

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### ATLANTA

### Alec Soth

HIGH MUSEUM OF ART

Photographer Alec Soth seeks the American South neither in traditional small towns nor in the cities and suburbs of the New South but in the forest. His portfolio "Black Line of Woods," 2006–2007, commissioned by the High Museum as part of its ongoing "Picturing the South" exhibition series, includes twelve images taken in secluded areas of seven Southern states. A sense of isolation dominates Soth's South. Single figures, all male (his backwoods world appears to be free of women), are engulfed by their natural settings. In *S. J., Nubbin Creek, Alabama*, 2007, lush greenery overtakes an elderly man in a camouflage T-shirt. An Eastern Orthodox priest in *Resaca, Georgia*, 2006, bearded and dressed in a dark cassock, wanders meditatively through a leafless autumnal forest. Though dwarfed by the trees' tall,

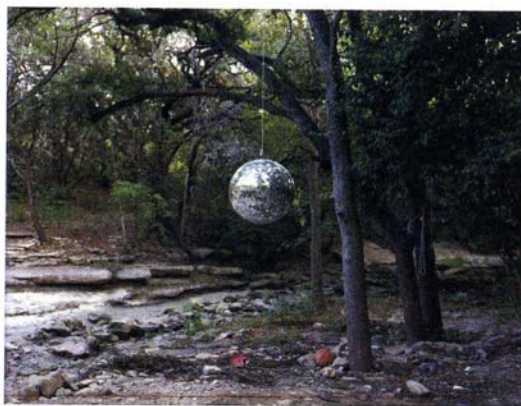
slender trunks, he anchors the composition, standing where the image's diagonal axes meet. Soth's stated focus in "Black Line of Woods" has been social outsiders, and while his images risk romanticizing the loner, the scenes' stillness and quietude largely mitigate that effect.

Seven entries in the series do not feature men, but buildings or detritus imply human presence. A lone, simply built house at dusk, eerily lit by a single street lamp, appears against a looming dark forest in *Bardstown, Kentucky*, 2006. The forest floor in *Knoxville, Tennessee*, 2006, is littered with cardboard, beer bottles, a pill bottle, and a plank of wood bearing the messages LEPRECHAUN WAS HERE NOV. 1, 2006. and BITCH. J. J. I WILL KILL YOU. I AIN'T NO FAG. Though each of Soth's images seems to have a story to tell, any narrative is only hinted at, not disclosed.

In some cases, Soth's unpopulated pictures are so strange—and possess such formal refinement—that one wonders if they might not be staged. A giant disco ball hangs from a tree in *Enchanted Forest (36), Texas*, 2006. Just below, at the base of the tree, are an overturned Frisbee and a deflated basketball. These two round objects related to leisure activities form a triangle with the mirrored ball at its apex, a meticulous arrangement that seems more than coincidental. In *Enchanted Forest (45), Texas*, 2006, a lightbulb supported by wires hangs from the trees over a green blanket littered with dried leaves, referring, seemingly, to William Eggleston's famous photograph *Greenwood, Mississippi*, 1973.

Soth states that although "there is some direction" involved in his work, his photos are not fully staged. Nonetheless, tension inevitably arises between the presumptive documentary facticity of the photograph and recognition of the ease with which digital photographs are manipulated or that many photographers working today construct their scenes entirely. In the end, however, it makes no difference: Soth's images are rich, pithy, often poignant, and sometimes humorous—regardless of how they came into being.

—Philip Auslander



Alec Soth,  
*Enchanted Forest (36)*,  
*Texas*, 2006, color  
photograph, 24 x 30".