

SEAN KELLY

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Alec Soth: Gathered Leaves



Alec Soth: 'Two Towels', 2004, from 'Niagra' © Alec Soth

TIME OUT SAYS



Touring photo show about the open road, longing and loss.

Forty-six-year-old Minnesota native Alec Soth still lives in his hometown of Minneapolis. Since the early 2000s his version of Americana has been hugely influential: mostly small-town and second-city portraits with an emphasis on place, capturing 'middle' (ie non-wealthy) Americans in all their inglorious glory.

A member of the illustrious photo agency Magnum, Soth's focus is project-based documentary work that touches upon fine art (he publishes photo-art books through his Little Brown Mushroom press). If some of his earlier works – serene, middle-distance portraits with subjects looking fixedly into the distance – seem overplayed, it's because his lyrical style has been so routinely emulated.

In this, his first major exhibition in the UK, we are treated to four of his major projects from the last ten years, including his latest, 'Songbook', a group of large-scale photos first brought together as seven unbound publications. These 'dispatches' (as he calls them) are from a road trip during which he and writer Brad Zellar followed the local action across seven states. A child plays an electric guitar for a church service; a tween boy too young to smoke does just that while donning a fedora; a group of adults old enough to know better are in full foam-party throttle at the Crazy Legs saloon. Using black-and-white film, Soth's aim is to recreate the quick, responsive feel of photos as he remembers them from his time working at a local newspaper.

But perhaps his most haunting series is 2010's 'Broken Manual', for which he photographed survivalists, monks and other refuseniks in their remote habitats. These nameless 'lonely bearded men' – with their woodsy hideaways and books on making improvised weaponry – are trying to disappear into America, yet Soth managed to get up close to them (homemade swastika tattoos and all), bearing out his claim that his secret to making people comfortable is the awkwardness he often feels himself.

Perhaps it's also to do with the fact that through his lens he seems to be identifying with all these folk – fat newlyweds in Niagara Falls, small-town preachers, hermits – and reminding us that these are not people on America's margins but the ones at its core.



Alec Soth: from 'Broken Manual', 2008. © Alec Soth



Alec Soth: 'Adelyn, Ash Wednesday, New Orleans, Louisiana', 2000. © Alec Soth



Alec Soth: 'Charles, Vasa, Minnesota', 2002, from 'Sleeping by the Mississippi'. © Alec Soth



Alec Soth: 'Melissa', 2005, from 'Niagra'. © Alec Soth



Alec Soth: 'Crazy Legs Saloon. Watertown, New York', from 'Songbook'. © Alec Soth



Alec Soth: 'Bree. Liberty Cheer All-Stars. Corsicana, Texas', 2013, from 'Songbook'. © Alec Soth



Alec Soth: 'Near San Antonio, Texas,' from 'Songbook'. © Alec Soth