

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

September 17, 2006

Requests

Filed under: [on blogging](#) — alecsothblog @ 7:57 pm

Like your average cover band, I gladly take requests. I'm happy to talk about just about anything (favorite f-stops, the nature of reality, lunch). I just ask for patience. Pretty soon I'm going to start being a photographer

26 Comments

1. Hi Alec,

I'm really enjoying the blog...I was actually going to write you with a couple of questions anyway.

1) (asked with the knowledge that you said "what camera do you use" is the stupidist question...) I was wondering how you ended up working with the 8x10 camera, what you like and dislike about it and your working method. The LF camera seems to dictate that you do things in a particular way, and I'm really interested in why you chose it. [I'm all EOS right now, because I can [barely] afford to work within one system.

2) I was wondering if you could dissect the working session of one of your pictures...how you work with the subject, how much direction you gave them, how you worked with the available light. Basically how you go about making a picture. I was thinking the Gunter Grass one might be a good one to discuss, but I'd leave that up to you.

Keep up the good work...
and thanks
Paul

Comment by [Paul McEvoy](#) — September 17, 2006 @ [8:53 pm](#)

2. Alec,

How about discussing where you think contemporary photography will be in 5 years?

Who do you go to for lab work and printing? And why?

Also, how about a piece on the photographic community here in the Cities?

Or a bit about the contrast between straight photography as art vs more contrived or manipulated pieces?

How about something on a comparison/contrast between the life of an artist in Twin Cities and NYC?

Keep up the good work. You make us all proud.

-Clint

Comment by [Clint Weathers](#) — September 17, 2006 @ [9:28 pm](#)

3. Well if you're ever in Atlanta, lunch would be on me if you're up for it.

Comment by [Walker](#) — September 18, 2006 @ [12:15 am](#)

4. My question:

How is it that a picture of the ordinary becomes an extraordinary picture as opposed to an ordinary one?

...edN

Comment by [ed nixon](#) — September 18, 2006 @ [6:57 am](#)

5. As a large format portraitist myself. i too am curious how you go about creating an image of a person with such a cumbersome tool. The portraitists I know of had either a long-running relationship with their subjects (Mann, Sturges) or had an army of assistants to help them with the process (Avedon, Steiglitz). You seem to be going at it on your own the same way that I do. except many of the people you photograph seem to be strangers and as you have mentioned, you must adopt a "used-car salesman" approach in order to convince people to stand still for so long. I have found that rather than heighten my photographic vision, shooting with a view camera forces me to focus on more trivial things like fiddling with holders and i spend less attention than i would like on my subject.
your opinions are appreciated. thanks

Comment by Asterios Moutsokapas — September 18, 2006 @ [1:53 pm](#)

6. p.s. what are your favourite f-stops? (i am an 8 man which on a view camera is quite is saying something

Comment by Asterios Moutsokapas — September 18, 2006 @ [1:55 pm](#)

7. Here's one for you sometime: Are you ever concerned that a "final" picture of a "person / place / thing", ends up replacing or crowding out other ways for you of seeing that person / place / thing... especially if you become attached to the subject or it's of a personal nature ? I'm thinking about your Mississippi project and the Niagara project – great images and stories imagined – but did they come with a price so to speak ?

Can you ever look at the falls again??

Comment by [Matt Niebuhr](#) — September 18, 2006 @ [2:08 pm](#)

8. I'm more interested in how you approach your subjects. I have found that, increasingly, people are suspicious of those with cameras. I've had the police called on me and have been otherwise harrassed by people unsure of my motives.

You seem to have a trusting rapport with your subjects that makes the pictures important documents about life, not just the subjects.

I admire you for that. Thanks for the blog too.

-Ford

Comment by [ford](#) — September 18, 2006 @ [4:36 pm](#)

9. Oh boy, a lot of questions. Let me answer the easiest first and save the rest for later:

F11 rocks!!!!

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — September 18, 2006 @ [8:14 pm](#)

10. Now the hard one question (from Ed):

"How is it that a picture of the ordinary becomes an extraordinary picture as opposed to an ordinary one?"

Hate to answer a question with a question, but...

Why is it you fall in love with one person and not another? It is mysterious. Magical. Not a thing for words.

My most reproduced picture is of Charles, Vasa:

<http://alecsoth.com/Mississippi-new/pages/Mississippi02.html>

I was recently looking at some other exposures of Charles. While they are okay, there is no question that the negative I chose is the best. Why? Absolutely impossible to explain. It just feels right.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — September 18, 2006 @ [8:27 pm](#)

11. Asterios Moutsokapas writes: "I have found that rather than heighten my photographic vision, shooting with a view camera forces me to focus on more trivial things like fiddling with holders and i spend less attention than i would like on my subject."

This is a problem with the big camera. Early on, I missed a lot of things due to film holders. And I still miss my focus way to much. And forget about children and animals. I don't have a prayer. There are a huge number of limitations. But artmaking, for me, is about limitations. It isn't about having a 20-300mm zoom. Filmmakers with a hundred millions dollars usually make junk. Limitations spark creativity.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — September 18, 2006 @ [8:35 pm](#)

12. Alec, you've hit the nail on the head with "limitations spark creativity". When you look back over the past 150 years or so of photography, the most enduring images were made with very simple instruments that imposed great restrictions on the photographers using them.

Being able to work within those limitations imposes a very simple and straight forward way of seeing and gets us down to the bare essence of our own personal vision. In effect it relieves us of the baggage of having to make many of choices, to having to make just a few.

All of that fiddling around truly involves us in the process, and if we are photographing another person, they can't help but be involved also. In addition, we make all of the decisions and are totally responsible for all aspects of what we do.

Bravo, your work and success are an inspiration.

Comment by [Mike Peters](#) — September 19, 2006 @ [9:17 am](#)

13. Hey Alec,

Longtime listener, first time caller.

Could you talk (blog, really) a bit about how you create a photograph like the excellent "Seneca" from your Niagara series? I'm amazed by the detail in the pavement and wondering how you manage to capture that. If we watched you take that shot, what would we see? And for how long would we be watching?

Comment by [David](#) — September 19, 2006 @ [10:55 am](#)

14. Not much to it. While the limited depth of field of view cameras can be frustrating, you can help control focus with camera movements. In this case I used a little front tilt. Read about view camera focus here:

http://www.imagedancer.com/view_camera_movements.htm

Also, I stopped down. This is tricky at night: epic exposures, camera shake, etc. Many photographers weight down their tripods with sandbags when shooting at night.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — September 19, 2006 @ [11:12 am](#)

15. How many frames did you take on projects like "Sleeping by the Mississippi" or "NIAGARA"?

How much do contact prints cost?

Comment by [aizan](#) — September 19, 2006 @ [11:56 pm](#)

16. Sometimes I really tired of looking at the master photographer's work. Could you give some names of undiscovered photographers that you like? I always like check out the new comers.

John

Comment by [Johnny](#) — September 20, 2006 @ [2:27 am](#)

17. You have said that you don't like looking at images online. I think most of us would agree that the online viewing experience will not compare to viewing an original print. However, don't you feel it is a worthwhile endeavor if for no other reason than to bring the work of talented unknown artist to light and to keep people informed of new work by established artist such as yourself? As a follow-up, are there any photographer/artist sites you admire?

Comment by [Don](#) — September 20, 2006 @ [2:43 pm](#)

18. Alec,

Are you concerned about the migration of film to digital prints? I've noticed several long-time large format photographers making this jump including you and Joel Sternfeld. I was able to see Sternfeld's last show in NYC and found the prints to be amazing, previously having only seen his work in book form. I was unable to make it to your show at Gagolian, but I expect the prints were just as perfect.

I saw your "Mississippi" show at Yossi Milo and those were wonderful traditional C-prints. The main point I'm getting at is did you feel pressure to make digital prints and were they larger than you are normally comfortable with? I learned that Sternfeld never printed his images larger than 16x20 before his last few shows at Yancey Richardson. Just wondering what your reasoning for going to digital prints is and whether you value a traditional c-print more than a digital c-print?

Comment by [William K.](#) — September 21, 2006 @ [10:26 am](#)

19. A simple request...

On the 2point8 blog I came across this information :

'In October of last year, Soth gave a talk in San Francisco, and showed a video that quickly described his working style. Soth is shown trying to persuade a passerby to be his subject. There's snow on the ground, and Soth's trying to convince someone he's just met to stand still while he readies his camera.'

Any chance you can make the video viewable online? Youtube..? Would be very interested in seeing it.

Thanks!

Comment by [Theodore Williams](#) — September 21, 2006 @ [11:27 am](#)

20. " Pretty soon I'm going to start being a photographer again and my blogging will slow down dramatically."

I'm curious about your photographic rhythms. Do you shoot every day with some kind of camera or do you go many days without touching a camera of any kind? If you take a break from your photography, do you find returning renews your energy and eye or slows you down while you try to recapture your rhythms, or...

Are your leisure shots (if you do such) of a different nature than your formal photography or do you not make that distinction?

Comment by [Eric Perlberg](#) — September 22, 2006 @ [4:03 am](#)

21. [...] In my post asking for requests, Eric asks: I'm curious about your photographic rhythms. Do you shoot every day with some kind of camera or do you go many days without touching a camera of any kind? If you take a break from your photography, do you find returning renews your energy and eye or slows you down while you try to recapture your rhythms? [...]

Pingback by [alec soth - blog » Blog Archive » FAQ: Do I take pictures every day](#) — September 23, 2006 @ [9:19 am](#)

22. I'm terribly curious about how your editing process has changed with notoriety. Do you do more or less self-editing? How much do you think about developing a specific style or vision? How much do you think about not developing a specific style?

I'm so delighted to read your `blog. Your posts are insightful. Thanks for doing it.

Comment by [Eric Hancock](#) — September 23, 2006 @ [5:49 pm](#)

23. any tricks for dealing with not-so-great light?

Comment by [j zorn](#) — October 3, 2006 @ [12:35 pm](#)

24. Hey Alec,

Two months ago I got the chance to see your work from the Niagara series at a great exhibition (clickdoubleclick) in Brussels, Belgium. Your work was exhibited across from Taryn Simon's work. It was such a joy to wander between those 8 images and let them sink in slowly! Both you and Taryn Simon are big inspirations to me, especially in your choice of subjects and the empathy with which you treat them. It really made me wonder what you think of Simon's work?

Thanks for your time,

Lodewijk

Comment by [Lodewijk](#) — October 24, 2006 @ [4:27 am](#)

25. I'm wondering if you have any recommendations for memoir/autobiography-type books written by photographers.

Comment by [Linda](#) — November 28, 2006 @ [1:38 pm](#)

26. Although this might be a rather trivial question, I would be interested in the same as aizen: How many frames do you take for a major project like NIAGARA? Also: do you take multiple frames (how many) of a single subject (different angles etc), do you sometimes even go back and photograph the same subject/scene a second time, if possible?

I could imagine that using a large format camera, because of time and cost involved you have to be more precise in this respect and in fact "edit" your work even before taking a picture – as opposed to shooting smaller format film or digital which offers more freedom for experiments.

Comment by Arthur — January 8, 2007 @ [5:27 am](#)