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# i-D



*Dance N Style. Sandusky, OH. Alec Soth. Photography Alec Soth / Magnum Photos*

Last year, Magnum introduced its first ever online photography course. With contributions from Bruce Gilden, Martin Parr, Susan Meiselas, Richard Kalvar, Carolyn Drake, Peter van Agtmael and Mark Power -- arguably seven of the biggest names working right now -- 'The Art of Street Photography' was perhaps the most prestigious access the internet had to offer in photography education for less than \$100. "Like many industries there is an urgent need for greater diversity within the photographic industry," Shannon Ghannam, Magnum's Global Education Director, said at the time. "We are committed to developing and giving a platform to diverse voices and perspectives through our educational programming around the world."

Following the success of the course, and the positive feedback it received, this month Magnum launch their second edition: 'Alec Soth: Photographic Storytelling'. Alec, the legendary photographer from Minneapolis -- famed for his startling vignettes of midwestern life and still, baron landscapes -- gives a 19-

# SEANKELLY

lesson breakdown via video in what he believes are the key skills to succeed. From his own creative journey to the more granular details of editing, the course aims to give an broad introduction to set any budding photographer's wheels in motion, or help a more experienced artist hone their skills further. Ahead of its launch, we had a quick chat with Alec to find out more about his photographic journey.



*Melissa, Flamingo Inn. Canada.*

## **What was your first introduction to photography?**

When I was 16 I had a teacher that opened my eyes to the world of art. He was a painter, but he also introduced me to sculpture and photography. At the time I was more interested in the former. I made temporary sculptures outdoors, which I would document with my camera. But within a few years the photographs took over and I left sculpture behind.

## **What were those first images like when you were just beginning to understand how the medium worked?**

One of my biggest inspirations at the time was the British artist Richard Long. He was famous for walking. The walk itself was the work of art. He might take a single picture to represent the walk, but his unseen process of moving through

# SEANKELLY

the world was what was most important. It was in that spirit that I came to photography. So it struck a chord when I discovered the tradition of American road photography. Soon I was mimicking the style of photographers like Walker Evans and Stephen Shore. It took years to find my own voice within that tradition.



USA. 2006.

## **How much of your knowledge and understanding of the craft was self-taught vs. a technical education?**

I'll be honest and say that one of the appealing things about photography was its relative simplicity. When I studied painting, I had a feeling it would take a decade just to get a handle on my tools. With photography, learning those basics was much faster. I took a couple of short technical classes and then had two critique seminars in college. Those were all important to my development. But it still ended up taking a decade to figure out how to use those tools in a way that suited me.

## **Beyond the changes in technology, what's most different about you as a photographer since then?**

I've come to see photography as a language. We think of it as a universal language, but I think it has different dialects. For example, the American road



# SEANKELLY

photography tradition I mentioned earlier is one dialect. Photojournalism is another. Photography has always had various vernacular dialects as well: family snapshots, wedding portraits, etc. What's changed recently is that vernacular photography is no longer just a print-based language, like type on a page, but a conversational language. People talk to each other with pictures. This radically changes the way we treat the language.



*Self-Portrait, Tokyo, 2015*

## **How much of being a successful portrait photographer is personality and the way you interact with your subjects?**

Portraiture has been defined as any image in which the subject is aware of their own depiction. In that sense, photographic portraiture is inherently about a relationship between the subject and the photographer. It's like two people dancing -- both personalities dramatically shape what is made from the encounter. So my personality matters, yes. But like any relationship, there's always the mystery of chemistry.

## **What part of the process do you most enjoy and what element you find most challenging?**

My favourite part of photography is the beginning of a project. Adventure awaits and there are so many possibilities for where the work might take me. There's a feeling of freedom and openness at the beginning of a project. Everything else [is challenging]! The beginning of a project is like the beginning of a baseball season. It's spring, your muscles are fresh and in your head you are going to end up in the World Series. But then you step up to the plate and you strike out. Even

# SEANKELLY

the best hitters fail 60% of the time. Like baseball, photography involves patience and an acceptance of small failures.



*Sonya and Dombrovsky. Odessa. Ukraine.*

## **Do you find that photography is an accessible, democratic industry?**

I don't think of photography as a single thing. I participate in a few different photographic worlds: blue-chip galleries, mainstream magazines, Instagram. And there are other photographic universes out there. Some of these are more democratic than others. That said, I do find photography to be more accessible than a lot of other fields.

## **In a world completely saturated with images, with millions and millions being created every day, what do you see as the most exciting photography in 2019?**

As I said earlier, photography is a language. But in the same way that a novelist shouldn't be threatened by someone writing a tweet, a photographer shouldn't be concerned about someone posting on Instagram. If anything, the world we live in makes artful authorship all the more valuable. Anyone can write a sentence or take a picture. It's rare to find someone who can take this further and assemble a body of work that enlarges our world.

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*Charles. Vasa, Minnesota. USA.*