

# Alec Soth's Archived Blog

March 25, 2007

W

Filed under: [editorial photo, minnesota, Paris, MN, photographs \(mine\)](#) — alecsothblog @ 9:07 pm



Ronald, 2007, by Alec Soth

What happens when haute couture comes to Minnesota? See my 26-page spread in the current issue (April) of W Magazine.

## 40 Comments

1. I just looked at it again today. It's so very nice. I am really curious about some of the kids in the photos.

*Comment by [Jen Bekman](#) — March 25, 2007 @ [10:25 pm](#)*

2. I got the W last week and was really happy to see the work you did. It's a terrific set.

Also, I saw some of your prints a week ago at the Margulies Warehouse in Miami. Simply beautiful.

*Comment by [davidbram](#) — March 25, 2007 @ [10:50 pm](#)*

3. Just as I was stepping out of Borders today something made me step back inside and take a look at the magazines that were laying right by the door. I saw W, decided to flip through the pages and..bingo bango!

Nice work Alec.

*Comment by [Danny G](#) — March 25, 2007 @ [11:45 pm](#)*

4. I was pleasantly surprised by the set... and especially loved the play between the non-fashion more typical alec soth signature images and the straight fashion shots...

Some interview questions you are free to ignore....

How did the project come about. Did they come to you and say, we'd like to put fashion on Minnesotans?

Were the non-fashion shots your idea or theirs?

Did you find in making these that you changed your way of working... For example on the fashion shots did you light them differently than you normally would have?

Did you present a relatively complete project or was there give and take in editing?

Were any images dictated that you would have preferred not to make?

Were there any shots not included that you wished had made it?

Do you have a favorite image?

I heard you used a casting agency for many of the models... were any people you found on the street or from your daily life? And what about the locations... did you also have a location scout or were these selected by you?

Any more editorial work coming up (I want more!)?

*Comment by [tiny](#) — March 26, 2007 @ [1:13 am](#)*

5. I enjoyed the photo story. In fact, it was the reason I bought the magazine. I wondered ,however, if anyone felt the slightest bit of mockery dressing these minnesotans in couture they might never be able to afford. Or the opposite, do you feel they gained a sense of pride being shown in a fashion publication? I've been going back and forth... they're beautiful either way.

*Comment by alyce — March 26, 2007 @ [8:47 am](#)*

6. How many hits of oxycontin did you give "Ronald"?

*Comment by Alfred Steiglitz — March 26, 2007 @ [9:54 am](#)*

7. saw it. brilliant. loved the casting.

*Comment by avs — March 26, 2007 @ [10:42 am](#)*

8. Wow, I love this photograph. My new favorite.

*Comment by Shen — March 26, 2007 @ [1:44 pm](#)*

9. Is any of this work available to see online?

Your 'Ronald' photo is soo beautiful. The light, the soft tones, the reflection, his expression... all perfect.

Katia

<http://iamkatia.deviantart.com/>

*Comment by Katia — March 26, 2007 @ [2:08 pm](#)*

10. The posted photo of Ronald is great, yet, I might never see the rest of that story. W? It would never occur to me to flip through the pages of that shit. I really hope not another great photographer will end up wasting his talent working for the meaningless magazines... I admire your work, therefore, I'm getting worried... Hope you don't mind for someone raising a concern (you get enough a... licking on these pages...)? But, should the worst (inevitable?) happen, we'll always have SLEEPING BY THE MISSISSIPPI and NIAGARA

*Comment by Velibor Bozovic — March 26, 2007 @ [6:29 pm](#)*

11. I thought W was a hotel, not a magazine. Not that I've ever stayed in one. I doubt the mag is distributed over here. Not to worry, if its any good, and it appears to be, we'll get to see all the pics in a book, or exhibition. Or on your website (yeah, right!). No need to battle your soul over glossy mag spreads though ("Well, if Victor says I am wasting my talent..."). Go for it I say and do the A-Z of them.

The Pic of Ronald is great, especially the bottom half.

*Comment by rob — March 26, 2007 @ [6:41 pm](#)*

12. I love this photo, and I also love that you took it for a fashion magazine and you can hardly make out the clothes.

Clothes can be a distraction in a portrait, as can skin. No distractions here. I look forward to seeing the rest.

*Comment by Roark Johnson — March 26, 2007 @ [10:04 pm](#)*

13. Quite a departure for them; although they've been hiring some really good photography outside of the fashion realm. I rather enjoyed seeing them there. Ballsy of them. And certainly brings further together this idea of fashion and art; perhaps this time by pulling it apart? A strange disconnect

between what alyce is talking about (people in fashion they can't afford) and the high fashion world of W. But then again I live in NYC where many of the people who work in and around fashion certainly can't afford the clothes they are photographing/art directing. As for "meaningless magazines" look back to the fashion magazines like harpers bazaar earlier in the century; man ray, kertes, z, avedon, salvador dali, henri cartier bresson and Brasai all worked for this magazine. At least W seems to be trying to regain something of this idea. Shake it up Alec.

*Comment by sean ross — March 26, 2007 @ [10:14 pm](#)*

14. Wow, even Stieglitz reads your blog!

Amazing.

The heavens must have WiFi.

*Comment by Danny G — March 26, 2007 @ [10:36 pm](#)*

15. Alec, the picture of Roland is great!

I'll buy the W magazine just for your photographs.

Some time ago you wrote:

"Is everyone aware that the day rate for the New York Times Magazine is \$400? (Half of that if you are using an agent). "

('art perseveres, wherever it may be found'  
February 27th, 2007)

What is your day rate for the W magazine?

*Comment by Jay Watkins — March 27, 2007 @ [4:37 am](#)*

16. beautiful work alec!! allways nice to see your pictures...

*Comment by [ruben](#) — March 27, 2007 @ [5:14 am](#)*

17. Here are answers to some of your questions:

**From Tiny:**

**How did the project come about. Did they come to you and say, we'd like to put fashion on Minnesotans?**

The creative director, Dennis Freedman, approached me about doing a project. We tossed around a number of locations. As I've been doing a ton of traveling and was eager to work near home. I suggested Minnesota. I also liked the idea of doing fashion work in February in Minnesota. It seemed like a good challenge.

**Were the non-fashion shots your idea or theirs?**

Mine. W granted me extraordinary creative freedom.

**Did you find in making these that you changed your way of working... For example on the fashion shots did you light them differently than you normally would have?**

Camera and lighting were pretty similar to the way I normally work. But everything else was different. It was a big production with assistants, RV's, tailors, stylists, etc.

**Did you present a relatively complete project or was there give and take in editing?**

This was one of the most amazing things about the project. I submitted my favorite images from each shoot. They didn't even look at the other pictures. We worked together on the editing, but I'd say 90% of the sequencing was mine. They could not have been more respectful of my process.

**Were any images dictated that you would have preferred not to make?**

No. The only external force was that certain articles of clothing had to be included. But I got to work with the legendary stylist Camilla Nickerson. She completely understood my process. So she worked with understated clothes or masked the more flamboyant pieces in terrific ways.

I was reluctant to take the picture of Paul Bunyan. It seemed too easy (especially for someone living in Minnesota). And I didn't include it in my first sequence. But in the end it works. A couple of people have said it looks like a self-portrait.

**Were there any shots not included that you wished had made it?**

I took a picture that I absolutely love. There is a long story behind the making of the picture that I'll save for another day. But as much as I love the picture, it doesn't fit with the rest of the story. While I was sad that it didn't fit, I was more than happy to make the cut. The image will have another life in another context.

**Do you have a favorite image?**

Surprisingly – a couple of my favorite pictures are the ones that really show the clothes (Danielle on 232, Dana on 234). I like that these pictures were taken in their homes...not in fake locations. For me there is a kind of spark that is created by mixing these truly beautiful individuals with elegant but understated clothes in their real domestic settings.

**I heard you used a casting agency for many of the models... were any people you found on the street or from your daily life? And what about the locations... did you also have a location scout or were these selected by you?**

This was a really odd part of the process. I mean, casting subjects for my pictures is a huge part of my process. But this project was done on very short notice and I was in Paris when we needed to find the models. So we used a casting agent. Again, I worked with someone, [Jennifer Vindetti](#), who really understood my eye and my process.

This ended up being a big learning experience. I remember years ago reading about Avedon doing The American West. He would send out assistants to find subjects for him. I found this outrageous. But I'm not so sure anymore. I think if you are working with someone who really shares your sensibility it can actually open up doors. In the case of this project, I was working with teenagers. It is really hard for a guy who looks like Paul Bunyan to hang out at school playgrounds, take Polaroids, and ask 14 year olds what size clothes they wear. Having the help of a really spirited, outgoing and creative woman helped me get access that I wouldn't have gotten on my own.

**From Alyce:**

**I wondered ,however, if anyone felt the slightest bit of mockery dressing these minnesotans in couture they might never be able to afford. Or the opposite, do you feel they gained a sense of pride being shown in a fashion publication?**

I don't think the clothes are the issue. For the most part they are really understated. If you saw these pictures in another context, you probably wouldn't know about the price of the clothes. The issue of 'mockery' is another matter. And it is something I'm always butting up against. I have my heart in the right place, but maybe it doesn't always look that way in the pictures. I'm working on a related post on this matter. Stay tuned.

**From Jay:**

**Some time ago you wrote:**

**"Is everyone aware that the day rate for the New York Times Magazine is \$400? (Half of that if you are using an agent). " What is your day rate for the W magazine?"**

I got paid a lump sum. I'd rather not share the specific amount as I'm sure this varies from one photographer to the next. The thing I'll say is that I agreed to the job before we ever talked about money. And if you calculate the page-rate, it is probably much less than you think.

**From Velibor:**

**W? It would never occur to me to flip through the pages of that shit.**

**I really hope not another great photographer will end up wasting his talent working for the meaningless magazines... Hope you don't mind for someone raising a concern (you get enough a... licking on these pages...)?**

I don't mind. I spend a fair amount of time on this blog dealing with the issue of artists doing editorial work. The reason I address this issue is because my feelings are mixed. I'm not going to rehash all of my reasons for doing this work here, but I will say that it has its dangers.

The one thing I've learned is no matter what venue you show your work (galleries, books, magazines), the most important thing is working with people who understand and respect your vision. I've subscribed to W for years despite never having the slightest bit of interest in fashion. The reason I subscribe is for the photography and design. The way that W respects the artistry of photographers is something very unique in the publishing world.

*Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — March 27, 2007 @ [10:33 am](#)*

18. *W? It would never occur to me to flip through the pages of that shit. I really hope not another great photographer will end up wasting his talent working for the meaningless magazines... I admire your work, therefore, I'm getting worried... Hope you don't mind for someone raising a concern (you get enough a... licking on these pages...)?*

I know, just like that trashy Stephen Shore – damned artists – you can't trust em to stay pure.

(and just what's wrong with having to live of ersatz coffee?)

*Comment by [tim atherton](#) — March 27, 2007 @ [1:17 pm](#)*

19. [...] UPDATE: Alec has posted about the results here. [...]

*Pingback by [Speak, See, Remember » Blog Archive » Alec Soth and Girls in Skirts](#) — March 27, 2007 @ [1:49 pm](#)*

20. Since some of you reflect on my comment I have to clarify. I certainly used some inappropriate words and it seems I was having a very, very bad day. It is not like me to label anything as shit and sorry to all that got offended. I am in no position to judge W magazine since I am completely ignorant to that kind of world. Fashion world scares me just like the world of politics; everyone pretends to be someone else in a way. I just wanted to express my wish to see more of personal stories/projects from Alec, that's where he is (as most of the photographers) the strongest..

*Comment by [Velibor Bozovic](#) — March 27, 2007 @ [3:00 pm](#)*

21. You skipped my question..  
Are any of these photos available online to see?

*Comment by [Katia](#) — March 27, 2007 @ [5:42 pm](#)*

22. I stopped by the cigar shop in Portland today and looked at the W photo shoot. I've always been prone to flip through fashion magazines for the same reason Alec has subscribed to W — there is a clash of design, creativity, and commerce that I find extremely interesting. That said, Alec's series seems so perfectly out of place in the magazine that it was very apparent, even before I read his answers to the posed questions, that he was given complete control of this project. Though there were obviously elements of collaboration, this is certainly a genuine Soth series. For anyone who hasn't actually seen the magazine in person I highly recommend taking it in as you would a normal magazine. After flipping through pages and pages of sexed-up, glamourized, seizure-inducing ads and images, the austerity and humanness of Alec's photos juxtapose the rest of the magazine content in an exciting way.

*Comment by [Al James](#) — March 27, 2007 @ [6:31 pm](#)*

23. Nope Katia, not online.

*Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — March 27, 2007 @ [8:17 pm](#)*

24. is this the issue with Kirsten Dunst on the cover? what ever happened to the images you made in paris/europe? I was also wondering about retouching...

Do you do your own retouching normally? what about for this project? did W handle that? how much retouching to you do to your images? I know that many fashion images are usually heavily retouched but I feel like you shy away at that for more of a documentary look and feeling? does Magnum have a retouching policy? do they have several policies for different assignments? Did you give direction or did the leave most of it up to you like it sounds like.

And one final thing...

Thanks for being so honest and open about all of this behind the scenes art/photography/editorial world. I think its really helpful there to be less of a cloud of mystery surrounding this world. A lot of these questions never get answered and a lot of times they might not ever get asked because there are not many places to turn to ask questions and discuss.

*Comment by [Harlan Erskine](#) — March 27, 2007 @ [10:00 pm](#)*

25. I agree with harlan. I really appreciate and enjoy the openness with which Alec shares these experiences with the rest of us who are trying to find our ways of being photographers. I am sure that the blog takes its fair share of time and I just wanted to say thanks as well!

*Comment by [grant ernhart](#) — March 28, 2007 @ [1:53 am](#)*

26. the thing is to create and to feel alive doing it...W as POP as Numero...are great magazines with great artist working in it. Alec,I didn't have the chance of see your work in W jet...but the chance to work in your place, in the way you want, with great professionals (and artists too) and to be publicated in a magazine as W...for me is a present!!!...really is...

*Comment by [ruben](#) — March 28, 2007 @ [4:15 am](#)*

27. I suscribe the Harlan's entry

*Comment by [jesus](#) — March 28, 2007 @ [6:01 am](#)*

28. Hi Alec, I see you have already said the pictures are not online, which is a shame. Maybe you'll post them when the appropriate time arises? BTW if anyone in the UK knows a retailer that has W magazine, please give my name a click and let me know.



Cheers.  
Dave.

*Comment by [Dave Greenwood](#) — March 28, 2007 @ [9:05 am](#)*

29. [...] Spoiler: Soth answers questions about the W shoot on his blog. [...]

*Pingback by [Joe Reifer - Words » Blog Archive » An assignment](#) — March 28, 2007 @ [9:50 am](#)*

30. **From Harlan:**

**Is this the issue with Kirsten Dunst on the cover?**

Yes

**What ever happened to the images you made in paris/europe?**

Still working on this project. I return to Paris later this week. I'll have news about this project in June.

**Do you do your own retouching normally?**

No

**What about for this project? did W handle that?**

I don't think there was any retouching other than dust removal.

**How much retouching to you do to your images?**

Very little. Normally just dust removal (the bane of large format photography).

**I know that many fashion images are usually heavily retouched but I feel like you shy away at that for more of a documentary look and feeling?**

Correct. I don't have any big philosophical problems with retouching. But in my case it isn't needed very often.

**Does Magnum have a retouching policy?**

Sorry, I don't know. I think it all depends on the context. A newspaper story on Iraq is going to be different than an advertisement for perfume.

*Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — March 28, 2007 @ [11:14 am](#)*

31. Just wanted to say thanks so much for answering my questions. I can't tell you how much it means to me to be able to peek behind the scenes at the process of making this kind of work.

*Comment by [tiny](#) — March 28, 2007 @ [2:24 pm](#)*

32. [...] Alec shared one of the images from the spread on his blog (I haven't seen any others surface online yet) and, in return, received a lot of questions from his readers. He took the time to address some of these questions here. [...]

*Pingback by [SHANE LAVALETTE / JOURNAL » Blog Archive » Alec Soth in W Magazine](#) — March 28, 2007 @ [8:31 pm](#)*



33. I don't think W is available in the UK; but that one image is beautifully Shaker-esque in colour and tone.

*Comment by [guybatey](#) — March 29, 2007 @ [6:01 am](#)*

34. Alec, thank you for the answers!

*Comment by [Jay Watkins](#) — March 29, 2007 @ [6:22 am](#)*

35. I think you can get W all over London. As far as I know all the newsagents in Soho have it and also most newsagents in the more salubrious quarters, Kensington, Chelsea and Ladbrooke Grove. Plus all branches of Borders stock it, any art book shop that carries magazines, like Waterstones in Garrick St or Magma in Theobalds Rd, and possibly at the ICA, Photographer's Gallery, Tate Modern bookshops.  
Good hunting and apologies if W has disappeared from London since I acquired this information. They used to sell it in the Smiths at Charing Cross Station too, but I think that was baaaack in the day.

*Comment by [Amy de Wit](#) — March 30, 2007 @ [12:34 pm](#)*

36. I just picked the April W up today.  
Fantastic spreads – perfect paired imagery.  
Well done – as usual. Congrats!

*Comment by [Don Guss](#) — April 4, 2007 @ [5:55 pm](#)*

37. Hi Alec! Absolutly loved the story...fantastic! Wondering if it was shot on 8×10 inch???  
Keep the fire burning...

*Comment by [Dirk-Michael Schulz](#) — April 18, 2007 @ [3:34 am](#)*

38. Thanks, yes, 8×10.

*Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — April 18, 2007 @ [7:34 am](#)*

39. I enjoyed the photos. That was, actually, the reason I bought the magazine. I love [magazine subscriptions](#) like these!

*Comment by [Jim C](#) — April 18, 2007 @ [3:57 pm](#)*

40. why oh why are you doing this?  
do you really need the money or are you just being sucked in by the W thing.  
Yes Denis is a smart man, and W has a "profile" but really, why are you selling yourself short like this?  
It's obvious why they want you, but why do you agree?

your talents and works are precious Alec.  
don't trade it for some gaudy tokens.

*Comment by [Peter Yardley](#) — April 26, 2007 @ [9:02 pm](#)*