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Edgington, Colin. "Alec Soth: *I Know How Furiously Your Heart is Beating*." *The Brooklyn Rail*. April 14, 2019.



Alec Soth: *I Know How Furiously Your Heart is Beating*

Calling the Earth to Witness the Truth



Alec Soth, *Anna Kentfield, California*, 2017. Archival pigment print, 50 x 40 inches. © Alec Soth. Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

There is something different about this Alec Soth. Something subtly more open. The thread is still there, his poetry still visible, but something else is flowing from these works as if waves beyond human perception were brought into the visible spectrum to commingle with one another. In this new show, *I Know How Furiously Your Heart is Beating*, the viewer must ask, "What is all this?" and set aside their Sothian knowledge, the images that we've come to know, the books and projects, and let the work blend into and out of one another if they wish to experience it fully.

In 2016, while in Helsinki, Soth sat next to a lake and began to meditate. The experience led to an awakening and in response, he took a year off and did "nothing." That is, he sat with himself to ponder the mesh of the world. It was a year of quietude in which all things were sought as connected entities, the self but an image in a world of images. And it was clear immediately that this work would not express the desire for

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escape as outlined in *Broken Manual* (2010) or another great American photographic road trip as in *Sleeping by the Mississippi* (2004) but something else entirely.

Walking into the gallery, the viewer is greeted with a pastel pink wall, isolated and set back from the gallery's entrance. A flattened plane of soft color in a large white gallery, it acts as an emotional anchor. On it hangs a single photograph next to the title of the show and the artist's name—a proclamation and a greeting. The photograph, *Anna Kentfield, California* (2017), depicts an older woman in a pastel green gown, sitting in a wooden chair. Her right hand rests in her lap with an open palm, signaling a form of meditation. Her left arm is bent at the elbow with her hand suspended at such an angle that it suggests both resting on the arm of the chair and hovering as if caught in movement. These hands evoke a mudra: of gently touching the earth and of introspection. The image is layered with surfaces, as if Soth is peering through foliage, windows, and through light itself. But this is the result of an accidental double exposure, an accident that surprised, that *pricked* Soth.



Alec Soth, *Monika, Warsaw*, 2018. Archival pigment print, 50 x 40 inches. © Alec Soth. Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

The use of double exposure reveals the artist to have embraced fortuity, in which a technical deliberateness is used to coax out something unpredictable. In *Monika, Warsaw* (2018), a woman poses at a table next to a strainer full of strawberries. An out-of-focus plant hangs down from the top left of the frame, obscuring a good portion of the image and to the right, the deckled pattern of light breaking through trees. The woman's right arm rests on the table while her left draws across her body with her hand resting on her right wrist. Her head, though, has vanished behind another partial image: the

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same woman. She looks through her own body and into Soth's lens. She looks at us, the viewer, who will note that every photograph takes place inside, with nods to something beyond. These are photographs about interiority and exteriority, and color is as much a focus as the subject matter itself. It's like the show is an array of photographic chakras; colors that burst into a unifying koan that reveals the pathos of an enlightened man. There is a purple water-stained room depicting aged books stacked and lined on shelves high in the corner, out of reach and abandoned. There is a yellow room, intensely colored with a twin bed the beckons human absence. And from this absence a presence comes forth; a presence that drifts into an inner state of being, where images aren't quite images at all, but free-floating assemblages of pure sensory experience, subtly identified and categorized by the brain, but in no way consciously settled.

Alec Soth's portraits have always spoken towards identity, place, and longing, but here they reach for subtle gestures and connective tissue: a man in a bathrobe dabbing his eye with a cloth (are they tears of joy, sadness, or allergies?); a girl in a long flowing dress stands with her hands clasped between a bed and a rolling table holding a *People* magazine with the Olsen twins on the cover; a man reaches to an out-of-focus hand and is graced by light, and another sits in an empty room wearing a corset. There's a photograph, *Hanya, New York City* (2018), that has the viewer peering through an opened bookcase at a woman beyond it. And there is another woman that sits at a table. She is in movement—multiple selves through time—and appears to be rearranging stones on the table in front of her. These stones are as sharp as can be; they are still and *clear*.

This show, these photographs, have helped me to see again. That is, the subtlety in which they suggest an attentiveness to appearances and to a conscious connection with the present, provokes an awareness of these things in the viewer. The natural propagation of images in the physical world, their constant appearing and disappearing—that they become visible through the reflection of light and burst in the mind as amalgams of the imagination—become a source for interconnection. This may be why the photographs in this exhibition feel more fleeting than they ought to be, even those that feel like old Alec Soth photographs. And although this body of work has culminated in another book—which forces linearity—it is not narrative driven or located in place. Rather, to hold the book (of the same title) in one's hands, and to feel the pages as one consumes the images with their eyes, is akin to cupped hands full of water. The contingent nature of all things, the impermanence of one's being on this planet, of an image in the mind (its liquid nature), of the pain and love that travels the body's nervous system, and their bodily expressions, float in front of the walls in this white space. This is the work of an artist who has seen through to a clearing, who sees flesh is but a carrier of consciousness meandering on an earthly walk, of bodies (like matter itself) that move around this world bumping into one another, creating energy.