

After the Falls

Marianne Combs St. Paul, Minn. April 11, 2006 5:00 p.m.



Niagara Falls is still sometimes called the "Honeymoon Capital of the World" but the American side of the falls has deteriorated over the years. Still, many choose to marry there.

Courtesy of Alec Soth

Most of us have heard of Niagara Falls, that massive surge of fresh water pouring out from the Great Lakes into the Niagara River and crashing over a 170-foot cliff. But can you name the three falls that make up Niagara?



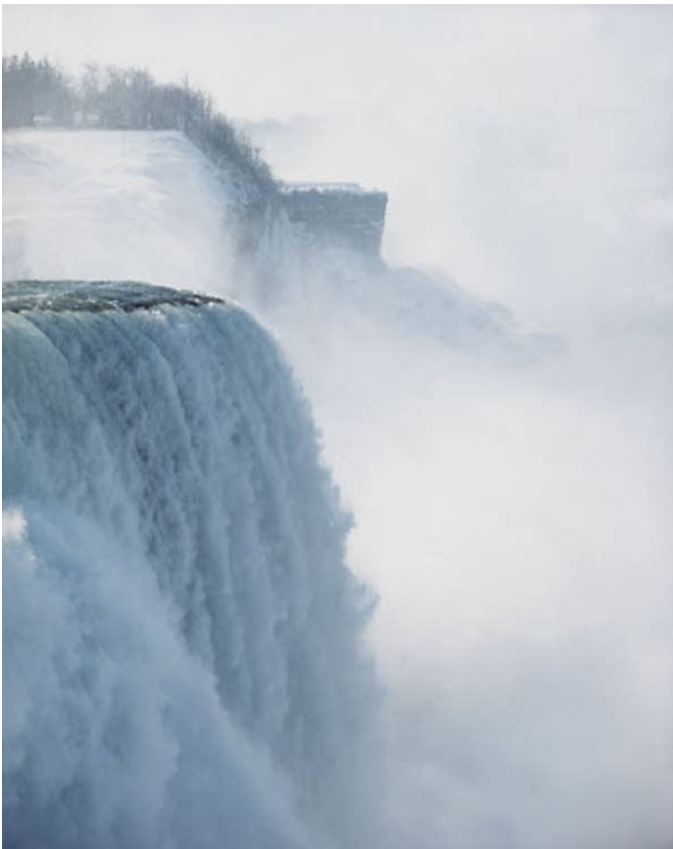
Photographer Alec Soth says he wanted to tell the story of Niagara as a sort of love song seen through photography. His series of images explores not only the falls but the people, their desires and their dreams. MPR Photo/Marianne Combs

There are the Horseshoe falls on the Canadian side, and the aptly named American Falls. The third and smallest set of falls is the Bridal Veil Falls. They were supposedly named for their appearance, but it could easily be strategic. From the mid 18- to the mid-1900s Niagara Falls was known around the world as a honeymoon destination. Since then the appeal has eroded; the falls are literally crumbling, along with the communities around them.

Photographer Alec Soth recently finished a project on life along the Mississippi River and was looking for a new subject. Even though he'd never been there, the Niagara Falls immediately appealed to him; it was another iconic body of water. He imagined

photographs that explored passion, the beauty of nature, the environment, and even the faded romance between the United States and Canada.

"I thought of the project as being like a love song--a sad love song--and sort of emotional, hitting on certain cliches, but hopefully being moving in a way," says Soth. "I especially thought about Roy Orbison and these kind of crashing falsettos that he always builds to at the end of the song. I think the drama of that is reflective in the falls too."



For photographer Alec Soth, the Niagara Falls became a metaphor of the uncontrolled rush of emotion people feel when falling in--and out--of love. Courtesy of Alec Soth

When Soth saw the falls, and experienced the life around them--the faded hotels, the down-and-out economy--his vision darkened. He was still interested in romance and passion, but now he also wanted to explore their consequences. In other words, what happens after the fall?

"There's a force there that calls people to it, and I do think the power of passion or new love is sort of reminiscent of that," says Soth. "I just think that sort of passion or new love crashes down eventually. That's what I was interested in: passion and its aftermath."

Soth's photos cover a lot of territory. There are images of the falls themselves, beautiful, thundering and dangerous. There are the old hotels, empty of people and yet so full of lines and color. And there are people: teenage couples, young mothers, newlyweds.



For some of his photographs, Alec Soth asked subjects if they'd be willing to pose in the nude. He says it was a way of getting a more intimate look at their relationships through the way they sat next to one another while feeling vulnerable.

MPR Photo/Marianne Combs

But at a certain point in the project, Soth felt he wasn't getting close enough to the source of the intimacy and rawness of love. So he started asking his subjects to pose in the nude. He says the way they held each other, or didn't, said something about their relationship, or their level of comfort with themselves.

"I still wouldn't say that these are extremely intimate pictures in the end, but it was my longing to get deeper, to get closer," says Soth.

To fulfill that longing, he started asking his subjects if they had any love letters they would be willing to share with him. They did.

"There's a huge range, from teeny bopper 'new love' letters to breakup letters or angry letters," says Soth. "And then this letter which I think is so sad and so tender. It says, 'If there was a nice apartment and I have a decent job and you felt happy and thought there could be a nice history together, would you come home?'"

Soth has put together a book of the Niagara photographs. On the page following this short, desperate note, he placed a photograph of the falls, surging forward relentlessly. He says he didn't want to

belittle the letter, but instead convey the intensity of emotion behind it.



At Weinstein Gallery in Minneapolis, patrons at the opening perused photographer Alec Soth's body of work titled "Niagara." Many remarked on the distinction between the sad and sometimes tawdry subject matter, and the lush, beautiful photographs. MPR Photo/Marianne Combs

On opening night at Weinstein Gallery in Minneapolis the room quickly fills up. David McMahon is a landscape photographer; he says Alec Soth has managed to capture the essence of a place.

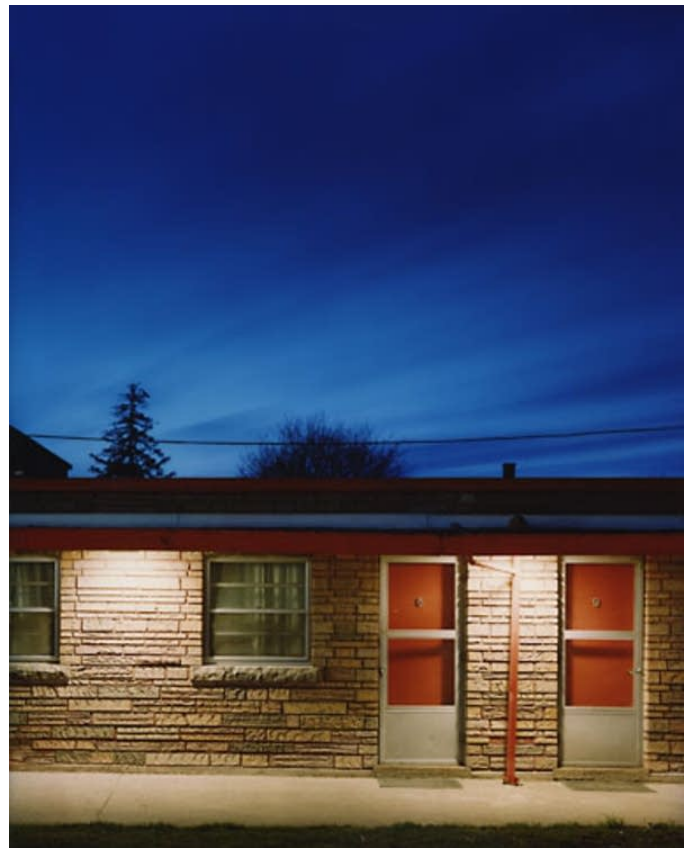
"The hotels, the people, the married couples--they're all part of Niagara Falls," says McMahon. "I've been there a couple of times and this is what it's all about."

McMahon says he likes the tension between the rich, clean photographs and the often sad, wistful subjects.

"I think the photographs convey a beauty and almost a sublime aspect of that area, but some of what they depict, when you think of those actual things, they do have a shabbiness and a tawdriness to them," says McMahon.

Photographer Alec Soth has shown the Niagara series in New York and Germany and given lectures on the project. Soth says that usually when he talks about photography, people ask him about the film he uses or his camera. But more than once, the Niagara photos have provoked more personal questions such as, "Would you say you're a good husband?" Soth says he thinks this is a good thing.

"I think the work is related to my own life," says Soth. "You know I married my high school sweetheart, I've been married a very long time, and it's been a long time since I've felt that falling in love, that new feeling, that crashing feeling. And of course there's something



Photographer Alec Soth's photographs tend to break down into four themes: the falls, the hotels, the people, and their letters. In his photographs of hotels, he simultaneously explores their outdated style and emptiness, along with the beauty of their color and symmetry. Courtesy of Alec Soth

tantalizing about that, but I think there's also something destructive about it."

The photographs have evidently struck a chord. Reviews of Soth's work have alternately praised him for his vision and berated him for being cold in his portrayal of desperate lives. Soth counters that he's looking at his subjects with empathy, as well as with an eye for beauty and irony. He says he's not out to tell anyone anything.

"I have ideas about what the work is about in my head," says Soth. "I have ideas about passion and the way passion fades and blah, blah, blah. But really I want it to be like a love song. You don't walk away from a love song thinking, 'Let me think about the nature of love.' You feel something, hopefully. Or you think it's a silly piece of junk and you laugh at it. And some people will do that, but hopefully there will be those who will feel something."

Gallery





Photographer Alec Soth often found irony in his subjects, whether it was a dejected looking "Happiness Motel" or a glass of hard liquor at the "Comfort Inn."

MPR Photo/Marianne Combs