



## alec soth didn't expect to become a world-famous photographer

But it happened anyway. Here, he shares his advice for young artists. Namely "just be your weird self and it will guide you."

By [Clementine de Pressigny](#) | 20 September 2017, 5:28am

Alec Soth is in his studio in Minneapolis, Minnesota, deep in photographic investigation mode when I call. He's forgotten we were scheduled to talk – "I was in here totally immersed in some goofball experiment. It speaks to what I've been feeling at the moment, I just lose myself in the process," says the photographer. "But part of that is keeping my head down and not really looking at the end result yet. I mean, I think I see it out there somewhere." Alec recently reemerged into the photographic working world after some time out. He's been doing this a while now (around three decades), and felt the need to return to a place where he could remember all the reasons he got into taking pictures in the first place. Back to the mindset he had while shooting the images for what would become his debut book, *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, published in 2004. The book that would propel Alec to the attention of the photographic art world, which is notoriously hard to attract. We're talking as that book is about to be re-released by Mack, coinciding with Alec's first London exhibition centring on images from *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, including one image previously not shown.



ALEC SOTH, 'PATRICK, PALM SUNDAY, BATON ROUGE, LOUISIANA' FROM SLEEPING BY THE MISSISSIPPI (2017).  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MACK.

Back when Alec started travelling along the huge river that cuts through the Midwest of America, including his home state of Minnesota, he was 29 years old, working full-time at a museum and had been photographing for a decade on the side, but had, as he says "no reputation then". Soth would take time off from his job to drive around, sleep in cheap motels and explore pockets of America rarely seen by those outside it – one that doesn't loom large in the cultural imagination the way New York and LA does, and without the gritty glamour and romance of the southern states. It exists out of focus, on the periphery of conceptions of America, though it's where vast swaths of the population spend their lives.





ALEC SOTH/MAGNUM PHOTOS . 'FORT JEFFERSON MEMORIAL CROSS' FROM SLEEPING BY THE MISSISSIPPI (2017).  
COURTESY SEAN KELLY GALLERY NEW YORK AND BEETLES + HUXLEY GALLERY, LONDON.

Each image in *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, including the two new inclusions for this updated edition – was carefully chosen to form part of a narrative whole. Alec doesn't shy away from his desire to tell a story, though he grapples with photography's momentariness, its inherent question-provoking that resists the story arc. Unlike some well known art photographers who vehemently reject calls to give details about the intention and subjects of their images, Alec includes a handful of notes at the back of the book that add intriguing bits of information, another layer to the picture, if you choose to seek that out. A woman photographed on Ash Wednesday with a charcoal cross smudged on her forehead is revealed as not quite the devout Catholic she may seem. As the photographer discloses: "Adelyn, Ash Wednesday, New Orleans, Louisiana. The day after Mardi Gras, Ash Wednesday, I went to St. Louis Cathedral in the French Quarter. The Cathedral is the oldest in the United States. Don Almonaster y Roxas gave it as a gift to the city after the Parish Church was burned in the Great Fire of 1788. Outside of the Cathedral, I found Adelyn. Her full name, she said, is Adelyn de Chartreuse Kocake Shockadelica. I asked her what she would be giving up for Lent. 'I'm not even Catholic,' she laughed, 'these are cigarette ashes.'"



ALEC SOTH, 'JOSHUA, ANGOLA STATE PRISON, LOUISIANA' FROM *SLEEPING BY THE MISSISSIPPI* (2017). COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MACK.

Does he collect notes about everyone he shoots? "No, it's too many balls in the air to visually focus on what I'm doing, but of course I have to engage with the person," says Alec. "Back then I was much more fearful and shy so it was kind of a nerve wracking, sweaty, jittery sort of engagement." One thing he did regularly was to ask his subject what their life's dream is. "One of the great things about being artist or an journalist is that you can ask these personal big questions and sometimes get really revealing answers that you can't in regular life. You can make this quick bond with people. There can be this kind of profound intimacy in those moments."





ALEC SOTH, 'CHARLES, VASA, MINNESOTA' FROM *SLEEPING BY THE MISSISSIPPI* (2017). COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MACK.

Though he's created more than 25 photo books, had over 50 solo exhibitions around the world and is a member of Magnum, Alec seems surprised at his success, and even a little skeptical that it will continue. He doesn't have that New Yorker if-you-dream-it-you-can-do-it attitude – his more reticent sensibility seems better suited to his Midwest home. "I went to school outside of NYC and I interned in New York and did all that stuff and I came away thinking, 'Well this is impossible, you can't make a living doing that'," he says. "I just assumed I was going to make a living in other ways and do it for myself, not on the side, but you know just not for money." So that's what he did, until he didn't need to anymore, when his obvious talent for capturing American stories in a very honest unsentimental way that is often tinged with strangeness or sadness, but never condescending. Though Alec is still careful to ensure he has multiple balls in the air – teaching and doing some commercial work alongside his artistic pursuit. "I have mixed feelings about trying to generate income making artwork because it just can really muddy the waters of what you're doing."



ALEC SOTH, 'CEMETERY, FOUNTAIN CITY, WISCONSIN' FROM *SLEEPING BY THE MISSISSIPPI* (2017). COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MACK.

With work that explores places off the beaten track, and the people that inhabit those places, from small town brothels to isolated house boats suspended on a frozen river, it might seem that Alec is a natural bold adventurer, but he insists that's not the case. "I was always a homebody and I didn't particularly like want to travel the world," he says. "Someone sits next to me on the plane, I never talk to them. I have a curiosity but at the same time I have this shyness, I have to push myself, it's almost my own neurosis mixed with a certain kind of curiosity. But I think that's the really good news for young artists everywhere — just be your weird self and it will guide you."



ALEC SOTH, 'KYM, POLISH PALACE, MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA' FROM *SLEEPING BY THE MISSISSIPPI* (2017). COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MACK.

*Sleeping by the Mississippi* by Alec Soth is on display at [Beetles + Huxley Gallery](#) from 19 September - 21 October 2017. The book, *Sleeping by the Mississippi* is published by [MACK](#).