

Bruised beauty: Weinstein Gallery reprises stellar decade for Alec Soth

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Mary Abbe By the time fame winked at him a decade ago, Minnesota photographer Alec Soth was wise enough to resist her come-hither charms.

Sure, 2004 was a whirlwind year with more than half a dozen shows around the world, including headliner spots at the Whitney Biennial in New York and the São Paulo Biennial in Brazil. His photo book “Sleeping by the Mississippi” quickly became a collector’s item. And he was nominated to Magnum, an elite photojournalist’s cooperative that soon brought him assignments from big-brand companies like Chanel and the New York Times.

It was enough to make any guy’s head spin.

But rather than decamp for Manhattan or Paris, Soth kept his St. Paul studio and continued turning out the books and photo series on which his reputation rests. In the past 10 years he has produced six more projects — “Niagara” (2006), “Dog Days, Bogotá” (2007), “Fashion Magazine: Paris/Minnesota” (2007), “Last Days of W.” (2008), “Broken Manual” (2010) and “Siren” (2012) — each infused with his distinctive appreciation for loners, dreamers, small-town decay and urban anomie.

Samples from all seven of the projects are featured in “Alec Soth: Until Now,” a poignant, thoughtfully edited 31-image exhibit at Weinstein Gallery in south Minneapolis. Its run there has been extended though May 31.

Although Walker Art Center staged what amounted to a midcareer retrospective of Soth’s work in 2010, that was a more sprawling affair with a darker psychological undercurrent. It was dominated by his then-new “Broken Manual” images of reclusive survivalists and their gritty outposts. This is a more balanced subset of pictures, still bleak at times but also marked by warmth, tenderness, bruised beauty and gentle humor.

Form and fashion

Working with a bulky camera that uses 8-by-10-inch film, Soth, 44, composes each shot as carefully as if it were a still life or a film scene.

The subjects may seem casual or offhand, but the formality of his compositions gives them an arresting stillness that deepens their appeal and mystery. There is a coiled and knotted snake centered on a slab of marble, a snow figure at the middle of swirling vortex of crystalline light, a crucifix with a detached leg bowed over a wintry Iowa valley, an aqua door hovering in an aqua room.

Rich colors amplify formal effects. Skies in midnight blue, twilight peach, or rainy-day gray fill the top half of pictures of a grassy plain, a casino parking lot, motel doorways, a stuccoed wall topped with broken glass that looks like a city skyline.

Broken and failed dreams are recurrent motifs. Take “Grand Twin Cinema, Paris TX,” a 2006 photo of a shuttered movie theater on an empty street on a sunny day in an improbably named Texas town. “Welcome to Downtown Paris,” says the shabby marquee above the theater’s entrance fluttering with discarded newspapers. Or “Charles



ALEC SOTH AND WEINSTEIN GALLERY

In Alec Soth’s 2007 photo “Jane 1 (dinner),” an older woman is posed in a room whose elegant decline mirrors her own.

ALEC SOTH AND WEINSTEIN GALLERY

“Paul Bunyan, Akeley, MN” (2007) is a nod to the state’s weather and its legendary woodsman.

Lindbergh's Boyhood Bed, Little Falls, MN," a shockingly barren mattress and threadbare quilt on an open-air porch unlikely to nurture the aspirations that carried Lindbergh aloft.

When people are included, he typically photographs them straight on at the center of the image. In a pair of photos, the lovely Natalia, a fresh-faced model, stares straight into the camera "before" donning her makeup and "after" when she is festooned with mascara, hair spray and sparkly headgear. He sets Jane, a strikingly beautiful older woman, amid the remains of a meal surrounded by guttering candles, half-empty wine glasses, at a velvet-covered table in a shimmering room whose elegant decline mirrors her own.

Commissioned to produce a complete "Fashion Magazine," Soth immersed himself in the Paris scene but also took high-end clothes to Minnesota, where he photographed them on small-town cheerleaders or girls like "Kristin," a slightly pouty teenage ice skater seen here in a snowy landscape.

Minnesota's irksome climate gets more than a nod, with 20 percent of the pictures involving snow. "Paul Bunyan, Akeley, MN" is an amusing nod to Minnesota's weather and its legendary woodsman, a gigantic figure who fills half the photo as he crouches in the snow near a gas station and a couple of cars that look like toys in the distance. Shot for the "Fashion Magazine" project, the jolly, heavily bearded Bunyan figure bears a cartoonish resemblance to Soth himself, surely one of those inside jokes that only a happy camper would dare to play on the international stage.
