

Nadine Stijns & Amal Alhaag:
The Anarchist Citizenship

George Georgiou: *Americans Parade*
Alec Soth finds a quiet place

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In the Company of Strangers

**Time away from
photography allowed
Alec Soth to take
a more reflective
and intuitive approach
as he explored his
subjects, their homes
and their inner lives
for his latest work.**

**Words by
Allie Haeusslein**

**A quiet
place**





It's an unseasonably cold but bright February day in San Francisco. Sitting across from me at my kitchen table is Alec Soth, sporting a baseball cap, glasses hanging around his neck, and coffee mug in hand. Between us is the only advance copy of his newest book, *I Know How Furiously Your Heart is Beating*. The grey linen cover stands out from the stained wood of the table. He tilts the book back and forth in the light-drenched kitchen as the metallic foiled title oscillates from purple to pink. "This is the kind of light this book should be seen in," he says, as he runs his fingers across the deeply embossed words.

Books have always been central to Soth's practice. In 2004, it was his self-published *Sleeping By the Mississippi* that launched him into the art world. Working with a large format camera in colour, he wove together portraits, landscapes and still lifes made during road trips along the Mississippi River over a five-year period. Soth approached a number of the projects that followed in a similar manner, focusing his 8x10 on a particular place, region or population. "I started being identified with this one kind of process," he explains. "And I became frustrated by the limitations of that. I wanted to be able to work faster and freer." That frustration led to a significant shift in his last body of work. "With *Songbook*, I started photographing with a digital camera and a flash in black-and-white. Everything was different. I was approaching people in a much more physically aggressive way because I was trying to function like a newspaper photographer. So I would barge onto some sort of scene and just take over. I really loved working in that way at that time."

But following *Songbook*, the prolific and much sought-after photographer took a hiatus. "For about a year I stopped travelling to make pictures, taking any assignments, and photographing people." That last part, he says, is important to note. "There had always been this nagging part of portraiture for me, this feeling of using people, and I didn't want to be in that space." He explains further, "As I got more experienced, I became a 'pro photographer'. I knew what I was doing, and I knew how to manipulate a situation. Suddenly I had a lot more power. I'm evening the playing field with this new work."

The approach that emerged came from a new perspective on the act of making portraits. "I always talked about the portrait as 'the space between us'. You're sitting over there," he gestures at me across the table, "and I'm sitting over here. I always felt like what I'm photographing is your exterior features, not what's in your brain or in your heart. And then I'm actually physically photographing this space," he says, gesturing at the 80cm separating us. "That space is distance. It's a removal. The way I started thinking about portraiture in this [recent] period was, 'Yes, I am photographing those things. But it's also an exchange of energy.' To know that all of those things are happening simultaneously makes the process a little less alienating. But still, I don't know what's going on in your head. And therein lies the title."

I Know How Furiously Your Heart is Beating is drawn from the final line of Wallace Stevens' 1917 poem *Gray Room*. "This poem represents what I'm trying to do – just be in a room with another person. Look at them in the room. Admire all of the incredible beauty of the surfaces the light is bouncing around, and try to have this moment where I have an awareness of something happening inside the other person without fully understanding it."

During his year of self-reflection, Soth's meditation practice – "a home-brew version of transcendental meditation," he says jokingly – also played a role in his shifting mentality about photography. Through the act of slowing down, "I realised how to access this really quiet space. And thus I didn't need to see forceful images or make forceful images. I just wanted subtlety and quietness. I no longer needed to travel and stop people on the street and say, 'Hey! Can I get into your house? Can I get you to take off your clothes?'" So when I did start photographing people again, I wanted this much softer approach.

It meant going back to the big camera and talking to people a lot before making a picture."

An early portrait sitting with the dancer Anna Halprin [opposite], arranged by one of her former students, helped set the course. "I had been playing with a more experimental way of working before I went to make her portrait," he remembers. "I'd been interested in dancers. Their job is physically responding to space. And I've always talked about photography, and especially portraiture, in spatial terms. She was frail, so I ended up going to her to make the picture. The encounter was not unlike hundreds of encounters I've had before as a photographer. But it felt just slightly softer, or I felt like my intention was gentler. I didn't have this thirst to take the picture. I felt no compulsion to put her in any kind of uncomfortable situation. There was an easiness about the exchange."

Sheathed in a pale green robe in the centre of the picture's frame, Halprin is seated on a throne that appears as if it has sprung organically from the living room's floorboards. Outside and inside blur indiscriminately around her figure, making it difficult to distinguish reflections of trees and vegetation outdoors from the indoor plants in the foreground and background. The impact is otherworldly; though she is alone, depictions of the Madonna and Child come to mind. It's in the sculptural folds of her robe and the posturing of her arms and hands, which appear as though something may have just been gently lifted from her embrace.

After creating this picture, Soth knew he wanted to continue making portraits through these one-on-one encounters in his subjects' homes. Rather than finding people by chance on the street, portrait sittings were arranged in advance in cities he was already scheduled to visit for lectures, workshops or assignments. His open-ended request was for "people who know how to inhabit space". In stark contrast to many of Soth's earlier bodies of work organised around place, he did not care where in the world the photographs for this project were made. "I felt like I wanted the whole book to be this interior world, and thus remove it from geography in a way."

In addition to returning to the large format camera, "another really important element for me is using available light, and if I had to add any light, using continuous light. By making do with available light, and leaving out the harshness and falseness of the strobe, everything slowed down and was softened as well. It was less control for me." The lighting and atmosphere in a picture like *Keni, New Orleans* [page 31] demonstrates the payoff from this process. Clean daylight pours in through the lace curtains on the right. The effect on Keni's face is reminiscent of sfumato in painting, as the light bathing the left side of his face gradually falls into shadow on the right. He gazes beyond the photograph's frame, as if he is lost in thought. The moment feels sincere, as if the photographer's presence is known, but not especially felt. "Instead of getting the subject to do something for my project," Soth reflects, "maybe it's more about taking what's there and having an encounter and having it work or not." This picture demonstrates Soth gently at work.

Though portraits comprise the majority of the photographs in *I Know How Furiously Your Heart is Beating*, they are counterbalanced by interior still lifes. In keeping with the project's openness, Soth responded to every given shoot intuitively, deciding at the time whether to make a portrait, interior, or both during a sitting. "There's this idea of taking a portrait of someone through their space," he explains. "Not through the space that they want hidden off, but the space they occupy." *Bill and Marth's, St Louis* [page 37] is an especially striking example. A cluttered room houses a shrine to the St Louis Cardinals baseball team. Light-stained posters, lanyards, pennant flags, photographs and newspaper clippings dominate the room's corner as they climb toward the ceiling alongside an ominous-looking crack –



- Page 31 *Keni, New Orleans.*
 Page 32 *Anna, Kentfield, California.*
 Page 34 *Nick, Los Angeles (top);
 Galina, Odessa (below).*
 Page 35 *Vince, New York City.*
 Page 36 *Leon, Berlin.*
 Page 37 *Bill and Marth's, St Louis.*
 All images © Alec Soth.



Further viewing

I Know How Furiously Your Heart is Beating is published by Mack, priced £50, alongside four exhibitions, at Look Galerie in Berlin (until 18 April), Sean Kelly Gallery in New York (until 27 April), Weinstein Hammons Gallery in Minneapolis (until 04 May), and Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco (until 11 May). Some of the work can also be seen in *Two Rivers: Joachim Brohm/Alec Soth* at NRW-Forum in Düsseldorf (until 07 July), mackbooks.co.uk





a chasm really – in the pale orange floral wallpaper. There are the worn, red edges of a cover on the edge of the couch, an out-of-focus handbag, a cane propped against one of many precarious stacks of paper. Then, nestled on a coffee table brimming with papers and books, the green leaves of a plant peek out.

Soth's volume presents only 35 pictures – a fraction of the images he includes in the project's wider edit – made over an intense year-long period. "I wanted to show this restraint," he continues. With *I Know How Furiously Your Heart is Beating*, "I'm on the poetic side of the spectrum... I didn't want to try to connect all the dots into a grand narrative. I just wanted to make photographs that were loving and affectionate and tender." That said, "I'm obsessive about sequencing, even when it's utterly non-narrative. I really wanted this book to function more like a compilation of little poems than a novel." Portraits and still lifes intermingle, the seemingly disparate people and places offering no obvious connections between sitters and interiors. Certain repeated visual cues, however, do permeate. The juxtaposition of interior and exterior, seen at the beginning of the book in Halprin's portrait, reappears in various forms. Several times, Soth shoots from inside looking out of windows and doors, offering glimpses of lush, verdant scenes beyond the home's confines. Plant life and florals also appear regularly inside: on apparel and wallpaper, in vases and pots, within clasped hands. Such widespread appearance suggests

a more porous exchange between indoors and outdoors and, more metaphorically, between one's private, interior world and exterior presentation. Soth explains, "When I was younger, I thought, 'There's the world out there and the world inside my head, and they are these two separate things.' At this stage in my life – a more mature stage – I understand that there are these things called windows that allow movement between inside and outside." There is no expectation here of revealing something profound about a sitter's psyche or life. We are instead asked to honour and value quiet moments where a fleeting intimacy glimmers in the exchange between subject and photographer.

Introspection to such profound effect surprises me, especially in the case of an artist considered one of the leading American photographers working today. *I Know How Furiously Your Heart is Beating* represents a leap of faith that is likely to reverberate beyond this project alone. It has even allowed Soth to follow some of the feedback he has been known to give to others. "When I'm asked to give advice to young photographers, one of the things I sometimes say is, 'Loosen your grip.' It's like they are playing tennis and holding on so tightly to their racquets; they are trying so hard. This book was me following my own advice and trying to loosen my grip. I want to keep reminding myself of that going forward. To not always try so hard. To relax a little and be open to what comes without forcing anything." **BJP**

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