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Halutz, Avshalom. "From mid-America to Mideast Photographer Alec Soth Faces Death in Tel Aviv Exhibition." *Haaretz*. December 3, 2019.

 **HAARETZ**



Sunshine, 2000. Alec Soth

On his first-ever trip to Israel, American photographer Alec Soth came without a camera, except for the one in his cellphone. That might not be surprising, considering that Soth, one of the most highly regarded photographers today, creates his work by means of a long and expensive process, using a large format manual camera perched on a heavy tripod – certainly not something that's easy to pack up for a visit of a few days.



Lenny, 2002. Alec Soth

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SEANKELLY

Soth, who is 50, had the opportunity to visit Israel in the past, within the framework of a project with [Magnum Photos](#), an international photographic cooperative of which he is a member, but declined.

“Years ago I was one of the photographers asked to do a project here, but I turned it down,” he says openly, in a conversation at the hotel where he’s staying with his wife and two children in [Tel Aviv](#), where he’s participating in PHOTO IS:RAEL, the seventh-annual international photography festival. After all, Israel is a pretty nerve-racking and crowded place, associated more with news reportage, and so very different from the mysterious and intimate spaces he usually captures in his photos.

Soth might not have been interested in visiting the country or taking pictures here, but for years he believed he was Jewish.

“It’s funny because for a long time I just thought I was Jewish. I just had this feeling and my wife did also,” he explains. “So I did a DNA test. Not Jewish. Much more British than I thought. Very northern European. Culturally, I guess I just wanted a sense of a community, it’s hard to say. Looking at me, would you say can I pass as Jewish?”

Absolutely.

“Exactly, that’s what I’m talking about (laughs). We were in Jerusalem and people were asking me for directions in Hebrew.”

Soth would prefer that readers not look at the photos accompanying this article. He would rather you leave your homes and see them printed out and mounted, full-size at the Tel Aviv festival, a 10-day event on through December 7, which is being held in the Azrieli [Saron](#) Tower and features the works of 250 artists from Israel and abroad.



Cemetery, 2002 Alec Soth

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SEANKELLY

“As for me, I’m invariably interested in the tactile aspect of photography. You can ask why we need exhibitions of photography now in the digital age – why you would have that. Just last night at the opening reception of the festival, someone came up to me and was, like, ‘I can’t believe what I’m seeing. I have seen these pictures for years on a computer screen and it is so much different now.’ And I said, of course it is. It’s like listening to a song on your iphone and then going to a live concert where you feel the power of the physical performance.”

American fantasy

The [Tel Aviv](#) event takes Soth back 20 years, to his project “Sleeping by the Mississippi,” which he created in the early 2000s and which brought him international renown after his pictures were published in a book, with the same name, in 2004. A few of the images from this series are on display at the festival. Its exhibitions, including Soth’s, have been curated by Maya Aner.

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Peter's houseboat, 2002 Alec Soth

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Seeing his works on display again — as part of an artistic “greatest hits,” world tour gig — forces Soth to deal with the passage of time.

He grew up in Minneapolis and still lives there. Contrary to his nature as a shy, urban type, he took his car and his camera and embarked on a journey along the Mississippi River. During his travels, he says, the way he had looked for images and photographed them changed – as did his lifestyle. He became an independent artist, largely thanks to the subjects he has captured in his lens.

Soth: “It’s a funny thing but I’m actually not known as a lover of travel. I wasn’t a kid that backpacked through Europe and all that, but there is a kind of American road-trip fantasy that’s in me, I guess. I do think there’s something very American about the quality of alienation and space. The country is so big and there’s this cowboy myth – of the lone figure that can make it on their own and so on. And added to that is a quality of loneliness, I think.”

One senses the experience he is describing when seeing the photo at the entrance to Soth’s exhibition in Tel Aviv, called “Peter’s Houseboat, Winona, Minnesota” (2002).



Charles, 2002 Credit: Alec Soth

“That picture,” Soth explains, “shows a snowy scene and there is a houseboat and a line of laundry hanging from it. I approached and [found out that] the man who lives there had been living there for 25 years. The laundry is quite colorful and it’s winter, and so it doesn’t make sense that it’s hanging there. It’s a sort of creative gesture on his part. At the time I was really interested in people who chose to live in different ways. I

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SEANKELLY

was embarking on my own path in the world, trying to figure out how I was going to live my life. I actually lived in a very conventional way. I always had a job. And I admired people who found a different way to live. I think that's part of what the work is about: imagining for myself a different way to live life on the road and finding people that did that."

One of Soth's best-known photos, "Charles," also featured in the exhibition, shows a bearded man wearing overalls and holding two model airplanes. "He is also choosing his own life, his own approach," the photographer says, "and I know I was terrified of doing that for myself. It's interesting because through this project, I did create my own way of living. It's kind of miraculous that 20 years later I'm in Tel Aviv and I didn't have a job since then, and I'm living this other life."

Despite the changes in his lifestyle, Soth says that today he keeps to a schedule and goes to his studio five times a week at regular hours – although he never takes photos there. He also teaches photography.



New Orleans, Louisiana, 2002 Alec Soth

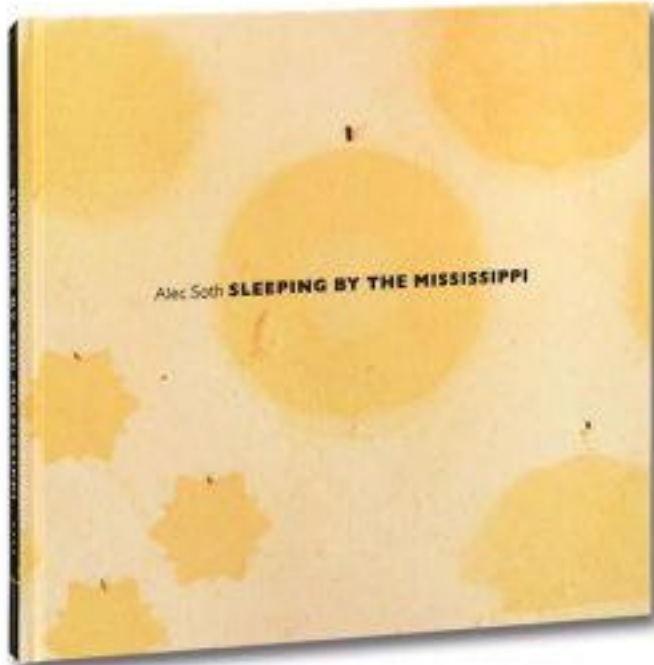
"To me the upside of photography is that it deals with death more closely with than any other medium," he observes. "Time is always passing and photography is showing this. One interesting thing about the exhibition here is now the work is 20 years old and I

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SEANKELLY

know of one person [in it] who died and another I photographed 10 years later. Now I realize it's been another 10 years. I have no idea where her contact information is, I will need to track her down. She looked so much different when I rephotographed her. The picture that I took the second time was not that great, because so much about photography is about the first encounter, the first magic.”

A million Mississippis



The cover of Alec Soth's 2004 book 'Sleeping by the Mississippi.' Print ambition. In an era where people talk about middle America as having been abandoned by the people on the coasts, but also having raised its head in the last presidential election – it's interesting to go back to earlier works by Soth, a Minnesotan. The reality they present is one that most Americans aren't familiar with to this very day. His work, he explains, is not journalistic or documentary.

“I don't want to show America. It's not about showing the real Mississippi River, because there are a million Mississippi rivers. It's more about showing my version of it, which is half-mythical. I understand that my work is within a lineage of work that looks like documentarian photography but it's not that. The great American photographer Walker Evans called it 'documentary style,' so it resembles that. I'm using the tools of documentary photography but I'm more interested in personal expression, and the dreams and myths that reside behind things.”

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In recent years, following the political changes rocking the United States, Soth worked for almost a year on a project that was intended to show those transformations – but in the end he set it aside, after he realized that it just wasn't his style.



Fort Jefferson Memorial Cross, 2002, Alec Soth

Last Updated: 18 December 2019

SEANKELLY



Charles Lindbergh's boyhood bed, 1999 Alec Soth

He is still dealing with prejudices about the place where he produces his work. "When I'm talking about editorial work, then New York magazine editors have this huge stereotype about middle America. Where I live, Minneapolis, is one of the most liberal cities after San Francisco, it's the most gay-friendly city but it's not always seen that way. That is the problem in our immediate culture," he says.

Now, with his work on display in the Middle East, Soth also wonders how it looks to foreign eyes.

"Four or five months ago I gave a talk in China, and it was translated of course. And then I realized I've got to explain a lot of things, since they don't have the context. They don't know where Memphis, Tennessee is and they don't even know it's associated with Elvis Presley," he says. "You, for example, have all this knowledge in your head about this neighborhood in Tel Aviv versus that neighborhood, but it can also be limiting."

Soth, who has published 25 books of photography, some of which have become collector's items, still believes in the importance of print – especially in the digital age.

"Originally I was interested in publishing books simply because that was the photographic medium I was exposed to. So that was my ambition. But then I kind of came of age with the internet and still wanted to make books, and then books became

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wildly popular and I benefited from that. Why did they become popular again? I think in the same way vinyl [records] became popular again. In the digital age there's a hunger for a tactile experience."



Alec Soth in Tel Aviv.

'Books became wildly popular and I benefited from that.' Avshalom Halutz

Is it harder to succeed today as a photographer today, in a world with so many digital cameras and photography?

"I used to worry about that but I don't anymore in the same way that there's so much writing and there are still good novels. It's interesting how much photography there has always been, there is this historic Israeli women photography pioneers section of the exhibition, there are always a million photographers who are unrecognized and it's always been that way. Even at Yad Vashem [the Holocaust center in Jerusalem], you see so many pictures that were being made. Well, but I'm happy I'm not 20 now."

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Mother and Daughter, 2002 Alec Soth

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