding spirit for this project, the hope being that with his international cast he might achieve the same shared intimacy that Hujar forged within his tight circle of Lower East Side friends. As a number of these pictures opt for the indirect gaze—the subject reflected in mirrors (*Galina, Odessa*) or partially obscured (*Leyla and Sabine, New Orleans*) or observed through cracks between bookshelves (*Hanya, New York City*)—I’m wondering if Hujar’s example of direct engagement proved too daunting or unwieldy to emulate.

The series is as much about looking as it is about being looked at. Almost half of the photographs in the book have no people and are instead about what they routinely see. Five of these “views” are reverse angles oriented through windows toward gardens or trees, with equal emphasis on the objects along the sills. A page at the end of the book quotes an Emily Dickinson letter to an unnamed friend: “I am glad you love the Blossoms so well. I hope you love Birds too. It is economical. It saves going to heaven.”

Soth has often photographed with a poetic sensibility and has woven two of the items mentioned by Dickinson—flowers (cut and wild) and birds (out of the cage or as illustrations in books)—throughout the sequence. Indoors and outdoors flow

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into one another. For the most part, he has preferred to photograph in sunlight. Only in a few instances do we see the harsher shadows left by artificial illumination.

Soth's love for the printed-and-bound word has been a constant in his oeuvre. Numerous instances can be found here. In the battle between the Marie Kondos of this world and inveterate clutterers, we know where his sympathies lie. It's not clear if the woman (out-of-frame) who lives in the dilapidated room in the Crimea still reads the volumes on the shelves perched high on the blue walls. But it's clear she can't bear to throw them out (*Ute's Books, Odessa*) and that she is Soth's kind of person. Another woman who lives among a sea of paperbacks stacked up on the floor is even more besotted with words (*Irineu's Library, Giurgiu, Romania*). Soth uses the double elephant folio of *Audubon's Birds of America*, which here occupies a Minneapolis room floor-to-ceiling, to combine his aviary and literary motifs. Anyone who has visited Vince Aletti's Lower East Side apartment knows that he is gradually being swallowed up by the thousands of books and magazines he owns. Soth's tender portrait of the critic, his face softly out of focus, hovering over his photographs and postcards, is perhaps the most successful here (*Vince, New York*).

It was brave of Soth to work here without a net—to assemble a group of people who are connected only through him. It's doubtful that many (or any) of his subjects know each other. That was not the case with Hujar's portraits. Soth's affection for everyone here seems genuine, which may be part of the problem. His benevolent energy feels too evenly distributed. Surely, one or two of them irked or aroused or bored him. If they did, though, he hasn't dared to express these impolite emotions in front of us.

August Sander and Diane Arbus were two of the supreme portrait artists of the 20th century because you could almost smell their distaste, fear, contempt, bemusement or loving regard for the people they photographed. With Soth, I have always sensed that he prefers to be well liked by his subjects than to risk ill will or combat with them.

My second favorite photograph (after the one of Aletti) is of a child's electric organ against a white wall in a middle-class home. Below the light switch is sheet music for "Little Red Corvette." This sweet and simple tribute to Prince, a local hero for northern Midwesterners of Soth's generation, carries a stronger charge of personal loss and kinship than registers in most of the portraits. Prince was anything but Minnesota nice. I'm not sure why Soth so often thinks he needs to be.

Collector's POV: The prints in this show range in price from \$14000 to \$26000. 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 \$63000.