

# SEANKELLY

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## BUST YEARS

Two photographers prowl the margins of America

**TYLER GREEN** // ART & LIFE



ALEC SOTH, MAGNUM PHOTOS, AND SEAN KELLY GALLERY, NEW YORK

ALEC SOTH'S *HOME*, *Treasure Island Casino, Red Wing, Minnesota, 2000*, depicts a mobile home partially wrapped in some kind of metallic insulation. In front two bicycles lean against a barbecue grill. A white reindeer sculpture, its head caught mid bob, is strung with Christmas lights. To the left of the door is a small mailbox on top of which has been taped or glued an American flag. The trailer is parked on a patch of dirt in a casino parking lot. This is someone's home.

Soth liked this photo so much that he included it in two different portfolios of his work: "Sleeping by the Mississippi," an early aughts investigation of life along the Mississippi River, and "The Last Days of W," a commissioned portfolio that looks at the margins of U.S. society after eight years of the second Bush presidency. It's the sort of what's-happening-on-the-domestic-front picture the artist took often during the 2000s, a decade most notable for the U.S.'s focus on expensive foreign wars and

its response to terrorism. His work from that period is most fully presented in the exhibition "From Here to There: Alec Soth's America," which curator Siri Engberg organized for the Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis, in 2010 and which is currently on view at the Everson Museum of Art, in Syracuse, New York, through January 12, 2012. The accompanying catalogue is one of the most important of early 21st-century art. Soth will debut a fresh body of work, one that he says will take a new turn, at New York's Sean Kelly Gallery in February.

Although the U.S. economy—and Europe's—have limped along for most of the past 10 years, you wouldn't know that from looking at the overwhelming majority of the decade's art. Economic statistics may provide a partial explanation: Income inequality in the U.S. is growing, in fact accelerating. Even as the number of poor Americans balloons, the millennium so far has been pretty good for the wealthy, whose

riches have helped fuel a robust art market. To a significant extent, artists have responded more intently to the demands of the market than to a declining U.S. The economic struggle, a subject of American art going back to 19th-century genre scenes, has substantially waned as a focus.

The Minneapolis-born Soth is among the valued contrarians and an exception to this rule. He is *the* artist of the Bush economy, having examined mostly rural America, particularly Middle America, across the Great Lakes and down into the Mississippi River Valley. His human subjects from early in the aughts, in “Sleeping by the Mississippi,” have a dignified self-possession, an assuredness that something will pull them through. That something is necessarily financial. In *Patrick, Palm Sunday, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 2002*, Soth places the titular Patrick on a patch of sand surrounded by debris that suggests the aftermath of a violent storm. The top third of the picture is marked by the beautiful purple blossoms of a flowering tree or vine, perhaps jacaranda or wisteria. Patrick is wearing an ill-fitting tan suit the pants of which are several inches too long. He holds what appears to be a Bible in his left hand and a palm frond, the attribute of a martyr, in the crook of his right arm. He seems to believe that if he can’t make it on earth, he will be welcomed somewhere else, somewhere up beyond those blossoms. He’s OK with that. He’s smiling.

“Sleeping by the Mississippi” is full of other people who are accepting of their lot in life. In *Charles, Vasa, Minnesota, 2002*, a bearded man in green coveralls shows off two model airplanes in the snow. He is standing on a half-built porch surrounded by long-exposed, weathered building materials. He’s crudely protected against the cold. But he seems content.

By the end of the decade, in Soth’s “The Last Days of W” series, contented people have given way to landscapes of uncertainty, with portraits often taken in places hit especially hard by the Great Recession. In *Camp Purgatory, Ontario, California, 2008*, a woman looks across a makeshift campground. Above her an American flag waves upside down, a clear distress signal. A sign below the flag proclaims the site to be Camp Purgatory. *Buffalo, New York, April, 2004* shows an architecturally striking staircase inside a

semiabandoned building. Detritus has piled up on the floor below the steps. A few photographs later, *Avenue Theater, Dallas, Texas, 2006* shows a freshly painted pawnshop, its marquee promising PAYDAY LOANS.

Oddly enough, asked about the lower-middle-class narratives that run through his work, Soth says he didn’t purposefully photograph people and places on the margins: “Over time art should be a marker of the moment it was made. That’s where I think my pictures fit in. The economic status of people or places wasn’t the subject of the work, but I think it was part of the work. It will reveal itself as something important. Or maybe it won’t.”

If Soth is the preeminent artist of life at the margins in rural America, then the South Philadelphia–based Zoe Strauss is the prime photographer of the same subject in the country’s urban environments. Her pictures are often raw and pleading. It sounds unkind to say that she captures the desperation of her subjects, but she does. Her photos from the 2000s will be featured in a major exhibition opening January 14 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which is planning to acquire all the roughly 170 works in the show. In one of these pictures—*Cynthia, Philadelphia, 2004*—a girl stands in front of a chain-link fence behind which lies a patch of concrete, perhaps a playground or ballpark. She has flowers in her freshly curled hair, and she’s wearing a shiny necklace and a corsage. She tries hard to present herself with aplomb; the city behind her has given up on its appearance.

Sometimes Strauss juxtaposes bright possibilities with grim present circumstance. *Election Night Green Paneling, Philadelphia, 2008*, depicts a contemporary interior decorated in the aesthetic of the 1970s, complete with linoleum floor and cathode-ray-tube television. An American flag on a pole stands next to a table and a folding chair. The datedness of the scene gives it a certain bleakness. The title and date suggest hope—the oft-repeated theme, of course, of Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign—but the stark, empty tableau also seems to say, “We’ll see.” A picture from 2004 likewise juxtaposes optimism with reality, showing a staircase, which is ordinarily a metaphor for upward mobility but in this instance is iced over and far too slippery to ascend.



“I’m really interested in social engagement,” Strauss says. Her pictures, which get right up in the faces of her subjects, revealing a black eye or a crack pipe, demonstrate just how engaged she’s willing to get. “I’m interested in the history of photography as well and especially street photography. That involves a lot of social-documentary-type stuff. But I don’t see my work as being documentary. It’s not presented with text. I put it forth for people to make their own narrative. I think it’s really important to show and talk about this current moment in our nation.” Strauss notes that she and Soth are part of a tradition of American photographers exploring the economic fringes that goes back to at least Lewis Hine and includes Dorothea Lange and the Works Progress Administration and Farm Security Administration photographers, as well as Larry Clark, Nan Goldin, Danny Lyon, and Gordon Parks.

That is not to say that Strauss’s or Soth’s work is at all like those photographers’ except in thematic focus. For example, many of Lange’s best pictures capture her subjects looking away from us or apparently unaware that Lange and her camera are there, while Strauss and Soth

pointedly introduce us to their subjects, who look right back at us. If Lange implicitly argues that her subjects deserve better, that a perfect democracy would more fully include them, Strauss’s and Soth’s photographs seem to be urging us simply to see these people, to think of them, to remember them. Their approach works: Charles of Vasa, Minnesota, has been stuck in my head for years.

Strauss’s pictures are more confrontational and often bleaker than Soth’s. But she also includes more dabs of optimism. Take *Trees on Slag, Central PA*, 2009, which will be in the Philadelphia exhibition. It’s a picture of a lush forest. It’s almost entirely green. Strauss seems to be standing with her camera on a hilltop, looking past some leafy branches to another hill that’s impossibly dense with bushy trees—except for one spot: In the middle of the picture is a gray slag heap, the by-product of mining. There’s no way of knowing how old that pile is, but judging from the size of the trees around it, it could be many, many decades old. Although the tailings are still plenty visible, even dominating the photograph, a handful of trees have begun to grow out of the waste. There’s hope for what’s been left behind. MP

**Zoe Strauss**  
*Cynthia*,  
 Philadelphia, 2004.  
 Inkjet print, 12 x 16 in.

OPPOSITE:  
**Alec Soth**  
*Home, Treasure*  
*Island Casino,*  
*Red Wing,*  
*Minnesota*, 2000.  
 C-print, 32 x 40 in.