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Look and Look Away

On Songbook, Alec Soth's new photobook.



Customers waiting for Walmart to open. Williston, ND, 2012, black-and-white photograph.

If you follow the gaze of every shopper pictured in Alec Soth's photograph of a crowded Walmart in North Dakota, you end up nowhere. The scene of big-box-store mayhem would have you think it's Black Friday or Super Bowl Sunday morning or the peak of the shelf-clearing shopping spree that is sure to precede doomsday. But in Williston, the city at the center of the oil boom that has afforded North Dakota the lowest unemployment rate in the country, this was just commerce as usual. It was a national story a few years ago: word spread fast that some incarnation of the American Dream was up for grabs in North Dakota, and scores of men and women from all over the U.S. loaded up the family van and set course for the Peace Garden State.

With this mind, it can be tempting to read Soth's photograph—the empty shopping carts, the sweatpants in public, the claustrophobia-inducing crowd—as acutely tragic. The journey to a new and better life ends here? There are consumer traffic jams in the promised land? The streets aren't paved with gold but with some sort of linoleum-vinyl composite?

Yet this picture is not meant as biting cultural commentary; it's not an attempt at myth-busting the American Dream. (If anyone knows that Gore-Tex and high-wattage fluorescents are part of our wondrous national experience, it's a Twin Cities native, Mall of America frequenter like Soth.) Instead, the tragedy lies in the total absence of connection or communication. Sure, if you flipped on the audio of this scene, there would likely be a cacophony of conversation, bits of which would reveal the presence of relationships, families, and friends. But in the moment captured, no one is looking at anyone else. As crowded as the store is, each shopper has found somewhere private to rest his or her gaze. In this sea of people, everyone is, impressively, in a world all their own.

The photograph, like many in Soth's newest body of work, *Songbook*, could easily serve as an illustration of Sheila Heti's "Stealing Glances," a 2005 essay on our tendency to avoid eye contact in public spaces. The opposite is also true: one of Heti's sentences could function as the caption for Soth's images: "When we look and look away, we reveal what we want—communion, citizenry—and what we lack—communion, citizenry."



Fun Valley. South Fork, Colorado, 2013, black-and-white photograph.

Songbook, with its candid shots of crowds and portraits of groups, its school dances and church gatherings, is definitively focused on American togetherness, or more accurately, our earnest attempts at it. In a way, this makes the work a thematic counterpoint to Soth's last major project, *Broken Manual*, a survey on American escapism that was as off-the-grid as *Songbook* is on.

These two seemingly diametric endeavors both highlight the impossibility of finding fulfillment, at either end of the spectrum; both subtly undermine our desires for and conceptions of true connection or true escape. When Soth photographs community, whether it's the sort that can be found in a bustling Walmart or the local chapter of a fraternal organization, there are hints of fragmentation. When he photographs solitude, there are traces of intimacy. Soth's partygoers end up lonely; his hermits end up with company.



The last snow globe repairman. Northfield, Minnesota, 2012, black-and-white photograph.

It's in this light that *Songbook* falls into place as the most recent installment from a photographer curious not about the American Dream, but the American Condition, an affliction perhaps born from that sense of unfulfillment (a cousin of Longing? A distant cousin of Hunger?). Soth, however, doesn't pursue a definition. In the very Szarkowskian sense, his pictures "point": they are handcrafted road signs, each uniquely complex but also carefully aimed toward that faceless beast that drives some of us into isolation, and others toward congregation. With equal parts Robert Frank and Alan Lomax, Soth roams the country investigating our mysterious national malady, not by searching for it outright, but by capturing its photographable manifestations: the very personal and sometimes peculiar ways we cope.

Through Soth's lens, our hobbies—golf with the ladies, football with the guys, snow-globe repair, skydiving, dancing, prayer—reveal themselves as more than just pastimes. They are chosen strategies in the low-stakes game of First World survival, tactics in our quiet battle of continuing on. In short, Soth's photographs are microstudies in *how we endure*.

Interwoven throughout the photographs of *Songbook* are lyrics of love and longing from Cole Porter, Howard Dietz, Sammy Cahn, and a handful of other great American songwriters. A line from Johnny Mercer's "Moon River" sits adjacent to a sterile image of an empty suburban street corner: "We're after the same rainbow's end waiting 'round the bend, my Huckleberry friend, Moon River and me." The last word in the book, however, is given to Romanian playwright, Eugène Ionesco: "No society has been able to abolish human sadness, no political system can deliver us from the pain of living, from our fear of death, our thirst for the absolute. It is the human condition that directs the social condition, not vice versa." The quote is a summary assertion that *who* we are is the result of *what* we are. It suggests that the individual worlds we create and identities we construct, no matter how splintered, are shaped by our shared instincts. And so, in some sense, everything we've just seen—Soth's kaleidoscopic view of mundane American life—is born from a condition that is inherently universal.



Lonnie's Roadside Cafe. Williston, ND, 2012, black-and-white photograph.

Suddenly, Soth's photographs of Main Street, its dreary roadside cafés and bleak landscapes, begin to look like portraits of battlegrounds, the settings of our daily skirmishes with Ionesco's "pain of living." The muted black-and-white images aren't always pleasant—Soth's picture of four men eating alone at four different tables can make you physically ache—but by presenting the struggle, Soth reminds us that we share a common enemy. This is *Songbook's* strength: It hints at the camaraderie available in our collective yearning for camaraderie, the community available in our collective yearning for community. A common enemy always unites.

Walt Whitman opened the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* with a portrait of himself: strong, virile, "one of the roughs." Soth opens *Songbook* with a portrait of a man named Bil from Sandusky, Ohio. Bil, smiling widely, is shown waltzing with an imaginary partner at Dance N Style ("Sandusky's premiere Latin-Ballroom Dance Studio & Dance Club")—it seems he's the evening's odd man out. The scene is small-town USA at its smallest and quirkiest, and yet the photograph is reverent. Bil, after all, is toe-to-toe with

the enemy, cheek-to-cheek with the beast, and he's grinning. Maybe he's blissfully ignorant to his pitiable situation. Maybe he's braver than the rest of us. Or maybe he knows that although he's dancing solo, he's not coping alone.



Dance N Style. Sandusky, OH, 2012, black-and-white photograph.

"Songbook" is on view concurrently at Sean Kelly Gallery, in New York, through March 14; Fraenkel Gallery, in San Francisco, through April 4; and Weinstein Gallery, in Minneapolis, through April 4.

All images courtesy Alec Soth/Magnum Photos.