

Dear Danielle Steel

My name is Sean Fader. I am a queer artist and a professor of photography at Tulane University. I am writing to you from Stove Works, an artist residency in Chattanooga, Tennessee. I have been asked to produce a piece for a show at Antenna Gallery that will open as part of Prospect 5, a multivenue triennial in New Orleans. The exhibition's theme is sugar, and I decided to investigate the history of the sugar daddy, in particular the story of Adolph Spreckels and Alma de Bretteville Spreckels. I was immediately consumed by their story, which eventually led me to you.

I'm sure that you know much of this history, but in briefly rehearsing it here, I hope to tell you a bit about myself, my practice, and what I discovered. Ultimately, I hope I can convince you to collaborate with me on a photograph.

Obviously, I am aware of your prolific output as a writer. But when I learned that you had written 190-plus books on Olly, your 1946 Olympia standard typewriter, I decided to rebuild a 1954 Smith Corona Silent Super and write you a letter. Thank the stars for You Tube. I found tutorials on how to replace parts, clean, and lubricate my typewriter (whom I now call Alma). I am humbled by your dedication to your writing, and, as an artist, I identify with that commitment. I have often described my artistic practice as tumbling down the rabbit hole. I find myself popping my head up two years later, looking around, and thinking, oh wow, did I make all this stuff? Just as Agatha Christie told you "I want to die face-first in my typewriter," I want to die making work

My recent body of work that I found myself tumbling down the rabbit hole was called "Best Lives." It's a series of collaborative portraits I am currently working on, focusing on the role of the digital photograph today. It addresses the messy pleasures and conflicting impulses that characterize queer uses of digital portrait photography in social media. I am currently using Instagram hashtags to find and contact queer people. I then set up a time to meet them.

When I arrive we talk about how they desire to be represented in digital public spaces as a subject, and we collaborate to create a portrait, inspired by our conversation, for their Instagram feed. They choose the final image I will use for the series by posting it to their Instagram. I then print the image 4x5 feet and create a custom 3D-printed frame to mimic 19th century society portrait frames. The details of these frames- each specific to their encounter- comments on the attributes and desires expressed by their sitter.

This interest in Gilded Age, high-society aesthetics connects this past work with my research on sugar daddies, and the story of Alma Spreckels. Alma was born Alma Charlotte Corday le Normand de Bretteville on March 4th, 1881, in the Sunset District of San Francisco. At the time the Sunset was just sand dunes. Her father believed they were descendants of Franco-Danish nobility (Bretteville). Charlotte Corday, from whom Alma took her middle name, was the beautiful aristocrat who murdered Murat in his bath. Murat is credited with starting the

September Massacres during the French Revolution and Alma's Middle name was a way for her father to insert a dig on the proletariat. Unlike her father, Alma was willing to work, but she did have plans to make it to the top. Alma dropped out of school to help run the family business—a Danish bakery/laundry service/massage parlor (aka a one-stop shop)!

Though I am unaware of any connection you have to royalty, Alma's full name reminds me of yours, Danielle Fernandes Dominique Schuelein-Steel. As I think about connections between you and Alma, I was struck by the fact that you are a descendant of the founders of Lowenbrau beer but don't drink, so does that make you beer royalty? On the other hand, Alma was a notorious drinker. She drank martinis by the pitcher.

Alma found herself, like you in love with art. She began attending classes at the Mark Hopkins Institute of Art and, though she did not prove to be the best artist, she did find her calling. She dropped out of school (similar to your time at Parsons) and began her career modeling in the nude for drawing classes—she was just over six feet tall and a curvy beauty. During this period, she became friends with the artists and weirdos of San Francisco. One artist she became friends with was Robert Aitken.

At this point in time, San Francisco was attempting to transition ~~from~~ from a gold rush town to the Paris of the west. By the way, did you know that one of the reasons San Francisco became such a gay magnet was because in the gold rush days there were very few women? So, a committee formed from San Francisco's elite was having a competition to commission a monument in the center of Union Square to honor Admiral George Dewey and President McKinley. Robert Aitken, Alma's new friend wanted that commission. He designed a monument for the committee that placed Alma as Nike, the ancient Greek Goddess of Victory, at the top of a large stone pillar, holding a trident (for Dewey) and a laurel wreath (for McKinley). When Alma modeled for the committee, Adolph Spreckels was smitten, and his vote became the deciding vote for Aitken's monument. Alma still stands at the top of that monument today.

Adolph Spreckels was the son of Claus Spreckels, a German immigrant. When Claus arrived in the states, he started a brewery, like your family. Claus eventually sold Albany Brewery in San Francisco and bought a sugar refinery. After an American treaty was arranged with King Kalakaua Hawaii's King, Claus bought 40,000 acres on the island of Hawaii where he farmed sugar cane and employed thousands of Japanese immigrants to harvest the sugar. Claus eventually handed down his sugar empire to his son Adolph. At that moment, Spreckels Sugar was the largest sugar company in the world.

So, Adolph saw Alma and was besotted. Alma was 26 and Adolph was 50. The literature says they "courted" for five years before marrying. The delay was due to the fact that Adolph had syphilis and worried that if they married that he would have to tell Alma. She eventually demanded they be married on a trip to Philadelphia and Adolph, afraid to lose her, agreed. Since he was 24 years older than her and his money came from sugar, she called him her "sugar daddy." Though she was the first to use the phrase "sugar daddy," she did not popularize the word. That would happen later in 1923 when it was used in the "Syracuse Herald-Journal" in an episode of the story "Fat Anna's Future." In 1925 Robert Welch created the candy we know as the Sugar Daddy, and the name really stuck (hilariously and unbelievably, the candy was originally named the "PappaSucker" and was changed in 1932 to the Sugar Daddy!)

So fast forward. Alma and Adolph had three children. While she was giving birth to her third child, the doctor rushed out of the room only to return after she had given birth. She later learned that Adolph had suffered a syphilis-related seizure; this was the time when she first found out about Adolph's condition. She and the three children did not develop syphilis because you cannot contract syphilis when it is in late stage, a fact I was surprised to learn.

Now to the part I'm sure you know. After their second child was born, Alma was able to convince Adolph to build her dream house—your house. She chose her favorite spot on the top of a ridge in Pacific Heights, allegedly with the best views of the Bay. She demolished a large Victorian and moved six others down the street (pissing off the neighbors by moving them into the street for quite a while.). Kenneth A Macdonald Jr. and George Adrian Applegarth (of MacDonal and Applegarth firm) were hired to design the French Baroque Chateau-style mansion that you call home. The house was speculated to have cost around \$1,000,000 to build in 1913 and took two years to complete. Is it still true that you can see six counties from the circular observatory? Did you know Alma put the plantings in the center of Octavia Street to slow cars down and cut the noise of traffic for Adolph when he was really sick? Did you know that she put the pool in her/your backyard to swim naked while drinking pitchers of martinis in order to piss off the neighbors? Does the glass roof over the pool still retract? It is amazing to imagine it was even possible to create a glass retractable roof over a pool in 1960. I recently found a typewritten report from the Historic Americans Buildings Survey about the history of her/your house. It seems to suggest the original report had several photographs as well, but I have only been able to find two black-and-white exterior shots. I was disappointed to find that the photos were in black-and-white. Color film was invented in 1935, and by 1950 it was commonly used for snapshot travel photography. The earliest color film I can find of her/your house is the scene of Sinatra opening his club in "Pal Joey." I love that Alma let Sinatra use her/your house for Chez Joey in the movie.

Did you know that after she built her/your house she went on a trip to Paris to furnish it? That is where she met Loie Fuller (who was openly gay) at a dinner party. I often wonder if they had a fling or if it was a "just friends" thing. I like the idea that they had some kind of romance. Loie was a pioneer of modern dance. She had become famous for the Serpentine Dance and was in Paris hanging out with all the artists. Paris at the turn of the century was the center of art and culture in the Western world. I imagine it was like living in-a inside Baz Luhrmann's "Moulin Rouge!" Alma was smitten with French culture and wanted to meet all the artists, and Loie was happy to take her everywhere. Eventually, ~~Alma~~ Alma connected with the sculptor Auguste Rodin. While she was there she purchased, from what I can tell, well over 70 Rodin sculptures and brought them back to the United States.

When she came home, lugging what I can only imagine to be a small container ship of artworks, it was 1914. She wanted to show the world her Rodin collection, and the following year she got her chance. The Panama-Pacific International Exposition was a world's fair hosted by San Francisco to commemorate the opening of the Panama Canal and also to promote the city's recovery following the 1906 earthquake. On April 9th, 1915, the French Pavillion opened with significant support from Alma, who lent many of Rodin's sculptures. Most notable was "The Thinker" for display in the courtyard. The building was modeled after the Palace of the Legion of Honor in Paris, and both the Pavillion and Rodin sculptures received rave reviews. Alma loved the French Pavillion, which was a temporary building constructed only of a wood frame covered with staff, a kind of faux stone made from a mixture of plaster and burlap-type fiber. Alma had her sights on a new goal, and by the close of the exposition the French government granted Alma permission to construct a permanent replica of the French Pavillion in San Francisco, which was a replica of the Palace of the Legion of Honor in Paris. After a lot of convincing, she persuaded Adolph to support her building a museum. The California Palace of the Legion of Honor opened nine years later, and six months after Adolph died of pneumonia. Alma donated much of her Rodin collection to the museum, and like the French Pavillion, "The Thinker" sits in the courtyard to this day.

Fun fact: In early 1884, long before Adolph met Alma, he got away with attempted murder. Adolph was 27 years old and "The Chronicle," San Francisco's shady newspaper, published an article about the Spreckels Sugar Company, claiming they were misleading their stakeholders. Adolph was maddened and went down to the newspaper with a gun to shoot Mike de Young, the paper's cofounder. Adolph did shoot him twice, but because Adolph was a terrible shot Mike survived. Insanely, because Adolph was rich, he was found not guilty. So fast forward to 1895 when M.H. de Young Memorial Myseum (at this point Mike was going by M.H.) opened as an outgrowth of the California Midwinter International Exposition of 1894 (the San Francisco world's fair before the quake). So when Alma opened her museum 30 years later, they were still feuding families! So Apparently when Alma saw M.H. de Young's children in public she would say, "Oh the don't like me because my husband shot their dad," Okay, ~~so~~ so here is the best part: the two museums were later merged to create the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

I could go on and on about Alma. I am fascinated with her. I was so moved when I found a picture of her with the "living doll" (a trans person) in her/your living room at Christmass in 1915. I love that she accepted people being themselves. I love that she was constantly raising money to support troops in WWI and WWII and in the process invented the rummage sale in her/your garage. In fact, her rummage sales were so effective that she expanded to thrift shops that were then donated to the Salvation to run! I know you are a couture kind of gal, but I personally love a thrift-store find! Thanks Alma!

If the walls of your house could talk, they would have a lot to say about Alma's time and about your life in that house. I remember-remember once reading that at some point you, your husband at the time, and all of your nine children lived in that house at the same time, and every one of your children had at least one dog. That house must have been amazing. I, like you, am an only child and grew up with parents who were divorced. ~~I-was-8-8-~~ I wasn't much older than one when my parents seperated. My only memory of them together is when I was just barely able to walk. We lived in a tiny log cabin in northern New Jersey. My father was blow drying his ~~****~~ hair in the bathroom, and my mother was sitting on the couch outside the bathroom door in the living room. They were screaming at each other over the sound of the hairdryer, and I stumbled up and slammed the door. My mom grabbed me and just cried. I always wanted siblings, much of my childhood felt very lonely. I think of your house so full of life, and it sounds like so much fun.

How in the world did you keep it all together, raising nine children and writing, I think, something like 195 books? It's hard to keep up with the number of books you have written since you have recently begun publishing seven books a year. Every time I check your daily blog or Instagram post, you are announcing another release. I really love your instagram. It's so fun to see your life. I especially love all the pictures of you wearing tie-dye shirts from your daughter's clothing line along with big, fabulous necklaces. If you find you are getting a lot of followers in the Southeast, it may be because of me. I tell everyone anout the work I am making ~~about*Alma*and*you*~~ and about you and Alma. I constantly wonder how you have more to say, releasing seven books a year, blogging regularly, tweeting and writing extensive captions for your instagram posts. You make the rest of us look lazy. I'm lucky if I finish one project evey two years. I keep thinking what I would do with my time if I had your sleeping "disorder." I put "disorder" in quotes because only having to sleep 3-4 hours a night and feeling refreshed sounds glorious. Actually, I think you and Obama are the ones in order. The rust of us needing eight hours seems like a disoarder. I would pay good money to have your sleeping order.

I recently found an old film that Alma had shot of her eldest daughter's birthday party at their home in Napa in August 1922. Little Alma is just 13 years old, and the birthday party seems like quite the extravagantly planned occasion. There is a whild party with costumes and paper hats, lots of toasting, horse racing, and a very strange parade. In the parade John Spreckels, Adolph's brother and founder

of San Diego, is dressed like a baby, smoking a cigar, being pushed in a wheelbarrow while being fed a drink in an oversized baby bottle. Alma and Adolph have their own martini shakers and keep filling everyone's drinks. It's the only film footage I have been able to find of the family though I assume there is more. I wonder if you have seen any film of them inside your home. I assume this wasn't the only occasion that Alma had documented in film. It does seem wild that in 1922 they commissioned someone to film a birthday party.

Alma loved planning and throwing parties just like you! I remember reading that your children joke that when you call them about Thanksgiving plans, they ask you what year they are committing to because you plan events years in advance. I am a planner but even I don't manage that kind of advance work.

Your sleep order and your planning brain must have been so helpful when you opened Steel Gallery. Again, I am humbled that on top of your publishing productivity, you opened a gallery in San Francisco to support artists you felt needed more representation. We need more gallerists like you. I was saddened to hear it had closed, but I will say that three years and almost 20 shows is an incredible run. I have many friends that could not keep their galleries open--when that was their sole focus, and they did not have such large families or prolific writing careers!

Funny story: I recently discovered that you had written an album I was dying to hear it and was thrilled to find "Love Notes" by Danielle Steel on Spotify. I found the album and clicked play. As I was listening to the first song, I kept thinking, "This voice sounds so familiar." I assumed that it was someone famous and glanced over to see that it was Johannah Cantwell! I actually went to Ridgewood High School with her. We were in the New Players Theater Company together, and I recognized her voice 25 years later. She has such a beautiful voice, it's like butter. Immediately, I reached out to her, and we reconnected. We lost touch years ago because she was a senior and I was a freshman when we did "West Side Story". I was a shark--a fact that now I am embarrassed to admit because I am very white, and we all wore dark body paint. It makes me cringe to think how that would come off these days.

So, if you have actually received this letter and are still reading it you may be asking yourself, Why is this crazy person sending me this letter? What did he mean at the beginning when he said he was trying to convince me to collaborate on a photo? What is this photograph contained in this letter? The answer is fairly straightforward. I would like to fly to San Francisco and reshoot this image in your home with you in the background. Here is why.

I have been thinking a lot about the history of the sugar daddy, particularly in gay male and queer spaces. Alma was the original sugar baby in the queerest city in the world. She saw San Francisco from the Gold Rush era all the way to 1968, two years after the Society for Individual Rights (SIR) opened America's first gay and lesbian community center in SF. She was amazing, and I want to pay tribute

to her tenacity but also to your work. In all of my research, you were always there, always mentioned. Someone carved up Alma's beautiful home into four condos, but you bought all of them and made that home whole again.

The photo I want to take is this--I want to take a picture in your home with me as Adolph and a twinkly boy 24 years younger than me as Alma. I want to model the photograph after several Rodin sculptures and a few early 20th century paintings that Alma had in her collection. For inspiration I reached out to the registrar at the Legion of Honor and received a list of all the paintings that Alma gifted the museum, so I could consider the best compositions to recreate.

You will see in the photograph I have included that my "Alma" is wearing a large pink feathered hat. This is based on one of my favorite images of Alma wearing a very similar hat, which I have also included. I spent considerable time researching who might have built this hat for Alma and what material might have been used. I worked with a close friend who is a milliner and an artist. She was able to point me in the right direction. I created the closest replica I could with currently available materials. The hat itself is wool. The feathers are Ostrich. When I was attempting to confirm that they were ostrich, I came across the history of feathers on 20th-century Edwardian hats. It turns out that using feathers from European birds for hats was banned in 1921 because this practice was decimating the European bird population. The earliest conservation movement (as we think of that in the West) started in the late 1890's, trying to convince women to use ostrich. Ostrich farms were created in South Africa for women's hats. Ostriches naturally molt, and the feathers can be dyed any color.

Speaking of colors. The photograph of Alma is in black-and-white so I spent a day deep diving into late 19th-century dyes and color themes to imagine what colors her outfit could have been. I decided to find inspiration in your love of red and pink and go with gold, red and pink theme for Alma's look. I was able to source everything to rebuild in wool with pink ostrich feathers, a wide brim dusty rose hat and circular metal pieces I created in the metal shop of the artist residency here in Chattanooga. The coat my "Alma" is wearing was lent to me by my friend Kate, who is also on residency with me. Kate recently subletted a studio for her artistic practice in Greensborough, North Carolina. from the costume designer for the Carolina Theater and it is still filled with decades of old costumes. When I showed her the image of Alma she said "I- "I have that coat." Her studio mate was kind enough to drop it in the mail. The photograph on the wall in the included image is from my most recent body of work "Best Lives" (I mentioned it at the beginning of this letter), which will be showing at Untitled Art Fair this December in Miami. I built, 3D-printed, gold-leafed, and aged the frame myself. If you are interested in creating this photo of us together, I will create a custom-designed 3d-printed frame for the image.

Thank you so much for your time. I see on Instagram that you are spending the summer traveling to reconnect with all of your children after being quarantined in Paris for the past 18 months. I can only imagine how healing that must be. I hope this reached you in the best of times. I hope you find my proposal enticing. Feel free to contact me with any of the methods below. I look forward to hearing from you.

Warmly and respectfully,
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