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ALEC SOTH, MACK, MAGNUM, NIAGARA, SLEEPING BY THE MISSISSIPPI

## Alec Soth on his classic photobook, Niagara

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Two Towels, 2004. From Niagara © Alec Soth, courtesy of the artist and MACK

“Niagara is part of American mythology. It’s a place of romance, where people go to get married,” says Alec Soth. “But when I got there my view of the place totally changed. The American side is economically devastated. It’s bleak.” As MACK republishes Soth's classic photobook, we revisit our article on it first published in 2006

Alec Soth’s first book, *Sleeping in the Mississippi*, was so sweeping in its epic statements, it seemed that Soth had nothing left to photograph. What could he do next? The answer is *Niagara*, a portrayal of the town that has traditionally been the romance capital of North America. In *Niagara*, Soth sets out to capture the grand passion of life, to do for love and marriage what *Sleeping in the Mississippi* does for the American Midwest.

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While the American side is bleak, the Canadian side is tacky. Cheesy motels, tacky tourist sites and a plethora of fast-food outlets make the town, the Falls notwithstanding, more Blackpool or Clacton than Paris or Rome.

As Soth began photographing, he also discovered the people of Southern Ontario and New York State are a tad more distrusting and a mite more suspicious than the easygoing folk of the Mississippi states. “The longer I spent there, the darker it got,” he says. “Part of that is down to me and my nature, part of it is down to the place itself. But I also find a real beauty in that darkness.”





*Aleisha and Joe, 2004. From Niagara © Alec Soth, courtesy of the artist and MACK*

It is a darkness evident in Soth's portraits, which form the soul of *Niagara*. In *Aleisha and Joe*, Aleisha has a hard-edged awareness etched into her face. Joe is more feral, his face a picture of opportunism gone awry. And for all their young love, he holds her in an alleyway where fencing, cables and a coal hole are the backdrop. Similarly Michelle and Pedro are portrayed against the drabest of surroundings. Michelle, like many of Soth's subjects, has a fragile quality to her, something so delicate and tender it makes her vulnerable, a vulnerability Pedro, in his cone-shaped party hat, looks ill-equipped to cater for.

Melissa poses outside the Flamingo Inn. She is a big bride in a big dress and looks lovely – but the taffeta white of her wedding gown against the barren walls of her motel talks of how her dreams will fade into a reality beyond her control. This reality hits hardest with Rebecca. Clutching a young baby, she looks worn-out and bedraggled, her hunched shoulders and darkened eyes betraying a life of lost hope and sleepless nights. Her passion spent, she stands on cracked tarmac, a rock to one side, an ugly flat-roofed building behind.

It is not all bleakness though. Occasionally the love shines through, especially when Soth asks his subjects to pose naked to make his images more intimate. So we see Michelle and James, both naked and both on their second marriage, their large bodies emanating a tender comfort and confidence in each other's company that transcends the blandness of their motel surroundings.

Inevitably, asking people to pose naked brought trouble to Soth. On one occasion he asked a young man he met if he could photograph him and his girlfriend naked. "He said he'd do it, then I saw her and she was only 16 and too young, so I decided to photograph them outside on the grass," says Soth. "But while I was doing this, someone saw us and called the police saying I was a paedophile, and this cop came running up to us and I had to explain what I was doing."





*Happiness Inn, 2005. From Niagara © Alec Soth, courtesy of the artist and MACK*

The ugly architecture of Niagara is a running theme throughout the book, the regulated functionality of the town's motels an allusion to hidden passion played out behind closed doors. At the Seneca, blue and green bucket chairs stand under stone cladding. Beneath hastily-drawn curtains, oil stained pavements are streaked with skid marks leading directly to the door – hinting at the urge of love, Niagara style.

Symbols of romance recur through all the motels but they seem fraudulent and shallow. The heart-shaped bath (and is that Soth we see in the mirror there?) and towels folded into kissing swans are overwhelmed by the brutality of the everyday – cracked tarmac, empty car parks and grey skies that hint at what lies beneath the surface of our transitory passion.

If anyone hasn't quite got the message that love and marriage might not be all it's cracked up to be, the love letters Soth collected should put them right. "To gather the love letters I would



ask people I met in bars or donut shops if they had any old love letters I could have,” says Soth. “If you’re in a donut shop and you ask someone at the next table for their old love letters, they are going to look at you like you’re a freak and mock you. But every once in a while, someone would have them and be happy to share them.”

The most extreme letters take you straight to the point where love slides into hate. “I love you but you’ve become a piece of shit,” begins one. Others are more telling in their banalities, whether it be the woman who bemoans her partner’s lack of hygiene, or the cliché-ridden missive that reads like a track listing of a greatest ever love songs CD. “You take my breath away..., You give me hope when I am down...,” and “I can’t live if living is without you.”



*Falls no. 26, 2005. From Niagara © Alec Soth, courtesy of the artist and MACK*

“A lot of the pictures are of the aftermath of passion and love. You see couples and their love letters and then you see the aftermath and the Falls could be a metaphor for the crashing



passion,” says Soth.

The Falls appear throughout the book, the images gathering pace to their tumultuous conclusion. So to end the book, we see the Niagara river heading inexorably to its fate, the river collapsing into the maelstrom of the whirlpool below. First comes love, then comes the fall. *Niagara* is beautiful, claustrophobic and dark, an intensely poetic and thoughtful work on the disappointment of broken dreams, a work rooted in one place but universal to all.

*Niagara by Alec Soth has been reprinted by MACK, priced £40 <http://mackbooks.co.uk/books/1224-Niagara.html> Alec Soth is a member of Magnum Photos [www.magnumphotos.com/photographer/alec-soth/](http://www.magnumphotos.com/photographer/alec-soth/)*



*Melissa, 2005. From Niagara © Alec Soth, courtesy of the artist and MACK*





*Nicholas, 2005. From Niagara © Alec Soth, courtesy of the artist and MACK*





*Rebecca, 2005. From Niagara © Alec Soth, courtesy of the artist and MACK*





*Best Western, 2005. From Niagara © Alec Soth, courtesy of the artist and MACK*





*Kiss Diary, 2004. From Niagara © Alec Soth, courtesy of the artist and MACK*





*The Flechs, 2005. From Niagara © Alec Soth, courtesy of the artist and MACK*





*Jen and Matthew, 2004. From Niagara © Alec Soth, courtesy of the artist and MACK*



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Ion and Matthew

101st Street (abandoned residential street in the Love Canal toxic contamination disaster area)

Misty (in swim cap)

Like a river she was,  
huge roily mass of water  
carrying tree trunks  
and divers drunk.

Like a Priscilla, a feminine Benjamin,  
a whore gone right over  
the fall,  
she was.

Did you know her.  
Did you love her, brother.  
Did wonder pour down  
on the whole goddamn town.

\*I was disappointed in Niagara – most people must be disappointed in Niagara. Every American bride is taken there, and the sight of the stupendous waterfall must be one of the earliest, if not the keenest, disappointments in American married life." Oscar Wilde



LETTERS TO DAVID

I can't go on like this

Terrace Court

"We can take the story apart, we can find out how the bits fit, how one part of the pattern responds to the other; but you have to have in you some cell, some gene, some germ that will vibrate in answer to sensations that you can neither define, nor dismiss. Beauty plus pity – that is the closest we can get to a definition of art. Where there is beauty there is pity for the simple reason that beauty must die beauty always dies." Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* (1980). © estate of Vladimir Nabokov

