

SEANKELLY

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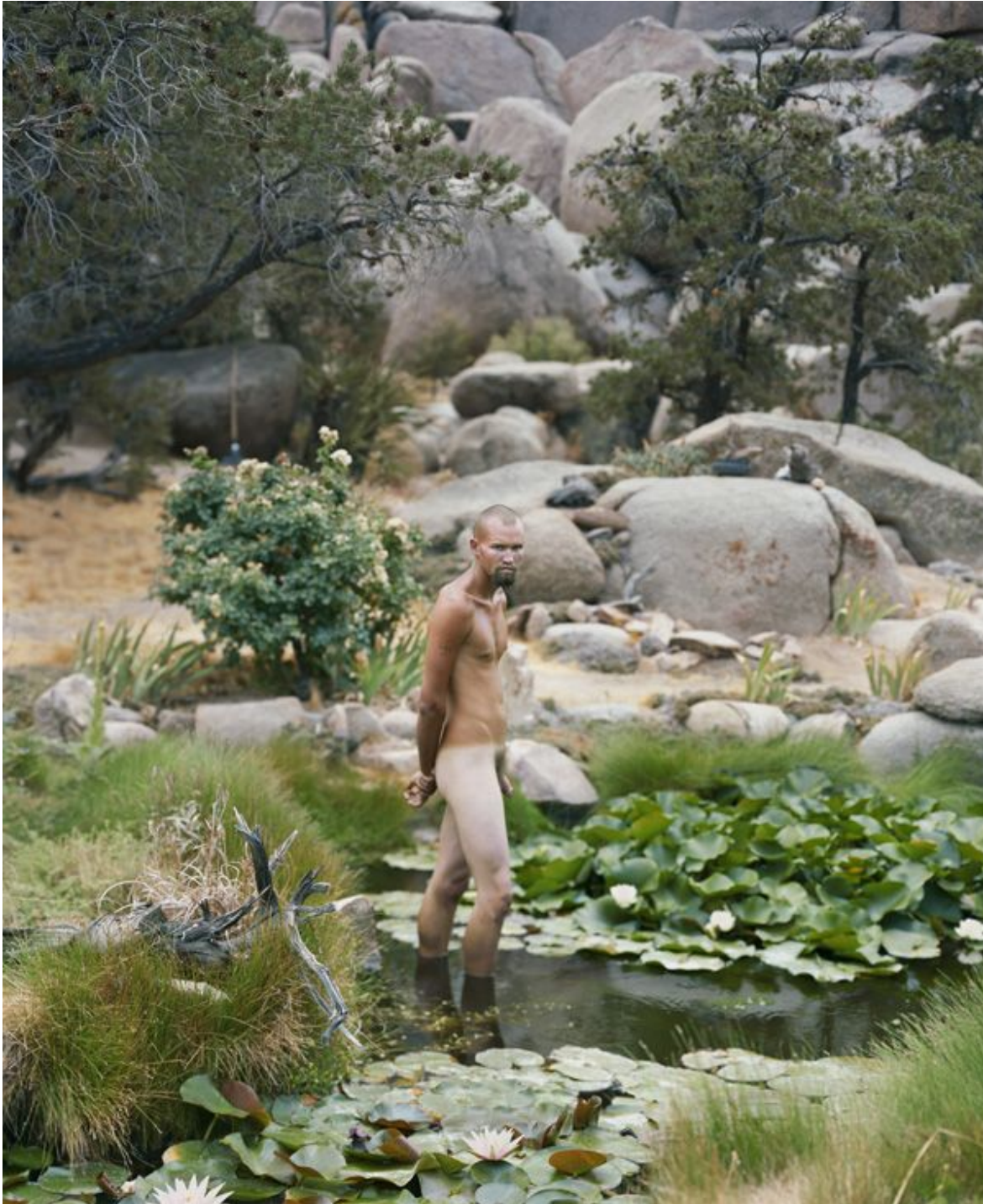
Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Children of God



ALEC SOTH, "2007_10z10006" framed archival pigment print mounted to 4-ply museum board image: 50 x 40 inches (127 x 101.6 cm) framed: 54 1/4 x 44 1/4 inches (137.8 x 112.4 cm) edition of 7 with 3 APs (image © Alec Soth Courtesy: Sean Kelly Gallery, New York)

"One picture leads to another," Alec Soth tells the two filmmakers in *Somewhere to Disappear* (2011), a documentary that follows him around during the last two years that he worked on his photographic book, *Broken Manual* (2006-11). Later, in the film, he says: "I want to be carried." Soth yearns for a subject to overwhelm his curiosity, leading him into places and situations that he couldn't have otherwise foreseen. Photography is his means of discovering both the self and the Other, and where the two meet. It is how he finds "a path through the world."



Alec Soth, "2008_08z10107" framed archival pigment print mounted to 4 ply museum board image: 70 x 56 inches (177.8 x 142.2 cm) framed: 74 1/4 x 60 inches (188.6 x 152.4 cm) edition of 7 with 3 APs (image © Alec Soth Courtesy: Sean Kelly Gallery, New York)

The impetus for *Broken Manual*, what “carried” Soth, was born out of his curiosity about Eric Rudolph, the “Olympic Park Bomber,” who managed to evade capture for five years, hiding in the Appalachian wilderness. On his way to see where Rudolph hid out, Soth stopped at the Gethsemane Monastery, in Kentucky, where Thomas Merton lived for nearly thirty years. Despite the fact that Rudolph committed murder because of his beliefs and Merton took a vow of silence and became a Trappist monk because of his, “[b]oth stories ignite a fantasy of retreat.” And yet, even as both men retreated from the material world, they also were deeply engaged with it. Rudolph transformed his bewilderment into bombs, while Merton accommodated himself to it through writing, silence, and pacifism.

In terms of their public actions, Rudolph and Merton mark the extremes. In *Broken Manual*, Soth photographs white men — hermits, monks, and survivalists — who dwell somewhere between these extremes. We are not always sure where.

“After returning from these two pilgrimages,” Soth writes in *Broken Manual*, “I met another hermit, Lester B. Morrison. Unlike Rudolph and Merton, Morrison isn’t a celebrity with a political or spiritual ax to grind. Nor des Lester consider himself an artist. He simply hopes to escape.” Morrison is Soth’s alter ego, the person in him who is not an artist, the one who hopes to run off. But for Soth, “[i]t’s not really about running away, but about the desire to run away.” He goes on extended road trips to find his subjects, but he doesn’t run away. *Broken Manual* is the result of the collaboration (and dialogue) between Soth’s two selves. It is out of these myriad contradictions that the work was assembled into a book in which Morrison writes: “I’ve included a number of photos by my comrade, Alec Soth.”

* * *



Alec Soth Installation Shot (credit- Jason Wyche)

Just as one picture leads to another in Soth’s search, one thought leads to another while thinking about his work. He opens up a space in which the mind wanders, seldom in ways that are reassuring.

Eric Robert Rudolph had strong, unbendable grievances against abortion and homosexuality. So intractable were his beliefs that between 1996 and '98 he planted a series of bombs, which killed two people and wounded more than 150 others. On October 14, 1998, the Department of Justice identified Rudolph as a suspect in the Centennial Olympic Park Bombing, which killed two persons and injured more than 100 others.



Alec Soth, "2008_08zI0238" framed archival pigment print mounted to 4 ply museum board image: 32 x 40 inches (81.3 x 101.6 cm) framed: 36 x 44 inches (91.4 x 111.8 cm) edition of 7 with 3 APs (image © Alec Soth Courtesy: Sean Kelly Gallery, New York)

(The bombing, which took place on July 27, 1996, during the Summer Olympics in Atlanta, Georgia, quickly became a media circus: within four days an innocent man, Richard Jewell, who was originally hailed as a hero for noticing Rudolph's bomb-laden knapsack and acting swiftly to move people away from it, became a suspect in the crime. He was hounded and ridiculed for months before being officially and completely exonerated.)

For the next five years, until May 31, 2003, when Rudolph was arrested behind a discount supermarket in Murphy, North Carolina, he survived in the Appalachian wilderness, gathering acorns and salamanders, stealing from vegetable gardens and grain silos, and occasionally going into a nearby town to rummage through a dumpster. When Rudolph was apprehended, he was wearing new sneakers, and was clean-shaven with a neatly trimmed moustache.

Rick Santorum has many of the same grievances as Rudolph, but instead of planting bombs and disappearing into the American wilderness, he is a Republican presidential candidate who believes that the majority of voting Americans share his view of women, homosexuality, and abortion. From 1995 to 2007, Santorum was the junior senator from Pennsylvania, overlapping with the years Rudolph planted his bombs and went out on the lam. In stating why he believed racial profiling during airport screenings was an effective way to identify potential terrorists, Santorum said: "I don't want to be called a xenophobe. I want to be called intelligent."



Alec Soth, "2006_08zl0036" framed archival pigment print mounted to 4 ply museum board image/paper: 40 x 50 inches (101.6 x 127 cm) framed: 44 1/8 x 54 3/8 inches (112.1 x 138.1 cm) edition of 7 with 3 APs (image © Alec Soth Courtesy: Sean Kelly Gallery, New York)

When a woman told Santorum at a public event that President Obama was an “avowed Muslim” who was not “legally” the president, Santorum did not correct her. Later, when questioned by reporters about this, he said it was not his “responsibility as a candidate to correct everybody who makes a statement that [he] disagree[s] with.”

Santorum has called President Obama, America’s first African-American president, “a snob” because “[h]e wants everybody in America to go to college” where “some liberal college professor” would be “trying to indoctrinate them.” Evoking lines from the Bible, while playing on racial fears, Santorum warns us that President Obama “wants to remake you in his image.” Like many other public figures, Santorum has avoided the issue of truth and civility because he believes that these forms of behavior are things of the past, a quaint code that our less-informed, less prepared ancestors followed.

As Michel de Certeau puts it in *The Practice of Everyday Life*: “They transmute the misfortune of their theories into theories of misfortune.” And then, in a sentence that evokes Rudolph’s bombs and Santorum’s assertions of the government’s mass programming of the young, de Certeau writes: “When they transform their bewilderment into ‘catastrophes,’ when they seek to enclose the people in the ‘panic’ of their discourses, are they once more necessarily right?”

* * *



Alec Soth, "2007_10z10030," framed archival pigment print mounted to 4 ply museum board image: 30 x 24 inches (76.2 x 61 cm) framed: 34 x 28 inches (86.4 x 71.1 cm) (image © Alec Soth Courtesy: Sean Kelly Gallery, New York)

Soth understands something about the solitude and bleakness, the somewhere and nowhere, of being alive in America. Many of his photographs are of an individual in a space that is both isolated and isolating — a close-up of a teenage boy with the beginnings of a moustache, looking out a window (Ronald, 2007). We have no idea where he is. Wanting to know more, we may imagine his circumstances, but in the end we are left ignorant.

Like many of Soth's subjects, Ronald remains mysterious, unknowable, and unremarkable. The relationship between Ronald and his surroundings is disturbing because you have the sense that he, like so many of Soth's subjects, is neither comfortable in his skin nor in the world. Questions persist long after we have stopped looking — will he ever find solace? What about Nicholas (2007), Lary (2009), or Roman, the Nocturnal Hermit (2006)? What doctrine or belief affords these individuals shelter, or helps shape their identity? What will comfort them?

* * *

The men Soth photographed for Broken Manual call to mind Lester Ballard, the main character in Cormac McCarthy's novel *Child of God* (1973). Ballard is incapable of having a human relationship. He is a cave dweller who lives in a state of complete isolation, and whose "first love" is a dead woman he finds in a car. According to McCarthy, Ballard is based on a historical figure that the author never names.

The mass media would place Ballard in the category of "inhuman," "subhuman," or "animal." The fervent message (and hope) is that he is not like US. It might be a reassuring thought, but it isn't true. Ballard, as McCarthy describes him, is "a child of God much like yourself perhaps."

* * *

Broken Manual comes in an edition of 300 copies. It was self-published by Soth and Morrison, in the long and hallowed tradition of poets and doomsayers. According to the press's website, Little Brown Mushroom Books, "Each copy of the book is housed inside another, one-of-a-kind-book. These signed and numbered 'shell' books are unique and cut by hand. Inside the shell there is also a small book entitled 'Liberation Billfold Manifest' and an 8 x 10" print signed and numbered by Alec Soth and Lester B. Morrison."

The 'shell' is a smuggler's bible, a device to transport contraband. Soth stacked rows of 'shell' books against one wall of a small gallery space. All sorts of pamphlets, tracts, books, news articles and other things were affixed to the wall above them. Among the titles I saw, I wrote down the following, How to Disappear Completely and Never Be Found by Doug Richmond, The Modern Survival Retreat: A New + Vital Approach to Retreat Theory + Practice by Ragnar Benson, and the advertisements, pamphlets and articles, "Fish House on Wheels," "Improvised Ninja Smoke Devices" and "Cave without a name."

The manual for escape is broken because one never fully disappears. From Google Earth to GPS tracking devices and cell phone signals, we live in a world under increasing surveillance. Soth's subjects want to escape detection.



ALEC SOTH 2007_10zi0075 framed archival pigment print mounted to 4 ply museum board
image: 30 x 24 inches (76.2 x 61 cm) framed: 34 x 28 inches (86.4 x 71.1 cm) edition of 7 with 3
APs (image © Alec Soth Courtesy: Sean Kelly Gallery, New York)

On a nearby wall, a black-and-white photograph shows a stack of VHS cassettes with titles such as *Pioneer House*, *Alone in the Wilderness*, and the *Imminent Military Takeover of the USA II*, which is available from The Prophecy Club in Topeka, Kansas, publisher of *The Crusader Magazine*. (If you look carefully at *Somewhere to Disappear*, you will see the stack of videos on a shelf).

Beyond their deep isolation, the men have little in common. Dustin sleeps in a cave next to a rifle. Along with his two rifles, he owns a deck of Tarot cards and a dog, and he has a swastika tattooed on his right bicep. He tells Soth, "I never made it to jail. I made it to county." Except for a pair of boots, he stands naked and sideways in a pool of water, against a backdrop of rocks and boulders, his hands clasped behind his back, head turned toward the camera. In the film, we learn that when Soth was leaving without saying good-bye, mostly because he was afraid of the rifles, Dustin came up and hugged him. Soth observes that, like so many of his subjects, Dustin "was desperate for love."

Garth tells Soth that he has been on a spiritual quest for twenty-seven years. He lives in the desert, sleeps under the stars, raises his own vegetables, and owns horses, a pickup truck, and a television. He is "gay" and his longest relationship "lasted a week, maybe two." Wind chimes hang from the trees.

Another man, crippled, mostly likely from being abused as a child, opens the door of his boarded-up house covered with warning signs and says: "I've been in hell." We learn that his father and mother cooked meth-amphetamine, and that by the time he was seven he had learned to sleep with his clothes and boots on, in case he had to run out of the house to avoid a beating. He could have stepped right out of Daniel Woodrell's ferociously brilliant novel *Winter Bone*, which was made into a terrific movie directed by Debra Granik.

In addition to McCarthy and Woodrell, Soth shares something with Flannery O'Connor, Stephen Wright, Brian Evenson, George Saunders, and Gary Lutz, different generations of American writers who have channeled the extreme, angry, and often calmly violent voices of the displaced, diminished, white American male. They have seen the enemy and it is us.

* * *

Near the beginning of *Somewhere to Disappear*, Soth gets permission from the poet and novelist, Jim Harrison, to photograph the isolated cabin in Montana where he goes to write. We see Soth lugging his large format, 8 by 10 camera through the snow. While photographing the sparsely furnished room, he defines the cabin as "a domain for [Harrison's] creative wandering." He knows his presence in it is "inappropriate" and "voyeuristic," but he can't help himself. He has been carried.

The space for his own creative wandering is rural America where the majority of its inhabitants are living lives of quiet desperation. Soth finds the ones who have left that community — the ones who believe, like Forrest Bess did, that he only felt normal when he was completely cut off from all other humans. Bess wrote this in a letter to Meyer Schapiro, who listened. That's what Soth does with such humility and grace. By entering their lives and listening, he gets them to open up and be seen.

The men that Soth photographs believe America is in "decline." Bewildered, they feel there is no place for them. The difference is that they haven't transformed their bewilderment into catastrophes. In that regard they are more civil than Santorum.

One man lives in the woods near a gas station. Another has hung a disco ball from a tree. There is a house built into the side of a mountain. Who knows how long it has been empty or who has lived there when Soth enters and takes photographs? This could be one of the circles in hell, but it is all any one of them has. It gives them the best chance to make it into heaven, which is the goal of all the children of God.