

View from the Photo Desk: Q&A With Alec Soth of Magnum Photos

September 2004

by Roger Richards



Congratulations on your recent election as a nominee to Magnum. Why did you decide to join this agency?



Alec Soth,
<http://alecsoth.com/>

Photo by Donna Kelly

A: I love the history of Magnum. I particularly respond to the famous advice that Capa gave to Cartier-Bresson: 'Don't keep the label of a surrealist photographer. Be a photojournalist. If not, you will fall into mannerism. Keep surrealism in your little heart, my dear. Don't fidget. Get moving!'

I am more than capable of falling into self-indulgent mannerism. Assignment photography keeps me going out into the world and looking at new things. It keeps me honest. And yet I still feel this pullback toward art. I thrive on this duality. And it seems to me that Magnum thrives on this duality.

Q: How would you describe your work? Is it documentary photojournalism or art?

A: I guess it depends on what work you are talking about. My project, '[Sleeping by the Mississippi](#),' was self-assigned and has been mostly seen in the art context of galleries and museums. So I guess it is going to be called art. But alongside that project, I'm regularly doing assignments for magazines. If I were going to label this work, I would just use the broad brush of 'editorial.' A term like 'documentary photojournalism' is a bit too loaded.



Charles, Vasa, MN, from [Sleeping by the Mississippi](#)

Photo by Alec Soth

Q: Your camera of choice is an 8x10 view camera. Why use large-format?

A: Years ago, I made a list of my favorite photographers. An extraordinary number of them used the 8x10. I figured I might as well give it a try. And I fell in love. I don't think the camera is better than any other; it certainly is less practical than even a 4x5. But there is something magical about it for me. What I particularly like is the viewing experience under the dark cloth. The ground glass is big. Instead of jamming your face into the camera, you stand back. It is like looking at a painting on an easel.

Q: How did the 'Sleeping by the Mississippi' project come to be?

A: At the beginning, this project had nothing to do with the Mississippi. The project was originally called 'From Here to There.' The idea was that one picture would lead to the next. If in one picture I photographed a chicken, I might then go on to photograph a short-order cook frying eggs. I considered the process to be like Web-surfing in the real world. I went as far as Iceland in my hunt for pictures. Along the way, I made a partial trip down the Mississippi. I began to think of the river as a metaphor for this kind of wandering. After awhile I got tired of the gimmick of one picture leading to the next. I decided to make the river the explicit subject, or link, but still have this kind of wandering spirit behind the pictures.



Houseboat, from [Sleeping by the Mississippi](#)

Photo by Alec Soth

Q: Can you describe your work process?

A: For the personal work, it is everything I just described: wandering, linking, serendipity. Assignment work is usually much different. A magazine usually hires a photographer to photograph something very specific. So I go and try to make the best picture I can. One of the reasons I joined Magnum is in hopes of getting richer assignments ♦ assignments that allow for wandering and discovery.



Herman's Bed, Kenner, LA, from [Sleeping by the Mississippi](#)

Photo by Alec Soth

Q: Are there any photographers whose work has inspired you? If yes, can you say how and why?

A: The person I've been enamored with lately is Eugene Richards. He is one of the reasons I wanted to join Magnum. His latest book, 'The Fat Baby,' is a masterpiece. He is one of the few photographers who really figured out how to tell stories.

Q: Since joining Magnum, has your life been changed, and if yes, how so?

A: Magnum is helping me get better assignments. This has nothing to do with quantity (assignments or money) but quality. Quality is everything.



Ste. Genevieve, from [Sleeping by the Mississippi](#)

Photo by Alec Soth

Q: What are you currently working on?

A: I recently finished an assignment photographing on a Hopi reservation for the Natural Resources Defense Council. I'm working on a long-term personal project called 'Love and Niagara.' And I've got a commission from Granta to photograph factories in the Midwest. A full plate ♦ I'm a very happy photographer.

View more of Alec Soth's work at <http://alecsoth.com>.

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