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**Photographer Alec Soth:
'To me the most beautiful
thing is vulnerability'**



MISS MODEL CONTESTANTS, CLEVELAND, OHIO, 2012, FROM SONGBOOK CREDIT: ALEC SOTH

Photography,' Alec Soth said, 'is so stupid. It's so obvious... Everyone can do it, and yet certain moments have this magic. And that's what you're always looking for. I make the analogy with popular music. In some ways, it's so easy to write a pop song, but why do certain ones do that thing that touches a nerve and makes them a hit? It's such a subtle little mix of elements. It drives me crazy because I'll often go out and think it's super easy – you can just point the camera anywhere and make a picture – and it just doesn't capture it at all. To this day, it's really mysterious to me.'

Soth is, by general consensus, the greatest living photographer of America's social and geographical landscape, the modern heir to a tradition of documentary photography that goes back to the Depression-era images of Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, and that developed through the work of such photographers as Robert Frank, Garry Winogrand and Stephen Shore. His work can be found in museums and collections around the world, but he has never had a major exhibition in Britain, until now.

Next week sees the opening in London of *Gathered Leaves*, featuring photographs taken over the past 16 years, drawn from Soth's four principal American projects: *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, *Niagara*, *Broken Manual* and *Songbook*. Soth has worked in every part of North America, as well as South America and Asia, but his main subject is what he calls 'the big middle': that huge swath of America that most people fly over, but which Soth has made his own. Through his lens, it is a place of backwater creeks and desolate spaces under yawning skies; small-town striving, disappointments and momentary joys; people who stare into the camera looking haunted, proud, defiant or, more often, simply bewildered to find themselves wrapped up in the mystery of life.

Soth lives in Minneapolis. You might call it the middle of the big middle. We had originally arranged to meet at his studio, but he said he had an errand to run and would pick me up from my hotel. An hour later we were still on the freeway, leaving the city behind, the bland hinterland of suburbs and strip malls giving way to flat Minnesota farmland, fields of corn growing five or six feet high, through which you could glimpse water towers and the roofs of farmhouses.

In the course of his work, Soth spends a lot of time at the wheel. 'It's so easy to have the perception of America as just this – freeways,' he said. 'But only two minutes away you can find all sorts of crazy stuff. It sometimes feels like America's flattening out, all becoming Starbucks. But it hasn't yet. There are also wonderful, rich, nuanced places, and they're all so different – vastly different.'

Soth's pictures, like all great photography, appear to cast the world anew. As we drove I looked out of the window, trying to see the passing landscape through his eyes. We passed a nice old barn, then a 1960s Cadillac parked in some long grass. 'Everything looks like a photograph,' I said.

Soth nodded. When he first set out to make *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, in 1999, he made it a rule that if he was driving and something caught his eye, he would always turn back to take a look. 'And what was interesting was that I didn't end up using a lot of those pictures, because what attracts your attention is very often a cliché. So you learn to reject those things, and find the things that are unique to you or more distinctive. And so much of what draws you in is intangible; it can't be explained.' He shrugged. 'It just resonates, in some way.'

We passed a city-limits sign for a place called Zimmerman. Zimmerman is Bob Dylan's real name, and Dylan is from Minnesota (although, sadly, not from Zimmerman). Soth obligingly pulled the car over so I could take a picture. He didn't bother to take one himself.

Swiss, unobtrusive, nice,' is how Jack Kerouac famously described the photographer Robert Frank, one of Soth's heroes, whose book *The Americans*, published in 1958, was a landmark in the tradition of chronicling the great panorama of American life. 'Midwestern, unobtrusive, nice,' is how you might describe Soth.

He is 45, of medium height and build. He was wearing a checked short-sleeved sports shirt, jeans and trainers. His beard is greying and neatly trimmed. He often wears a baseball cap. He looks like a man who does not much like drawing attention to himself – an asset for a photographer. His wife, Rachel, is a former midwife who now teaches art; they have a son and a daughter.

Soth (it rhymes with 'both') grew up 'just past the suburbs' of Minneapolis. His father was a lawyer, his mother an interior decorator. The pop star Prince owned the property adjacent to the Soth family home, and was, in a manner of speaking, a neighbour. 'I never met him'. Prince later expanded his domain and bought the Soth family home - and demolished it.

Soth has an elder brother, but as a child lived largely in his own imagination: 'I had a lot of pretend friends.' At school, he was so shy that he was afraid to raise his hand in class. It was an art teacher, when Soth was about 16, who encouraged him to express his imaginary world through art and, as he puts it, 'changed my life'.

He went on to study painting at Sarah Lawrence College in New York, but always felt fraudulent as a painter. 'I was praised but I didn't feel gifted, and I wasn't comfortable in the studio,' he told me. He switched to making outdoor sculptures, and it was to photograph them that he picked up a camera for the first time.

He was 29 when he set out on his first major project, travelling along the Mississippi. 'I remember when I got to the river, I thought, "I can go on the Minnesota side or the Wisconsin side – either way it's full of possibilities." And the making of the work was just so magical. It felt like every time I knocked on a door, it opened.' He laughed. 'And it's never been like that since.'

More than just a travel chronicle, it is 'a project about flight and dreaming'. One of the first images in the book is of the aviator Charles Lindbergh's childhood bed. 'I'd read this autobiography of Lindbergh where he talked about wanting to go on a trip down the Mississippi with his father. And there was something about the idea of this little boy, sleeping in this bed, overlooking the Mississippi River – this boyhood wanderlust and the dream of the life to come – that was really evocative to me.'

Sleeping by the Mississippi established Soth's signature of beautifully composed images shot on a large-format camera. It also established what was to become his abiding quest: to use photography in, as he puts it, a 'quasi-literary way', as a form of extended narrative. 'I'm less interested in the incredible image or the iconic moment – they come along or they don't. Anyone can take a great picture, but editing those pictures and, more importantly for me, putting them together and having them resonate off each other – that's the ultimate task. It's the body of images I'm most interested in.'

Soth uses the word 'metaphor' a lot to describe his early work. If *Sleeping by the Mississippi* employed the river as a metaphor for wanderlust and the dream of the life to come, his next big project, *Niagara* – published in

2006 – was a metaphor for love. Niagara Falls is known as one of America's foremost tourist attractions; it is also a popular destination for honeymooners. Soth's Niagara is a place of poignant hope and disillusionment: beautifully shot images of the Falls are juxtaposed with blandly generic motels (Happiness Inn) that look as much like settings for murder as for newly married bliss; a young groom in an ill-fitting rented tuxedo; a display box of cheap wedding bands in a jeweller's window; and anonymous letters of raging, and dying, love ('Remember giving me flowers the first 3 mths? What happened, eh?... I hate you always. Take Care and Drop Dead').

'What fascinated me,' Soth said, 'is how this crashing waterfall is a metaphor for that crazed intensity of new love, and how it's like this force that peters out.' He laughed. 'Niagara Falls is also where a lot of people go to commit suicide.'

Soth's work is not explicitly political, but it is inescapably so, seeming to exist in the space between the American dream and the reality of an empire in decline. What is absent from his vision of America is as notable as what's present: affluence, luxury, power, even the consolations of middle-class security. If America is founded on what Walt Whitman called 'that vast basis of the supremacy of Individuality – that new moral American continent', it is the constant thrum of loneliness and melancholia that underpins it that permeates Soth's work.

'Absolutely the two are linked,' he said. 'But I think there's something beautiful in that lonesomeness – it's like a Hank Williams song. To me the most beautiful thing is vulnerability, and there are definitely people who are willing to expose that.'

Soth seems to live in constant wonderment at what photography might unfold: the 'miracle', as he puts it, of 'going out into the world looking for something, and how often you find it'; the readiness with which people will bare themselves to the camera. 'That's just amazing to me,' he said. One of his most remarkable photographs, from *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, is of two women seated on a cheap sofa, staring neutrally into the camera. The title, *Mother and Daughter, Davenport, Iowa*, omits the fact that they are prostitutes, photographed in a brothel.

As part of the project Soth asked his subjects to write down their life's dream – 'Which is also amazing to me, that you can go up to a stranger and ask them what their dream is.' The daughter wrote that her dream was to be a registered nurse. 'And the mom said she didn't have any dreams any more. She was beyond them.'

Why does he think they agreed to be photographed? 'To be acknowledged.'

Soth's star rose quickly. By the time of *Niagara* he had been taken up by the Gagosian Gallery, the most prestigious in America. The relationship raised his standing in the art world and was lucrative, but it was, he admits, 'a bad fit'.

'The shows Gagosian have are amazing – but I'm not that person, Jeff Koons or whoever. And there was some pressure not to do magazine work, to be... an artist. The art world is built on elitism, and in terms of art-world standing it's better to be an artist using photography than to be a photographer, doing magazine and editorial work. But I want to do all of it. I'm a photographer, and I'm not embarrassed to be a photographer.'

His next major project, *Broken Manual*, was a reflection of his unease – an extended exploration of the desire to escape, or 'run away', as he puts it. For the best part of four years, he ranged back and forth across America, seeking out people who had turned their backs on the world – hermits, monastics, loners whether by choice or circumstance. The result was an unsettling series of images: portraits of bearded recluses looking like ghosts; survival rations; homes improvised from old school buses.

It was a period, he told me, when he had grown 'tired of photography' and its limitations, and wary of the attention it had brought him. The idea of running away himself, of retreating to the imaginary world he had inhabited as a child, seemed appealing. 'I wanted to take apart what I'd built,' he said. For a while he seriously contemplated buying a cave – there are any number in southern Minnesota, it seems – as a 'mental space' to retreat to.

'My fantasy was to have a tree house above the cave because I wouldn't want to sleep in it. I didn't get it in the end because that's when the economy collapsed and I got really worried about my livelihood. I thought, "What am I doing spending money on a cave?"'

During his search, Soth went so far as to commission a model of his ideal cave, which he showed me when, errand completed, we arrived at his studio, located in small professional building on a quiet street in St Paul. Soth's model cave stood on its own table, sculpted in plaster of Paris, with a sturdy tree growing from the fake moss on its roof, a ramshackle house planted in its branches.

What, I wondered, did his wife think of this scheme? 'She both understood it and thinks that it's ridiculous.'

Soth suggested lunch and we walked to a nearby Italian restaurant. We passed a row of shopfronts – an evangelical church stood next door to a pet store advertising itself as Minnesota's largest supplier of reptiles.

He ordered steak salad and began to talk about how after *Broken Manual*, with its theme of running away, he had felt an urge to re-engage with society. Inspired by the model of the small-town newspaper, he travelled across America with the writer Brad Zellar, photographing schools and social clubs, churches and Walmarts, and publishing the work on the fly in an A3 magazine format. This work formed the basis of his most recent book, *Songbook*.

The title is an allusion to the *Great American Songbook* – the body of songs written between the 1920s and 1950s by the likes of Johnny Mercer, Cole Porter and Rodgers and Hart that marks the summit of the craft of popular songwriting. Soth juxtaposes images with snatches of lyrics – a verse from Cole Porter's *Night and Day* sits beside a photograph of a church theatrical performance. For the book's epigraph he quotes the Romanian playwright Eugène Ionesco's submission that 'the authentic human community is... that which is revealed by our common anxieties, our desires, our secret nostalgias'.

'That mixture of anxiety and nostalgia is something those old lyrics conjure up for me,' Soth said. 'There's something uncomfortable when you hear those songs on old vinyl – they're like a wonderful dream, but you know it's a dream that will end.'

The work that made Soth's early reputation was shot in colour on a vintage 8x10 format camera on a tripod - like something from the late 19th century - a painstaking process, almost as time-consuming as making a painting. In 2009 I worked with Soth on a story for the *Telegraph* magazine, which involved shooting in Detroit in the freezing depths of mid-winter. I have a memory of standing in front of a derelict hotel which had caught his eye, Soth moving the camera back and forth for the best perspective, periodically disappearing under the dark cloth to focus the camera, as an icy wind whipped at our ankles and a group of curious winos edged closer, doubtless weighing up what the contraption might fetch at the local pawn shop. Soth worked on, unruffled.

All the pictures in *Songbook* were shot using a digital camera, in black and white, with a flash. Soth says he likes its 'aggressiveness. Rather than standing back and watching the light fall on a subject, you are projecting out your own light. And it's almost a metaphor for the way I was working, like an attack dog.' It is an approach that evokes the work of another of Soth's heroes and influences, the photographer Arthur Fellig, known as Weegee, who is famous for his lurid pictures of crime scenes, but who ran the gamut of social reportage and portraiture.

'What I love about Weegee is that there's chaos, there's death, but there's also this tremendous joyousness in it all. Weegee used to say that if you want to be a photographer you can't be a "nice Nellie" – you can't be afraid to talk to people; you have to just get out there. And that's really good advice. I was a nice Nellie. I used to be genuinely nervous about approaching people. But now I'm definitely less nice than I used to be. And I think that pushing out into the world and confronting people made my work so much better.'

The advent of social media and the smartphone has democratised photography, and in a way made the life of the photographer as artist that much more challenging. Now, more than ever, as Soth said, 'Everyone can do it.' The magic moment, the glorious sunset, lunch – all are recorded an infinite number of times and broadcast to the world on Instagram.

It is a medium that Soth admits to having felt 'threatened' by. 'I was really bothered by it – the fear that I'm a professional photographer and I'm going to be judged by images on Instagram, to a different standard. It took me a while to figure out that I had to let go of this idea of the photograph as preservation and conservation, and that photographs are being used conversationally. It really is being turned into this new language.'

It is a language that Soth has now embraced with a vengeance. Posting on Instagram as littlebrownmushroom, he has more than 70,000 followers. A lot of what he posts is pretty much what anyone posts: views through a car or hotel-room window, random things that take his interest, lunch. Among his followers, he is famous for what he calls his 'unselfies' – self-portraits in which he employs a variety of stratagems to cover his eyes.

'It's about wanting to show my face, but also being embarrassed and wanting to obliterate it,' he said. 'But this has gone on before Instagram.' While working on Broken Manual, he made a self-portrait, took a pistol and shot his face to pieces. 'Thrilling!' he said, laughing. 'It was like a form of suicide. It really was something.'

When I worked with Soth I was constantly intrigued by what he saw, and how he saw it. What made that particular building, or landscape, or person, interesting; what did he see that others didn't? And how did he divine, and capture, the resonance in the commonplace that others would miss? What would happen if somebody stood behind Soth as he took a photograph, then stepped into his place to take the same image? Would the picture be the same? Soth said he thought it would. I disagreed.

We stepped out of the restaurant and he scanned the people walking by, then pointed towards a teenage couple. 'That girl with the pink hair,' he said. She was pretty, but not particularly so; somebody you would pass on the street without a second glance. She agreed to be photographed, and Soth stood her against a wall and took her picture with his iPhone. Then I took her picture with mine.

Afterwards we compared pictures. Mine, he joked, was better: a breeze had blown her hair across her face, making the portrait more interesting. Of course, he was wrong. Not only was his composition better, but he had seen what I had not: that while her boyfriend was dressed in the teenager's standard-issue T-shirt, jeans and trainers, she was in her best frock. In the two minutes during which Soth was photographing her he had discovered that she was on her way to a job interview at a dollar store – the lowest rung on the American employment ladder, but one she had none the less dressed up for. He had seen her beautiful vulnerability. And he had celebrated it. Mine was a picture of a girl taken by a man with an iPhone. His was an Alec Soth.



Charles Lindbergh's boyhood bed, Little Falls, Minnesota, 1999, from *Sleeping by the Mississippi* CREDIT: ALEC SOTH



Melissa, 2005, from Niagara. "There's something about this billowing of the dress that reminds me of the waterfall, which you almost can't see when you're there, because of the mist. And there's something about this creeping water at the hem of her dress – as if it's coming to get her" CREDIT: ALEC SOTH



Helena, Arkansas, 2002, from Sleeping by the Mississippi CREDIT: ALEC SOTH



Mother and Daughter, Davenport, Iowa, 2002, from Sleeping by the Mississippi CREDIT: ALEC SOTH



USA, 2008, from Broken Manual. "This is a Mormon community in Utah. I liked the satellite dish and the plastic planters. This is a community that has really stepped away from the mainstream. They practice polygam there. And it's such a beautiful piece of land, on this bluff..." CREDIT: ALEC SOTH



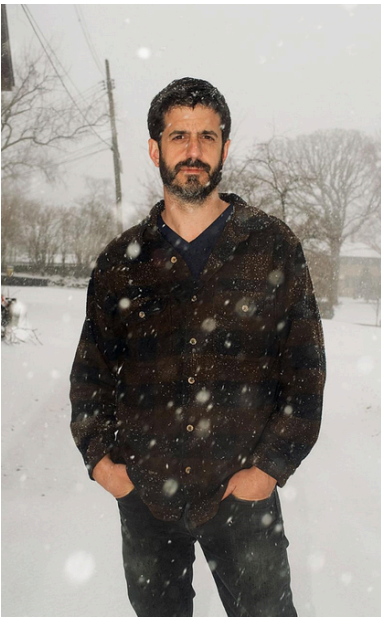
Joshua, Angola State Prison, Louisiana, 2002, from Sleeping by the Mississippi. "The teardrop tattoo means you've murdered someone. He'd found God in there. There was this Easter service – like 1,000 men sitting in these bleachers. I got to stand there and just look at everyone and think I'd like to photograph that guy. What a strange privilege" CREDIT: ALEC SOTH



Dave and Trish, Denver, Colorado, 2013, from Songbook. "I took this in their apartment in Denver. I'm interested in the hidden face, because faces give you so much information; when you take it away you can put yourself in the picture. Some months later I got a call from Trish saying that Dave had died, falling down a flight of stairs. So the picture has this memorial quality" CREDIT: ALEC SOTH



Patrick, Palm Sunday, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 2002, from *Sleeping by the Mississippi*. "Patrick was on his way to church on Palm Sunday. He's wearing his best suit. Those trousers...I felt a real, genuine affection for him"
CREDIT: ALEC SOTH



Alec Soth in Minnesota CREDIT: CARRIE ELIZABETH THOMPSON