

Four 40x50 inch photographs from the series: *Sleeping By the Mississippi* by Alec Soth (rhymes with 'both')



Peter's Houseboat, Winona, MN, 2007.110.1



Angola, Louisiana, 2007.110.13



Harbor Marina, Memphis, TN, 2007.109.9



Fishermen, Wickliffe, KY, 2007.111.4

On view in [A Drop to Drink](#), U.S. Bank Atrium, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor Target Wing, Globalization Exhibit.

*Sleeping By the Mississippi River*, published in 2004 by Steidl, is a series of 46 prints of people and places along the Mississippi River from north to south. The MIA has the series plus six unpublished prints, making it the only complete set of the series in any museum collection. It was acquired in December 2007. You can view the series on [www.alectsouth.com](http://www.alectsouth.com).

"*Mississippi* was about the wandering spirit," says Soth.

## Possible Tour Questions

1. These four pictures show the Mississippi River. What do you think of when you see pictures of the Mississippi River? When have you seen the Mississippi River? Which of these pictures is like the river you saw? What is going on in each of the pictures? How is the Mississippi River like other long rivers of the world?
2. What is the same about the river in each of these pictures and what is different?
3. How have people interacted with or connected to the river? What are some of the results of these interactions?
4. Each of these pictures took a long time to photograph using a large format view camera. Look closely again at one of the photos and think about why might it have taken so long. [Look for the sunrays on Angola, LA or the Pyramid Arena in the Memphis]. Think about the differences between a picture taken with an iPhone and one that takes longer to take. If you were the photographer, what would you concentrate on?
5. These photos were chosen specifically for this gallery's topic A Drop to Drink. What uses does the river have? What threatens the river?
6. In the complete series *Sleeping By the Mississippi*, Alec Soth also took photos of people near the river. If you have the opportunity, look at some of these photos to get a better understanding of the artist's meaning. Why might people live, work, hang out, by this river? Why might an artist?



Biographical Info [www.alecsoth.com](http://www.alecsoth.com)

\*There is plenty of information on this website, especially in the Press section.

\*Born in 1969 in Minneapolis where he currently resides with his family. Owns and operates the publishing company Little Brown Mushroom in Minneapolis. See [www.littlebrownmushroom.com](http://www.littlebrownmushroom.com) for information on Soth's current projects, blogs, Tumblr, etc.

\*Education: BA 1992 from Sarah Lawrence College, originally trained as a painter. Fellowships from McKnight, Bush and Jerome Foundations among many others.

\*Worked as a digital image specialist at the MIA from 1996-2003.

\*Shows: Walker Art Center, 2010; Sean Kelly Gallery in NYC, 2012, Jeu de Paume in Paris, 2010; and many others. Soth is represented by the Weinstein Gallery in

Minneapolis and by Sean Kelly in New York. Breakthrough at the Whitney Biennial, 2004 where *Sleeping By the Mississippi* received critical acclaim.

\*Member of Magnum Photos, a professional photographers' cooperative founded and administered by its members. Started by Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Capa and others in 1947, its website, [www.magnumphotos.com](http://www.magnumphotos.com), is a fascinating place to explore award-winning photo-journalism, documentary photography, and current news photos. The name comes from the celebratory magnum of champagne. Soth was nominated in 2004 and became a full member in 2008.

"I fell in love with the process of taking pictures, with wandering around finding things. To me it feels like kind of a performance. The picture is a document of that performance." (Soth)

### *Sleeping By the Mississippi*

"Alec Soth's work is rooted in the distinctly American tradition of 'on-the-road' photography developed by Walker Evans, Robert Frank, and Stephen Shore..."

It's not often mentioned that Soth works serially. That is, his projects are long and involve larger topics that take many shoots and build up meaning through time. **Because of this serial aspect, individual images can't represent the depth of what he does. While some of Soth's images are very compelling, they don't show the network of ideas, conceits, and poetic imagery in the entire body of a project.** For instance, a photo of a bed is just that, an individual bed. When taken in the context of the other beds Soth has found on his journey down the Mississippi, though, the one bed is part of a portrait of the national psyche. Some beds in this series are abandoned (in a Louisiana swamp), and some are preserved as museum pieces (at Lindberg's boyhood home). Some beds are full of other sorts of meaning (in a Memphis motel, bearing a prostitute), and some are points of refuge (in the home of a tired old Southern matron). **Meaning grows in Soth's work by this accretion of imagery, like in an epic poem or a good novel. Likely the best possible way to see a series by Soth is in a book...**

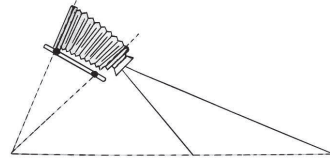
**"But when the series is seen as entire and connections are made between its parts, Soth's work is more akin to a John Steinbeck novel or a book by James Agee, in which the heroism of the people living and facing their lives, their troubled dignity, and the poetry of their connections to other human in similar circumstances, all shine through."** (Review by Michael Fallon, 6/8/2004, [martists.org](http://martists.org))

"I like the way Soth goes about things. He has a shrewd and sardonic eye, and he's always alert to the unpredictable, nonstop strangeness of the world, but he rarely goes after weirdness for its own sake. He is sensitive to the currents that flow back and forth between himself and his subjects, subjects who, because of the time it takes to fiddle around and set up a shot with his large-format camera, cannot help but be aware of the thirst of his lens. In other words, in his encounter with his subjects he is always candidly a human being himself—he doesn't use the camera to distance himself from other people." [[martists.org](http://martists.org), Glenn Gordon, April 24, 2005]

### Large Format Photography

Large format photography uses a large format camera that holds film that is 8x10 inches. Today's cameras may have either a digital back or the traditional film holder.

A bellows connects the standards on the front (lens holder) and back (film holder). Thus both the front and back of the camera can be tilted up and down and sideways to solve perspective and depth problems and to create interesting effects. Large format cameras reduce distortion. Ansel Adams used large format and 8x10 is especially good for landscape and architecture shots where the photographer is not at the same height as the subject. Different lenses and different length bellows can be attached to the camera. A tripod is a must! The cameras are heavy!



Soth uses an 8x10 view camera like the K.B. Canham model above left, and the R.H. Phillips & Sons, above right, and professional color negative film.

Setting up a shot with a large format camera takes a LOT of time. The artist composes the picture and considers how to adjust for perspective and angle using the Scheimpflug principle to fit a landscape or subject onto an 8x10 film without distortion and keeping parallels even. (see Wikipedia-Large Format Photography). The most time-consuming part of a large format shot, focusing, must be done before the film is slid into the back standard. This is done looking at the image as it is displayed on a ground glass plate. The ground glass is slid into the back standard. Using a focusing loupe, each part of the composition is checked for focus, with the lens adjusted and tilted accordingly. When satisfied, the photographer removes the ground glass, slides in the film and takes the shot, which, depending on the exposure can take some time. The film is removed from the holder and developed later. (So yes, you need a changing bag and/or cover cloth to create a dark room space to load and unload the film.) Soth says sometimes he is lucky to get one or two exposures on a given day.

Confusing? Complicated? Large format photography is the opposite of today's 'point, snap, photo-shop' camera work. Photographers like the way large format shooting slows down every part of the process and allows them to really contemplate a shot and to be creative. In a way, it is like unplugging the power sander and sanding a piece of wood by hand. Every part of the shot is under consideration and the photographer is connected to each part of the shot.

Sue Hamburge, 2012