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Photographer Alec Soth's new project articulates the intimate encounter between artist and subject



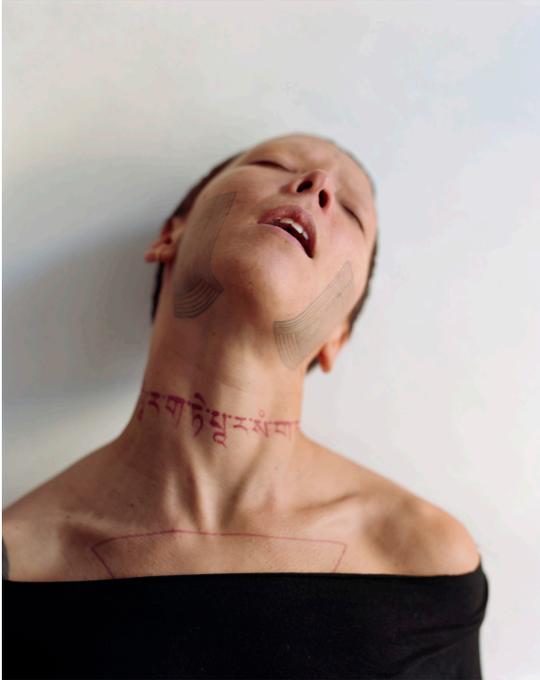
Nick. Los Angeles. 2017.

The title of American photographer Alec Soth's new project, which is currently on view at Berlin's LOOCK Galerie, comes from a poem called *The Gray Room* by Wallace Stevens. In the short poem, a room where a person resides is described in succinct but telling detail — as it turns out it is not grey at all, but actually embroidered with colour: green, red, white, the yellow of the forsythia. The final line of the poem provides Soth's wounding title: "I know how furiously your heart is beating."

Stevens' poem does not just offer an affecting title, but the episode described in the poem — of watching another person from a distance and trying to understand them — is key to Soth's approach to photography in this series too. "When I revisited this poem I thought that this exactly describes what I'm trying to do, which is, to have this experience of being in the space of the person and looking at them in the space, admiring all the beautiful things that I see," Soth tells SLEEK at the Berlin gallery. "And simultaneously questioning what's happening with the other person. Those things that I can't see and just feeling that energy amidst all this beauty."

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This description is revealing as regard his latest series, widely regarded as Soth's most "poetic" yet. *I Know How Furiously Your Heart Is Beating* consists of a slim selection of 35 photographs, which have been collected in a book of the same name published by MACK. Meanwhile, the exhibition at LOOCK is one of four concurrent exhibitions under the same title, which opened at different venues this past month.



Michelle. Berlin. 2018



Birds of America. Minneapolis. 2018

Since the publication of his breakthrough book, *Sleeping By the Mississippi* in 2004, Soth has achieved idol status in photography circles. *Sleeping By the Mississippi* was a landmark project: a melancholic portrait of the forgotten American coastline unwound through a series of tender portraits, interiors and gloomy landscapes. In comparison, *I Know How Furiously Your Heart Is Beating* offers a quieter — but none the less potent — insight into the intricacies of humanity. It is neither journalistic nor epic in cinematic proportions as his previous projects such as *Sleeping by the Mississippi* and his most recent series *Songbook* were, but is concerned with something as Soth says himself “inarticulable.” In interviews about his new work, Soth, who is based in Minnesota, has mentioned that he finds it difficult to condense the project into a few buzzwords, “a one sentence thing that you can say to satisfy a journalist or audience.” He continues, “I think the reason it’s harder to articulate is that it’s more about these inarticulable things like energy than it is about even about ‘poetry’. ‘Poetry’ suggests language, whereas I’m talking more about a physical quality, a physical exchange.”

I Know How Furiously Your Heart Is Beating sheds the informational and the geographical pinpoint (many of Soth's projects, such as *Sleeping by the*

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Mississippi and *Niagara* pivot on the conditions of a specific place). “It was conceived of in opposition to that structure,” says Soth. “Trying to bring things to something more simple and pure.” It is in essence non-narrative, instead finding illuminating smatters of coherency here and there through accidental motifs: flowers, birds and birdcages, tattered books and tattooed skin.

The reason for the project’s change in direction resulted from a personal change of heart. According to Soth, he got hung up on the ethical issues surrounding taking another person’s photograph and intended to stay in Minnesota, retreat and “just look at the light.” Soth admits, “It always seemed a little problematic that I was using these people for my own art.” He didn’t want to “just drive down the street and grab people.” As in his previous series, almost all of the sitters in *I Know How Furiously Your Heart Is Beating* are strangers, but this time he arranged meetings with them beforehand, giving his subjects time to research him and decide more fully whether they would like to be apart of the project. And he did, as he says, “feel better about it.”



Yuko. Berlin. 2018.



Anna. Kentfield, California. 2017.

The turning point was when the opportunity arose to photograph the influential postmodern dancer, Anna Halprin, who taught the likes of Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown. Soth visited Halprin at home, then in her late 90s, photographing her through a window in a flowing jade dress, caught amongst the blurs of blossoms reflected in the glass and framed by a fringe of tumbling ivy. “I was interested in spending time with her because she’s a dancer, and she really understands bodies in space. I was interested in being in the space of another person and how that’s affecting everything. And she knows that. So, I spent time with her, and I felt good about it and that I wasn’t doing any harm.”

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Soth's initial interest in dancers sparked a wider interest in seeking to photograph people who are "comfortable in space and who might be open to something that's not just a portrait." This led him to people like Yuko in Dusseldorf, with marigold yellow hair, or Michelle in Berlin. The result are photographs that translate an "encounter" between two people into photographic form, but one that flickers with the intimacy of knowledge and a desire as Soth says to "keep things open."

The final images sing with Soth's characteristic detail and description. Unlike much of his previous work, the palette is bright and frequently viridescent — exuberant greens glisten throughout, glimmering in window frames and repeated in the painted fingernails of a model. Faded pale pinks and romantic shades of lilac and blooming magentas figure often. The majority of the photographs are of interior settings, ones laden with personal bric-a-brac and embellishments: framed photos, the yellowing trim of a lace curtain, a miscellany of paper fragments tacked to a door frame. There is a sense of seeing the world anew, of appreciating its sumptuous beauty, of practicing a fresh optimism, even a naïveté. "You know, my eyes had been washed out a little bit. I wasn't cynical and so somehow, there's a bit more innocence in the way of seeing."

By being open in this way, arguably allowed Soth more room to experiment with his medium too. In a photograph of a Polish singer named Monika, she is visible standing beside a window exactly where her face should be in a up-close portrait at a table. The effect was entirely coincidental: shooting on his large-format glass plate camera, Soth forgot to flip the holder around, which resulted in a striking incidence of double exposure. Meanwhile, in another image of a young man sprawled on a bed, once again captured through dappled glass, Soth's bulky camera is just-visible in the window reflections

Standing before the gleaming image in the sun-bright gallery, Soth comes to a realisation: this happenstance re-enacts what he's trying to do. "It's about an experience in space with myself and another person, and that's my sentence."