Budick, Ariella. "Alec Soth – photographer who saw the light." *The Financial Times.* April 11, 2019.

FINANCIAL TIMES

Alec Soth – photographer who saw the light

Soth, subject of a New York exhibition, re-thought his art following a mystical experience

Alec Soth, 'Anna. Kentfield, California, 2017'

Some photographers rely on a quick eye and the slow business of editing; Alec Soth constructs a picture the way a painter does, sculpting light like pasty pigment, building up details until the image hums with complexity. His recent photos appear at the Sean Kelly gallery in New York and in a ravishing new book, both called *I Know How Furiously Your Heart Is Beating*. The title comes from the last line of a poem by Wallace Stevens, a short, deceptively simple musing on how much tumult can clang beneath a serene surface. Soth understands the profundity of trinkets, the eloquence of a hand at rest, the drama of papers piled on a desk. He rummages in paraphernalia and excavates a kind of grace.

An elderly woman, arrayed in a petal-green kaftan, lounges as comfortably as she can on a sculptural wooden chair. She is surrounded by exquisite trappings: kilim pillows and poufs, a Turkish carpet, a fireplace with a floral mosaic. The photograph has been shot from outdoors, and reflections in the glass bring trees into the room, where they mingle with a profligate philodendron that cascades from a high shelf. The woman

inhabits a verdant fantasy, like Max's bedroom in *Where the Wild Things Are*. There's even more nature visible through a side window, a glimpse of a separate world of greenery and light. Soth tells us only as much about her as we can glean from her Marin County habitat — enough to know that she is blessed.

Soth only recently discovered such scenes of beatitude; for years he was drawn to gritty American dystopias. Like Robert Frank in 1950s and Stephen Shore in the '70s, he recorded the effects of poverty with glum elegance, adding his own undertone of contempt. In the 2006 series *Niagara*, he scrutinised the onetime honeymoon destination, using it as a metaphor for urban and romantic rot. He fixed his lens on decrepit motels and awkward couples; his subjects ran the gamut from tawdry to tacky.

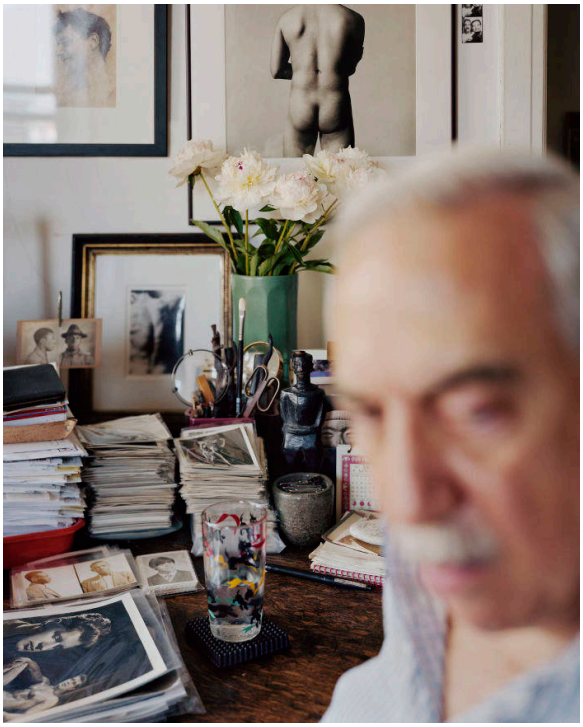
Soth seemed to intuit that he was exploiting people in the name of authenticity, using them as stand-ins for the fading American dream and, perhaps, for his own despair. What he knew was that he treated people like prey, stalking and seizing them on the run. "It's the bird flying around that swoops down and grabs the worm and then flies off," he said.

Alec Soth, 'Ute's Books. Odessa, 2018'

Then, in 2016, a mystical experience overcame him, severing him from his past. In an interview with the novelist Hanya Yanagihara that's printed in the book, he describes the epiphany, which came after a long flight, plenty of meditation, and a jet-lagged walk by a lake. "I stayed up all night rethinking everything about what I do. Photography, for me, has always been about separation and this feeling of social distance that I have." Now, he was suddenly imbued with the vivid, if vague, sensation that everything was connected, and that his work needed to embrace those bonds. He stopped making

portraits, and returned to them only after a year, with a completely different approach. “When I photograph people, I want to find a new way to engage with them,” he told Yanagihara. “Where it’s not driving around, snagging people, talking them into stuff they don’t want to do.”

Now, he enters his subjects’ lives, not as an intruder but as an invited guest. Often he shoots them at home and surrounds them with sedimentary layers of their obsessions. It’s a trick he learnt from Walker Evans, whose tenant farmers of the 1930s painstakingly assembled their tired treasures into perfect still-lifes. Like Evans, Soth understands the way a corner crammed with pictures and plants can communicate more directly than a person’s closed, posed face. The result is a collaborative construction, a lair assembled to the sitter’s taste, then presented to the photographer, who declines to judge. In his pre-enlightenment days, he got physically close to his subjects, but used his camera as a barrier between himself and them. Now he often pushes people right out of the frame. The vast upwelling sea of books, surging from floor to wall; an ornate but peeling room in New Orleans; sheet music for “Little Red Corvette” propped up on an electric piano — each of these backdrops is imbued with story and personality, even without a single visible human.



Alec Soth, ‘Vince. New York City, 2018’

Soth still indulges his voyeur’s instincts, though less explicitly. In his portrait of Yanagihara, the camera spies on her through the gaps in a bookshelf. Working with a heavy, large-format camera that rewards methodical care more than improvisation, he has produced a formal feat, an abstract grid with tiny points of focus. The writer’s disembodied face becomes a puzzle piece in a disassembled room, along with paintings, sculptures, and a television set.

Even when an interior's furnishings edge out of focus, they still tell a story. In "DanGeorg", a collector stands helplessly amid his trophies, including a late Picasso nude and a mini Calder mobile. But the masterpieces blur. Instead, Soth homes in on the elderly man in his Missoni bathrobe, his pink wizened toes poking out from thick sandals. Glancing away from the camera and dabbing at one eye with a handkerchief, he appears almost tragic in the morning light. All those fine things enfold their owner, but they can't protect him.

In some of Soth's most powerful images, the subject is light — or maybe enlightenment itself. A white-faced cockatiel stands in the windowed corner of a Salt Lake City home, one claw grazing the knob that could set it free. Two seasons appear to collide just beyond the glass: one pane overlooks a sea of autumnal yellow; the other shimmers with green. The bird looks wistfully around at us, its feathers gilded by the soft light from outdoors. On an adjacent sill, a stack of leather-bound Bibles tells of the garden we once inhabited, a place as magical as the one just out of reach. Does the cockatiel know how that story ends?