

# SEANKELLY

Guntzel, Jeff. "Alec Soth Stays Sane by Staying Put," *City Pages*, January 2008.

**CITYPAGES**

## Alec Soth stays sane by staying put

Freeze Frame: the arresting images of Minneapolis photographer and New York art star Alec Soth.



*Alec Soth*

If Beverly Hills has a Main Street, it's Rodeo Drive—three blocks of palm trees and designer boutiques with names like Armani, Gucci, and Louis Vuitton. Impossibly expensive cars—Ferraris, Rolls-Royces, Lamborghinis—cruise down the strip. Paparazzi stalk red carpets and limousines.

From the balcony of a brand new Chanel Boutique one evening this past December, Minneapolis photographer Alec Soth, an invited guest at the store's glamorous opening party, surveys this scene, clad in a black blazer and black slacks he bought with the help of an former intern—"a real fashionable dude."

Inside, in an oversized dressing room intended for the private shopping of the elite, hang three large photographs of a Paris fashion show snapped by Soth. Mingling throughout the store are Hollywood starlets (Hilary Duff, Angie Harmon) with flawless bodies wrapped tight in extravagant clothes. Standing near Soth on the balcony is the young actor Chris Klein (*American Pie*). It occurs to Soth that Klein's suit looks much better than his own does.

Somewhere on the street below, Soth's driver, hired by Chanel to chauffeur him the two blocks from his hotel to the opening, waits for him. Earlier, at the hotel—a Four Seasons where rooms start at \$545 and

the \$70 breakfast, much to Soth's bewilderment, didn't come with eggs—he told the driver, "I'll just walk." The driver argued: "You should take the car." Being a man of manners from the Midwest, Soth took the ride, and a few short seconds later he stepped from the car onto Chanel's red carpet.

A photographer wants to snap his picture. Soth stretches out on a bench and strikes a mock-seductive pose, smiling playfully through a thick, black beard. He hasn't even had a drink yet and has no idea why he's doing this.

For a guy who grew up a shy kid in Chanhassen, married his high school sweetheart, Rachel (a nurse), and never left Minnesota, the opulence is absurd—but no more so than his sudden success.

"I know I would make more money if I lived in New York and went to parties and all of that," he says. "But then I would be an alcoholic."



*Alec Soth*

SEVEN YEARS EARLIER, in his tiny studio above a coffee shop on the blighted corner of Franklin and First avenues, Soth waits nervously for a visitor: Martin Weinstein, the exultant, silver-haired boss of the Weinstein Gallery, an art-world outpost on 46th Street and Lyndale Avenue. Soth rented the Franklin studio space to make a statement: He is a serious artist. He's been learning how to be a photographer for nearly a decade, shooting ribbon cuttings and groundbreakings for small newspapers in the St. Paul suburbs.

The studio's location is perfect. It's close to his job at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, where he photographs the holdings for use in books and brochures. But the decor is hardly high-class: some darkroom equipment, a '60s-era plush pink velvet chair from a garage sale, and a skylight. In anticipation of his distinguished guest, the 30-year-old photographer has framed and hung some of his best work—

hoping, cautiously, that it might some day adorn the much swanker wall space at Weinstein's influential gallery.

That Weinstein is coming at all is a product of outrageous fortune. A high school-aged intern in Soth's department at the museum just happens to be the daughter of the notoriously proud connoisseur of modern photography. After discovering Soth, she started badgering her father to come have a look. "What's the imagery?" Weinstein asked skeptically.

"He's got these pictures of sheep in parking lots," his daughter Molly explained.

"I do Chuck Close and Man Ray," the father told her. "I don't do livestock in parking lots."

But daughters have a way of chipping away at a father's resolve, and before long Weinstein caved and agreed to visit Soth at his studio.

To Soth's immediate relief, Weinstein walks through the door and compliments the space. The photographer is excited to show off his sheep pictures, but Weinstein focuses on a handful of photos taken on a series of road trips along the Mississippi River. He sees a photo of a houseboat on a frozen Winona riverbank—it's a bleak but vivid winter shot—as well as a portrait of a woman named Adelyn with fire-orange hair and an Ash Wednesday mark on her forehead, improvised from the remains of an expired cigarette .

Weinstein is impressed. On his way out the door, he tells Soth, "Call me when you get 10 great pictures."

So Soth went hunting for tattered and isolated spots along the Mississippi, usually in the spring and with a pile of books on tape. In the back seat of the van was his constant companion: a complex and fussy R.H. Phillips and Sons 8x10 Compact camera, a relic of the late '80s that opens like an accordion. The contraption sits on a tripod strong enough to hold a small child; the negatives cost \$20 a piece and capture incredible detail and color.

From all those miles up and down the river emerged a collection of photographs called "Sleeping by the Mississippi." The work won him his first major award: the 2003 Santa Fe Prize for photography. Soon two curators from the Whitney Museum in New York City were flying in to meet Soth. "I think they took pity on me," Soth says, only half-joking. By 2004, prints from his Mississippi project were hanging at the Whitney Biennial in New York City.

"As custom dictates," *New York Times* art critic Michael Kimmelman wrote in his review of the exhibit, there were "a few good discoveries (Alec Soth, a photographer)."

The tossed-off reference was enough to turn Soth into an overnight star. "It was just those four words, and it hasn't stopped since," says Weinstein, who now represents Soth.

Since then, Soth's prints have hung in prestigious galleries and museums all over the world: Paris, Berlin, Beijing, and Sao Paulo. He's taken assignments from *Esquire*, *W*, *Newsweek*, *GQ*, and the *New York Times*. These days his large prints sell for as much as \$20,000.

Weinstein, who has delegated to himself the job of "keeping Alec's hat size the same," says, "He is still in amazement of it all. He notices the sweet awe of things and he knows how fleeting this is."

IN A ST. PAUL STUDIO that is a significant upgrade from his Franklin space, a printer the size of a floor freezer rumbles as it slowly spits out giant photographs to be framed, crated, and shipped to a solo exhibit in Paris, where a gallery is hanging 100 of Soth's prints. Eric Carroll, the photographer's red-haired studio manager, sits at a desk near the door, quietly answering emails. Meanwhile, Soth answers questions and endures a photo shoot.

"I absolutely despise this," Soth says with a self-conscious laugh.



Alec Soth

The printer makes a loud swoosh and drops Brianna into the tray. Soth was in the parking lot of a Richfield strip mall setting up a shot in the snow when Brianna, who had been shopping on her day off from high school, trudged past in boots and a long black coat a few sizes too big for her. She wore a black hat with a brim and clutched a black Chanel shopping bag. "It's impossible to verbalize why I pick one person over another," Soth says. "I just pluck them out."

*Brianna* is a perfect Soth subject. She doesn't perform for the camera and she's unconventionally striking. Standing in front of the giant green awning of a Sally Beauty Supply, she embodies what Soth calls "the trickle down of fashion" from places like Paris and Beverly Hills.

In stark contrast is the portrait of Chanel über-designer Karl Lagerfeld at the Grand Palais in Paris. He stares toward Soth's camera through blackout sunglasses and strikes an imperial pose, one hand clasping his suit coat. Lagerfeld radiates power—a rare theme in Soth's work.

As the photographer shoots Soth, the uncomfortable subject comments on the role reversal. "What I do is so different than this," he explains. "Imagine if he was standing over there in the corner for like 10 minutes

dinking around with his camera the way I do. What happens? I'm getting bored with the experience and I start thinking about other things and I'm not aware of the camera anymore."

This is the space Soth tends to thrive in. He's a fussy photographer working with a fussy camera, and by the time he's set up the camera and the shot, the subject's instinct to perform has long ago expired, which is exactly what Soth wants. That's one reason he avoids shooting celebrities: They're trained to turn it on as needed and that drives him crazy. "They can even do it with their eyes!" he says. Instead, Soth's photos feature ordinary people who he has interrupted and detained for the better part of a day.

Minneapolis photographer Karolina Karlic, who has assisted Soth on many shoots, says he gets away with it because of his personality.

"A lot of the time people don't know who he is," she says. "He doesn't name-drop himself at all and subjects are usually just intrigued—they see this guy with a burly beard and tennis shoes and they think he's just this young photographer playing with an old camera."

Soth, for his part, credits something more base: "People are flattered by attention."