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Alec Soth On The "Ethically Dubious" Side of Photography

"I see a photograph as this sort of diving board for the imagination."



Keni, New Orleans, 2018, archival pigment print, courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York.

"It's something I'm not proud of—the fact that I'm not good at photographing people I know well, and love," Alec Soth tells *GARAGE*. We're discussing his latest body of work, the book-length *I Know How Furiously Your Heart Is Beating*—selections of which are currently on view at **Sean Kelly Gallery** in New York, through April 27. (The title is borrowed from the closing lines of Wallace Stevens's short poem "**The Grey Room**".) Nearly all of the portraits contained within it are of subjects who didn't know Soth before he showed up on their doorsteps, camera in tow. "The thing I find so hard about photographing my wife," Soth explains, "[is that] I know every gesture she makes, and I know what it signifies. I like not having that knowledge—this pure act of looking, initially." Taking pictures of strangers can be liberating: no baggage, no preconceived notions.

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In these new images, we're introduced to a diverse cast, from Michelle (Berlin, a tattoo looped around her neck, head thrown back in a moment of contemplation or ecstasy) to Galina (Odessa, stark white hair, inspecting herself in a three-paneled mirror framed by family portraits). After making contact with prospective subjects with the help of assistants, Soth would arrive at their homes, ready to engage. He likens the process to painting; at the time, he was reading Martin Gayford's **Man with a Blue Scarf: On Sitting for a Portrait by Lucian Freud**. Occasionally, a person is merely represented by the objects they own, or a corner of their house: a bookshelf, a bed, a view through the window.

"I walk in, maybe we sit down, have tea," he explains. "Chat a little bit. Then maybe I have a look around their apartment. Maybe we talk about where they think would be the best place to take a picture....I'm wary of using the word 'collaborative,' because I'm still fully in charge of the image, but it's more of a back-and-forth exchange."



Yuko. Berlin, 2018, archival pigment print, courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York.

The entire series was born from an existential rethink, the result of what Soth calls a "quasi-spiritual experience," after which he questioned his entire vocation. "It was a positive experience, it wasn't a crisis," he says. "I felt very connected to the world around me, and that prompted a change. Another change: I became vegetarian. I gave up meat, I gave up portraiture—all these ethically dubious activities, I was trying to slow down."

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For about a year, the only photographs he took were of landscapes in his hometown of Minneapolis. Then, in 2017, his San Francisco gallerist invited him to stage a project in its space. The result was unexpected, to say the least. For “**Seesaw: Portraiture and Play with Alec Soth & Friends**,” the photographer held private, 90-minute encounters with 15 individuals, many of them coming from a dance or choreography background. The result was akin to Marina Abramovic’s “The Artist Is Present,” but with movement exercises and props (including, yes, an actual seesaw). No one was allowed to talk.

here were several cameras in the room, available for either Soth or his partners to use, but the import of the interactive performance was more ephemeral. “I would just respond to the energy of the other person, and something would ensue,” he says. “They were super incredible experiences, but not much came of them artistically.”



Anna. Kentfield, California, 2017, archival pigment print, courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York.

One prospective participant in “Seesaw” was **Anna Halprin**, a renowned dancer in her late 90s. Halprin couldn’t make it to the gallery, so Soth went to her house instead. There was no wordless, 90-minute encounter, but rather a more conventional portrait shoot. The resulting image depicts Halprin looking positively regal, sporting a floor-length green dress in her wood-paneled living room. “I felt really good about it,” Soth says, citing it as “kind of my return to portraiture” after a year of self-reflection. Many more images would follow, taken around the world: Kai poised in a bare room in New Orleans; Dan-George in Dusseldorf, in a bathrobe, surrounded by fine art.

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Part of what Soth sees as the “ethically dubious” nature of portraiture has to do with a familiar lament surrounding photography: how the medium purports to be truthful, while being anything but. “I’m so aware of the limitations of photography, and also the deception of photography,” he says. “The way the light catches a person utterly changes the way we read the picture. I see a photograph as this sort of diving board for the imagination, and that’s always struck me as slightly problematic when dealing with people—because they’re real people, with real lives, so why should I be using them as these diving boards for the imagination? It’s why I’ve struggled with the ethics of portraiture, and in this case I tried to be a little more thoughtful in how I go about it. But that’s not to say that these pictures reveal that much information about a person. How could they?”

One thread running through this new series is the presence of mirrors, windows, and reflective surfaces (a robust fixation shared by contemporary photographers like **Paul Mpagi Sepuya** and **Ryan McGinley**). Soth cites a clear inspiration: the MoMA curator John Prakowski and his 1978 exhibition “**Mirrors and Windows: American Photography Since 1960.**” Prakowski “divided photographers into these two types: window photographers and mirror photographers,” Soth explains. “In other words, people looking out at the world and people looking into themselves... It’s since occurred to me that a window *is* a mirror, it just depends how the light’s hitting it. And I’ve often thought of myself as a window photographer—[but] the window’s highly reflective, and I keep catching myself in it.”