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Intimate, Odd, and Eerie America as Captured by Alec Soth

Wandering through the various lives visited by Soth's images, it is easy to understand the political and cultural schisms in our country.



Near San Antonio, Texas by Alec Soth, detail view (all images by the author for Hyperallergic)

COLUMBUS, Ohio — A survey of works by photographer Alec Soth features 27 examples of his complex and candid portraiture, forming a powerful complement to the Pizzuti Collection's primary summer exhibition — a collective meditation on the human form as subject, *Go Figure*. It is instantly clear that the Minneapolis-based Soth follows a longstanding photographic tradition that seeks to paint a portrait of America by way of its individual characters. Since Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, the traveling documentarian-portraitist has been a working modality for photographers, occasionally innovated by those with a particular eye for the quirky, like Diane Arbus, or a penchant for technical refinement, like Richard Avedon.



Alec Soth at the Pizzuti Collection, installation view.

Soth's work fits comfortably within this lineage, as much of it developed via spontaneous interactions on road trips through lesser-run territories in Middle America. He certainly demonstrates an Avedon-esque virtuosity with black-and-white values; selections from Soth's *Songbook* series, shot with a Hasselblad camera with a digital back, are so hyper-detailed that they almost pull details out of life that aren't normally there. Soth has a powerful ability to capture the critical moment of extremely kinetic subjects — a cheerleader in Corsicana, Texas frozen midair at the apex of a toe-touch, her ponytail rising straight above her head; in Kaaterskill Falls, New York, what appears at first glance to be a scenic view of a waterfall contains a male figure in a dead fall so perilous, it could only be achieved by someone with lifelong familiarity in making the dive; even an ostensibly simple tableau of a hand reaching toward a wall of keys at a shop in Savannah, Georgia captures the reflection of light off the keys, behind the extended finger, so as to give a Sistine Chapel sense of gravitas to the gesture.



Bradley Lock and Key, Savannah, Georgia, detail view.

The above are all selections from Soth's series *Songbook*, shot during seven different trips between 2012 and 2015 that he took with friend and writer Brad Zeller, together emulating the lives of small-town newspapermen. The images were first presented in real time on Tumblr, later printed on newsprint in a self-published zine format, and eventually turned into the more formal *Songbook* publication (accompanied by lyrics, in reference to the "Great American Songbook" tradition). When the works were shown in large-scale print form at Sean Kelly Gallery in 2015, the Pizzuti Collection made their acquisition. This is the main body of work on display, but there are also selections from Soth's breakthrough series, *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, his investigation of the romantic and contradictory Niagara Falls culture, *NIAGARA*, and a small side gallery devoted to a handful of works in his *Broken Manual* series.



Melissa, from Soth's NIAGARA series, detail view.

As a matter of course, Soth's work evokes an Arbus-like sense of everyday human oddity, and the uncomfortable feeling of a narrative beyond the image. Unlike the conjuring acts of painting and sculpture, documentary photography and portraiture require — or at least strongly suggest — the presence of the photographer, even if he is never seen. How did Soth come to be in these remote and intimate places? How did he score an invitation to a prom in Cleveland? Why is an old man wandering through a cornfield at night, all alone? How did Soth gain passage into a motel room where a couple kisses on the bed, the female's back to the camera? Or a room with clothes and toys heaped upon two stripped twin mattresses, where three children wildly jump on the beds?



Home Suite Home. Kissimmee, Florida, detail view.



Alec Soth, installation view.

All these questions could, perhaps, be attributed to the charm and knack of instigating instant familiarity with strangers — the typical social skills of a photographer who specializes in portraiture. However, selections from Soth's *Broken Manual* series, tucked away in a room that is generally leveraged by Pizzuti curator Greer Pagano to present difficult work, raise questions and imagined narratives to a fever pitch.

Soth is oft quoted as saying that photography is “not good” at telling stories, and seemingly has an obsession with the limitations of what can be conveyed with a single image — as opposed to novels or films, which he once referred to as “narrative engines” in a talk with Andrei Codrescu at the Walker Center for the Arts in 2010. The images in *Broken Manual*, shot in 2008, are eerie and destabilizing, pushing Soth into territory quite apart from the legacy of American documentary portraiture in his line. His subjects here are off-the-grid types; tasked by the High Museum in Atlanta to contribute to their *Picturing the South* series, Soth started thinking about the Olympic Park Bomber, Eric Rudolph, and how he had escaped capture as a fugitive in the Appalachian wilderness for some five years. Following the theme of the desire to run away — of breaking with society and trying to live a detached life — Soth became obsessed with the challenging objective of locating people who have determined to live off the grid.

The works in this series are jarring, titled only by image numbers, featuring objects out of place — a disco ball hangs in a forest, a makeshift closet bar with empty hangers has been installed in the corner of what appears to be a painted artificial cave, a school bus sits abandoned on a prairie with wild horses. These are moments so

odd that they could almost seem staged, but apparently they are merely reflective of people whose lifestyles have disconnected them from the trappings of society in all but a few, strange, and highly selective ways.



Broken Manual images, installation view.



2008_08210107, detail view.

The commanding figure in this room is a lean and rather haunted-looking man, who stands naked, but for boots, in a lily pond, backed by breathtaking boulders and scrubby pine trees. He is a strange combination of grace and awkwardness — lithe and tan above the waste, with a stark tan line that reveals his preference for shorts in a glaringly white stretch of flesh from hip to knee. He seems comfortably naked, though not at ease with the camera, and vulnerable in a way particular to men who are naked but wearing shoes. On his upper arm, there is a homemade swastika tattoo. In this place, more or less at one with nature, it is the only symbol.

Perhaps, as Soth asserts, there is no way to adequately convey the complexity of a human life in a single image — and certainly, this naked wood nymph of a Nazi presents imagined narratives across the spectrum — but his work does manage to capture, collectively, a portrait of a nation. Wandering through the various lives visited by Soth's images, it is easy to understand the political and cultural schisms in our country. Though the distance from the Mississippi River, or the Pacific Northwest wilderness or the Oklahoma panhandle, might not be all that great, geographically, the clean and considered fine art environs of the Pizzuti Collection, and the attendees of a members-only preview, feel worlds apart from their pictured countrymen.

[Alec Soth](#) continues at the [Pizzuti Collection](#) (632 North Park Street, Columbus, Ohio) through August 12.