

Essay for 2004 Whitney Biennial Exhibition Catalogue

Evolving from a series of road trips along the Mississippi River that took place over a period of several years, Alec Soth's series *Sleeping by the Mississippi* captures an array of individuals, landscapes, and domestic settings that elicit feelings of isolation, longing, reverie, and a sense of eccentricity specific to the United States. Instead of being the main subject of the compositions, the river provided an organizing structure that Soth could freely explore with his curious and discerning eye. Though the pictures are conceptually related to one another, they are not narratively interdependent. Rather, the link between them is lyrical, reflecting an inspiration rooted in poetry. During the course of the project, Soth revisited the poems of Walt Whitman, James Wright and John Berryman. The project is also informed by Robert Frank's legendary book *The Americans*. Like Frank's work, *Sleeping by the Mississippi* is a fusion of documentary and poetic styles of photography; it is elastic, unbound by a rigid conceptual framework, and it develops from a sense of wanderlust that is quintessentially American in spirit.

Soth says he is naturally attracted to people and places that embody a quiet sensibility. This is reflected in his choice of an 8x10 view camera – each exposure is made on an 8x10 inch negative – to capture his subjects and settings. The slow process involved with using this camera lends itself to the stillness and poetic quietude of his pictures, enhancing the reflective quality of his subjects. This particular camera work requires complicit subjects, making evident the sense of trust that Soth establishes with his subjects.

Weather floating on water, surrounded in lights and garlands, or old and discarded, empty beds are a recurring motif throughout the series, invoking an underlying dreaming state. "I want the sequence to feel like lucid dreaming, a kind of rambling dream which you don't quite understand, but also seems to make some sense," the artist has said. One of these beds once belonged to the aviator Charles Lindbergh and is shown tattered and stained on an anonymous blue porch. Soth, in fact, was influenced by a quote from Lindbergh's memoir *The Spirit of St. Louis*: "Over and over again I fall asleep with my eyes open, knowing I'm falling asleep, unable to prevent it. When I fall asleep this way my eyes are cut off from my ordinary mind as though they were shut, but they become directly connected to a new, extraordinary mind which grows increasingly competent to deal with their impressions." Sleep, for Soth, metaphorically alludes to a state in which the mind is free to roam, unencumbered by reason and a received set of rules – a state that encapsulates the poetic, wandering quality of his pictures.

—Apsara DiQuinzio