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Pantazi, Chloe. "Alec Soth's Case Studies of America," *Hyperallergic*, January 5, 2016.

HYPERALLERGIC

Alec Soth's Case Studies of America



Alec Soth, "Bill, Sandusky, Ohio" (2014), from 'Songbook'

"Our vision of America is so shaped by television and movies. All we see are Hollywood starlets and New York cops. We sometimes forget that there are whole other lives being lived in the middle of America. And some of these lives are really inspiring."

—Alec Soth, as told to SeeSaw Magazine in 2004

LONDON — A British science museum feels like a strange place for a photography exhibition about 21st-century America. Why not the National Portrait Gallery or Tate Modern, I wondered, when I saw the ad for Minneapolis-born photographer Alec Soth's first major UK show, *Gathered Leaves*, at the Science Museum in London. But as I wove through the exhibit's four large display rooms — each dedicated to a single collection: *Sleeping by the Mississippi* (2004), *Niagara* (2006), *Broken Manual* (2010), and *Songbook* (2014) — it began to make more sense: Soth's photographs show him in the role of social scientist, and his subjects — a heterogeneous group of ordinary and sometimes extraordinary people — are case studies of American life.

Gathered Leaves borrows its title from Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" (1855), the poet's portrait of a multifarious nation on the brink of war. It's a fitting context for the pre- and post-9/11 United States depicted in Soth's work, and takes on new meaning at a time when social media and smartphones have made us more connected and divided than ever before. Whitman's poem illustrates a changing country made up of varied, individual Americans; Soth's photos depict Americans today, and what brings them closer and further apart as the world slides into an increasingly digital future. The exhibit's introductory text prompts viewers to think about how "gathered leaves" refers to photography as a medium made up of sheets of paper, but I came away thinking more about the glimpses of strangers' lives arranged on the walls, each frame a window into another person's world; these are the leaves Soth has raked together.

Of course, some people are more interesting than others. In the first room, *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, which documents the fragmented lives strung along the river that Huckleberry Finn navigated, I was most drawn to "Sunshine" (2000), a photo of a young sex worker who, like Huck, also ran away. At 14, Sunshine (then named Monique) left home and a baby in the care of her parents; she changed her name and began a new life, working as a prostitute in a Memphis motel. Photographed at 21, she appears lying on a bed in a vaguely seductive pose wearing a spangly tie-up bikini, her black hair in a ponytail, a crucifix around her neck. Rings of eyeliner circle her eyes, which look straight at the camera,

too tired or bored to challenge it. In the mirror behind her, a man with a camera is just visible, an apparition-like figure moving toward her to take her picture. It's alarming to see Soth in the frame, his presence a reminder of the other men with quite different intentions who could take — and have taken — his place in the room. I felt uncomfortable looking at the photo, but for a while I couldn't look away.

In the next room, where Niagara — Soth's journey to upstate New York's once thriving destination for lovers and honeymooners — is displayed, a photograph of a bride on her wedding day is just as revealing, in a different way. Taken right after she got married, "Melissa" (2005) is a striking yet tender portrait, and unlike a typical wedding day photograph. The woman sits at an angle slightly away from the camera, with her hands folded over her dress — a pose one might assume at a business meeting. She doesn't flash a toothy grin but rather looks at the camera as though seeing through it and into her own thoughts, presumably about what her married future holds. It's a shot Soth is particularly proud of. "I prefer the subject to be quiet and move inside themselves, so they are in a reflective state," he told the Guardian. "That's part of the power of this picture, I think: she's neither happy nor sad. She's reflective, and she has this new life ahead of her." Looking at "Melissa," I wondered what that new life might look like.

The future is just as unpredictable for the subjects of Broken Manual, Soth's four-year project photographing men on the run, monks, and other hermits. Walking into the third room, a darker space with dim lighting, it's instantly clear this series isn't like the others on display. While the photographer takes a passive role in the observation of his subjects in Mississippi, Niagara, and Songbook, he seems to be playing a game of hide-and-seek with the anonymous, unshaven men that appear — and sometimes don't — in Broken Manual. "2008_02zl0189" (all photos in this series are titled this way), a close-up shot of a bearded man as he sleeps on a mossy tree trunk, seems to have been taken surreptitiously, without the subject's permission. Shot from above, the photo has an intimate angle that, when coupled with the man's closed eyes, is unsettling. Watching this man sleep, I felt strangely as though I was being watched too (and of course I was, by the security cameras), somehow an unwitting part of Soth's game.

The feeling of being under surveillance hovers around the other photographs in the series, especially those missing their subjects. "2008_08zl0238," a picture of an empty gray-brick house that's been built into the side of a cliff, is particularly creepy. The slope of a mountain partially reflected in the windows looms like a shadow, reminding the viewer of the remote location, while a satellite tacked onto craggy rock like an afterthought serves as the house's only connection to the outside world. But "2006_08zl0036" is the most haunting photo, a black-and-white shot of a lone disco ball hanging from a tree in the woods, as though nature has thrown itself a silent party. Whoever left the disco ball there is playing a cruel joke — this person has thrown a ball for their search party, except there's no cause for celebration: nobody's there.

After going on the run in Broken Manual, Soth rejoins society in Songbook, a black-and-white series for which he posed as a local newspaper photojournalist, traveling around the country to take pictures at beauty pageants, proms, and prisons. Despite the series' focus on community, the theme of loneliness plays on here. An old man dances with an invisible partner in an empty room in "Bill" (2014), taken in Sandusky, Ohio. In "Miss Model Contestants" (2012), four girls who've entered a beauty pageant in Cleveland pose next to each other, assuming the same hand-on-hip pose, all vying to be number one. A Silicon Valley businessman in "Facebook" (2014) walks alone through a grid-like plaza outside the company headquarters with eyes glued to his phone, which isn't visible but instead suggested by the curve of his arm and bowed head; the work reminded me of Eric Pickersgill's *Removed* (2015), a series of photos in which the subjects' phones have been erased to show how people can pay more attention to their devices than each other. Even a cheerleader appears alone in "Bree, Liberty Cheer All-Stars" (2013), displayed in the collection's photo book. Looking like the quintessential all-American cheerleader, Bree has a big grin on her face, her legs split in the air and her backcombed blonde hair whipped above her head. But her vulnerability's exposed in her strained smile, and her performance here is interrupted.

The sense of isolation that's prevalent throughout the exhibit — in Sunshine's resigned pose and Bree's fake team spirit — culminates in "Execution, Huntsville Prison" (2013), a startling photograph that shows a procession of sheriffs in white hats and corrections officers walking to an execution in Texas.

One man can be seen putting his phone back in his pocket (or is he taking it out?) on his way to watch another person die. Though the Death Row prisoners themselves aren't pictured here, their absence feels louder than the presence of the men and women in the photo. I remembered the faces of strangers in the images I'd looked at before this one — people living within the law or outside of it, or somewhere in between — all waiting in their own invisible lines, headed to uncertain futures, together yet profoundly alone.

Gathered Leaves: Photographs by Alec Soth continues at the Science Museum (Exhibition Road, London) through March 28.