

Alec Soth: Photography as an American Dialect

By MITCH TEICH • MAR 22, 2018



([//www.wuwm.com/sites/wuwm/files/styles/x_large/public/201803/soth_-_cemetery.jpg](http://www.wuwm.com/sites/wuwm/files/styles/x_large/public/201803/soth_-_cemetery.jpg))

Cemetery, Fountain City, Wisconsin, USA, 2002

ALEC SOTH / COURTESY OF MAGNUM PHOTOS

Photographer Alec Soth speaks with Lake Effect's Mitch Teich.

The Milwaukee Art Museum's current photography exhibit, *The Open Road* (<https://mam.org/season-of-travel/open-road/>), features the works of many groundbreaking international photographers who were enamored with the idea of the Great American Road Trip. But there are American photographers, as well, who have the ability to show the country to their fellow Americans in a different way.

Minnesota photographer Alec Soth (<http://alecsoth.com/photography/>) does that with his 2004 project, *Sleeping By the Mississippi*, which is represented in the exhibit. Soth's images open a window to a world that is both familiar and foreign - photographs of subjects like a man in a balaclava and green union suit, holding model airplanes while standing on his roof; or a bed frame consumed by weeds.



Minnesota photographer Alec Soth.

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But while the images are likely to spark thoughts in their viewers, Soth stops short of thinking of himself as a storyteller. "I have a real complex about storytelling and narrative," he concedes. "I long to be a storyteller, but that's not exactly what photography does.

"I think it suggests stories, and you leave it to the viewer to kind of fill them in - that's the great pleasure of looking at photographs. But I envy storytellers."

But even without a narrative arc, Soth says one image does inform the next as he's working on a project. "Photography is this medium, and on one hand, it's incredibly simple. Anyone can do it. Everyday, people are making masterpieces - incredible photographs that have never been made before.

"But to make a group of pictures that work together, that are connected to each other - it's an incredibly difficult achievement, and it's like this puzzle with half the pieces missing."

Soth came to photography after initially studying and practicing other forms of art in college. He has traveled the world on photo projects, but says

Sleeping By the Mississippi is emblematic of his affinity for staying near home, either physically or metaphorically.

"What I love is photographing in a place where I speak the language, and not just literally," Soth says. "I know the nuances. I always say that photography is a language, and that I speak this particularly American dialect."