

SEANKELLY

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Art in America

ALEC SOTH

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CRANBROOK ART MUSEUM

by *matthew biro*

BLOOMFIELD HILLS



This traveling midcareer retrospective, "From Here to There," suggested that Alec Soth is one of the best photographers working today. Originating at the Walker in 2010, the show included a representative selection of Soth's work from the mid-1990s to the present. On view were more than 100 photographs, ranging from 8 by 10 inches to nearly 5 by 6 feet, short videos and various forms of book art, from maquettes and zines to professionally produced volumes. Perhaps more than any other contemporary photographer, Soth understands the tension between art and document inherent in the photographic medium. Situating his work between these two tendencies, he has created surprisingly personal metaphors for the collective hopes and anxieties governing post-9/11 America.

Soth emerged in the early 2000s with "Sleeping by the Mississippi," documenting four years of road trips along the river. Quixotic representations of outsider culture in the form of detailed yet painterly portraits, landscapes and tableaux, Soth's images are distinguished by their non-systematic content, expressivity and rejection of a deadpan mode of address. In these images of forgotten Americans, distressed domiciles, empty beds, lonely pictures affixed to peeling walls, and the iconic river and its immediate environs, Soth simultaneously asserts hardship and our ability to imaginatively transcend it.

The show paid considerable attention to the artist's two other major projects of the past decade: "NIAGARA," his epic series about desire, place and commodification, and "Broken Manual," a penetrating interpretation of survivalist culture. "NIAGARA" explores the famed location as a metaphor for love, interspersing portraits of couples, families and lonely individuals with motel interiors and exteriors, beautiful images of the falls and handwritten love letters that Soth borrowed from people he met there. "Broken Manual," on the other hand, documents men who have almost completely retreated from the world, focusing on their possessions and the environments in which they live. It is perhaps Soth's bleakest project.

By using an 8 x 10 view camera, Soth slowed down the documentary process, making it less candid, more poetic and meditative. His portraits seem simultaneously honest and staged. Their subjects pose and are aware of the camera, yet they also appear psychologically relaxed, caught slightly unawares while engaged in reveries. This inwardness helps to underscore the artist's themes of dreaming, love, death, desire, escape and loneliness.

The interiors and landscapes are similarly suffused with emotion and symbolism. Two swan-shaped towels on an empty bed evoke the fading—or perhaps the rekindling—of a profound connection. Fragments of American woods and deserts become ciphers for alienation from society. Soth's subtle palette and the density of information produced by his large-format negatives can give his photographs a surreal majesty or the quality of dreams.

The retrospective culminated with "Michigan" (2012), revealing another important side of the artist's practice. In 2008, Soth started Little Brown Mushroom, a publishing house devoted to limited-edition newspapers and photo-books. The Michigan photos all come from the third issue of the *LBM Dispatch*, an irregularly published newspaper and Tumblr blog documenting road trips taken by Soth and the writer Brad Zellar. Although the black-and-white images deal with poverty, violence and the deadening effects of the social system, they convey an underlying sense of resilience. As is the case with Soth's earlier work, we see a focus on outsider communities and life off the beaten path. Here, however, there is a greater sense of crisis. The photographs, made with a medium-format digital camera, were all taken in the two weeks directly before the last presidential election. At a time when the mainstream media painted a portrait of a radically divided country, Soth discovered something else: an America in which individuals hoped to negotiate differences and cultivate alliances.

Alec Soth: Melissa, Flamingo Inn, 2005, chromogenic print, 50 by 40 inches; at the Cranbrook Art Museum.