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How to Run Away: Alec Soth on What He Learned From His New Series of Hermit Portraits



Detail of Alec Soth's "S., Alabama," 2007 (© Alec Soth / Courtesy: Sean Kelly Gallery, New York)

A visitor to **Alec Soth's** inscrutable new exhibition at **Sean Kelly** gallery, called "Broken Manual," might find themselves feeling a bit lost. The photographs, some immaculately printed in large-scale, others in smaller sizes on thicker stock, depict solitary figures — all men — lost in thickets of trees and sections of dark, forbidding woods that invite curiosity but repel closer scrutiny. Among the portraits and landscapes are also a few still lifes, a rarity for this artist, composed of bizarre, disturbing objects: an odd sex toy that appears to be carved from ivory, or a knife improvised out of metal and wire.

In "Broken Manual," Soth, who has long been known for his photographic portraits of the weirdness at the heart of America, has sought out men who choose to escape society, hermits who create their own worlds in the woods. His images hint at the fear and paranoia that drive this escapism in deeply psychological photographs that delve into his subjects' psyches — even when the people themselves are not immediately present in the frame. Recently, ARTINFO spoke to the artist about how he stumbled into this project, his own escape fantasies, and why even hermits have blogs.

How did you first become interested in the hermits you depict in "Broken Manual"?

In one sense I've always been interested in this idea of escape. The first project that I got any attention for was called "Sleeping by the Mississippi," and that was the boyhood version of that kind of Huck Finn, romantic notion. That idea's always been with me, but I'm no longer a boy [laughs] and so this is the middle-aged, mid-life crisis version of that. Whenever there's a book with a silhouette of a man running on the cover, I want to read it. And so, I want to somehow get at that feeling. And this project came out of that.

So the work comes out of a kind of escape fantasy? How did the project initially come about?

What actually happened is I got commissioned by the High Museum to work in Atlanta. It didn't really work, and I remembered that story of the Olympic bomber in Atlanta, Eric Rudolph. There's that whole story about how he hid out in the woods when the FBI was looking for him — it sort of touched on the same romantic notion. So I started poking around in the area where he was hiding out, and while I was on that trip, I visited this tiny little monastery in Northern Georgia. I was trying to figure out a way to explore this desire for retreat without making it like a documentary essay on rightwing survivalists.

I wanted to approach it in a different way, so that it wasn't about a very specific kind of act, but about this general longing. For me, that's the big struggle. Photography is so specific about the world. How do you photograph longing? Music can do that. It's about a feeling with music, but it's harder in photography. Particularly, when you're perceived as a documentary photographer.

The titles of some the photos are just numbers, and there's a general air of instability — the narrative is fleeting.

Yeah, and sort of fractured. With the titles and with a number of other strategies, in terms of the kinds of prints, the variety of prints, the sizes, and so on, I wanted an inconsistency. And that was something that I saw in the literature of running away, these different guidebooks on how to run away. They were so desperately incomplete and non-definitive. Someone is trying to create this document but it's not working; it's a bit of a failure.

In terms of the naming strategies, sometimes I'm working as a documentary photographer, sometimes I'm photographing the way I would normally photograph, and title it the way I normally would. And, you know, those numbers mean something. They're actually my negative numbers. Incidentally, that has been a nightmare for everyone involved. My studio manager and the gallery hate it because it's so complicated, this number system.

With all the different formats and sizes of the photographs in the gallery, the show seems like a departure from earlier shows you've had, where all of the photos are single-sized, high-finish prints.

Yeah. This whole theme of breaking and broken... I wanted to smash the way I was working and get away from it. I just don't want to keep making the same picture over and over again. And this work kind of came out of a struggle with that as well.

There's also the pile of survival books and ephemera that you installed in the space. What do you think of that as? Do you think of it as a sculpture?

It's not quite a sculpture — it's like the exhibition, with the grey walls, and the grey frames, and this kind of unique mounting. It's not quite installation art, but with this show I was much more conscious of installation and that sort of sculptural aspect of things than I normally am.

I don't want to call myself a sculptor, and I don't think of that wall that way. When I installed the book pile in the Walker Art Center, people were free to touch it and everything. In this case, you can't because it's a different circumstance. So it wasn't thought of as a sculpture, but I wanted to evoke my process, and the book does that. The book is such an essential part of all this, and I wanted to communicate that somehow. It's always a struggle, if you're a bookmaker, and a book is important to you: how do you communicate it in an exhibition, which is a very different format?

Hermits aren't exactly easy to pin down. How did you actually find your subjects?

In many cases, I found people on the Internet, which always seems like a contradiction. The whole thing about this project is that it's a contradiction. One of the resource materials that I looked at a bit... there's this blog that I read on hermitry. And I just think that's really funny. All these people reading this blog —

A blog on hermitry seems like the ultimate irony.

Yeah, exactly. And this same contradiction exists in these survival books. If you're writing a book to run away, why are you sharing this? Why do you want to help other people? The whole thing is sort of a failure. People need other people. And so, people go online. In many cases, not all cases. I'm sure there are real, 100-percent-exclusive runaways out there, and I probably just didn't meet them. There's one guy who I just met by driving down this road and that road, and deeper and deeper and deeper, and I just stumbled onto this character who was truly alone. But in most cases, it was via some connection.

How was the experience of actually doing the portraits? Some of the photos are very posed, and you must have had to work with the individuals very closely.

When the project started, I wasn't going to photograph people at all. At that time, as part of this desire to run away, I didn't want to encounter other people. So I was photographing around where Eric Rudolph was living. I thought I would just photograph these places where people had run away, and try to evoke that spirit. But, then it just wasn't enough. I needed people, ironically. It's that same irony: I needed people.

And so I was making these portraits. But then, it felt wrong. It sometimes felt contrary, so I needed a lot of distance. I started photographing people from really far away, blowing up details so you can feel this distance. It was complicated. I didn't want to give very much information at all about the people I was photographing. I wanted them to exist, after you leave the exhibition or after you look at the book, as these blurry characters in your imagination.

The photos definitely are not as explicitly representational or narrative as other work you've done. Was part of the whole process just you traveling around by yourself?

Yeah the project went on for over four years, different trips. The first half I was alone; and in the second half, these filmmakers were with me. So it was just me bouncing around any trying to figure things out. And the project changed dramatically over that time. It had an entirely different name at one point. Actually the name changed three different times, and the focus of it changed quite a bit.

It was originally called "Black Line of Woods," and it was going to be these purely nature pictures. And then this idea of the manual came in, the text part of it, these instructions on how to run away. And when the filmmakers came in, that changed things as well, because, of course, the contradictions doubled themselves.

And that's the documentary that is showing at Sean Kelly gallery along with the exhibition?

It is, yes. I thought a lot about that. The film wasn't there the previous time I exhibited. I really love the documentary. It's not my film at all, so I didn't have any say in anything about it. But I have a great affection for the filmmakers, and the fact of them making the film did affect my work. I knew they were catching the narrative aspects of these people. In a way it liberated me to do even less. There were multiple occasions where the filmmakers got an interesting story, and I don't even show the person in my pictures.

A few of the photographs only show objects. Are some those the possessions of people you didn't photograph?

That's correct. There's this character Tony in the film. [Sighs] He's sort of the darkest, most crazy, horrific character in the movie. And in my photographs, I don't show him. I just show the interior of his home, with this punched out wall and writing on the wall. And in other cases, there are objects that I photograph instead of the people. That was a challenge for me: Can I evoke the spirit of people without so much showing them?

You do a lot of research on the Internet and had a highly regarded personal blog. What do you use the Internet for? Is it just exploring and looking around?

It's always been a big part of my process. The thing about "Sleeping by the Mississippi" way back when was that the project developed at a time when web surfing was very exciting, this idea of bouncing around. And it was like, "Wow! You just go from here to there and bounce...." And my idea then was to sort of incorporate that quality in the real world, to sort of web surf in the real world, and use whatever information I found online to bounce me around. It's been a key part of my process. Still is. Yesterday, I found something online, and sometimes I don't even read the story, I just read the headline. And it's an excuse to go out somewhere and to have an encounter.

You have this alter-ego named Lester B. Morrison who comes up a few times in the show. Can you explain how that came about?

It's a complicated journey. The way I think of Lester is as another one of these characters whom I met. He is the person who is crafting the text on how to run away. And, like a lot of people I met, it's a person who hasn't run away, who is dreaming of it, imagining it, creating it. A part of running away is creating a new identity for yourself — a sort of glorified identity for yourself. And Lester is another part of this fracturing of the project for me.

The whole thing seems a little bit like a manifestation of your own desire to run away.

Here's the thing. So, the final photo book I've made for "Broken Manual" is hidden inside other books — because it's like, if I'm going to run away, or if I'm going to make this book that's for men to run away from their lives, they'll need to hide it, and it comes in a vehicle in which you can already hide it. One of the instructions is that you have to create

a new identity, and it sort of explains how Lester B. Morrison is created — what sort of name you should make up, and all that kind of stuff.

[Note: Soth's "Broken Manual" photobook comes enclosed in larger found books that the photographer cuts the center pages out of, thus hiding his own work]

Do you have anything coming up in the near future, or are you headed anywhere new? Not into the woods, one hopes.

No, no. One thing I have thought is that as you go out and you spend too much time alone, there's this real sort of self-indulgence that takes place. And I'm totally prone toward self-indulgence. And one of the reasons that I wanted to be in Magnum and be a quasi-documentary photographer is that it keeps me honest, sometimes. And it keeps me from being too self-indulgent.

I'm trying to engage with the world again, and other people, and not just think about myself. Which is hard. [Laughs] So I'm trying to move out of the woods and deal with other human beings for a while. But, they're really annoying. So I'm struggling.

"Broken Manual" is on view at Sean Kelly gallery through March 11