

SEANKELLY

West, Naomi. "Paris, Milan... Minnesota," *The Telegraph*, June 2007.

The Telegraph

Paris, Milan... Minnesota



Cars, Pamela and Allen, 1988 Ford F-150, by Alec Soth

Invited to produce his own fashion glossy, the photographer Alec Soth found himself shying away from the rarefied couture culture of Paris and finding a simpler beauty in the snowy suburbs of his native Minnesota. By Naomi West

The fashion industry operates at a frenetic pace: producing two catwalk collections annually is a bare minimum for designers, with countless additional 'cruise' ranges, diffusion lines, must-have handbags and special-edition perfumes to be rustled up as the months speed past.

The Minnesota-based fine art photographer Alec Soth works rather more slowly. Using his large-format 8x10 camera (which requires much 'fiddling') he took five years to produce *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, 46 photographs of the sights and the people he encountered along the length of the river that formed his first book in 2004.

But earlier this year, at the invitation of the renowned photographers' co-operative Magnum (of which he was made an associate member last June), Soth set out to produce enough images to fill an entire fashion magazine in barely four months. 'It was an overwhelming task,' he says.

By considerably cranking up his natural tempo, the 37-year-old - a finalist in last year's Deutsche Börse Photography Prize - met his deadline to deliver the third annual Fashion Magazine for Magnum Photos. Entitled Paris Minnesota, it follows Magnum's previous takes on the fashion glossy by the Briton Martin Parr and the Brooklyn-born street photographer Bruce Gilden. 'I kept saying, "This could be unbelievably great if I had five years!" But a creativity emerges out of desperation. And I felt that,' Soth says.

The finished magazine has two sections: 'Paris' incorporates portraits of noted fashion figures (Sonia Rykiel, Azzedine Alaïa surrounded by an animated throng at his kitchen table) as well as scenes in homes, hotel rooms and show venues in the fashion capital; 'Minnesota' features predominantly portraits of teenagers (cheerleaders, basketball players, ice skaters), some dressed by a stylist for a fashion shoot, and people in their best clothes standing alongside their cars with their customary backdrop - roadside piles of grubby snow. But the notion of taking pictures in his home state, where he still lives with his wife (his high-school sweetheart) and adopted Colombian daughter, was far from his mind when he started on the magazine.

His first day at the couture shows in January was a shock to the system, being more accustomed to spending days driving alone before happening on a suitable subject. 'Ah, it was ugly,' he recalls, grimacing. 'My plane was really late. I have tons of equipment and the airline lost a few major things. We had to drive straight to the first shoot at the Dior show, where there were nine million photographers backstage running around with their digital cameras and then me with all this equipment. I don't know quite how it happened, but I ended up getting kicked out of the show.'

He found taking portraits of models considerably less enjoyable than he had anticipated, because of the near-impossibility of getting them to stop doing what they do best. His affectingly still portraits are usually achieved because he takes so long messing with the camera that his subjects 'slow down and withdraw into themselves a little bit. They're not trying so hard.' But with professional models 'even when they're not posing physically... they just do something.' He took a series of photographs of models before and after they were transformed into catwalk-ready fashion beings. 'But I was always more interested in the "before".'

In Paris, he recalls, 'I felt such a gap between myself and that world. The way these people present themselves to the world is very different from my people. I needed to inject that into the project somehow: real people and, also, my people.' He decided to shoot extensively in Minnesota to provide a counterpoint to the Paris scenes. 'That's when it came alive. Fashion, for me, is not just about how some glamorous, sexy model presents herself to the world. It's about how we all do it.'

Having arrived at this framework, ideas began to suggest themselves. As a reflection of a sizeable pull-out series of photographs of the Grand Palais filling up for the Chanel couture show, he photographed the exterior of a Minnesota branch of the middle-of-the-road department store JC Penney as its snowy car-park emptied.

He feels compelled to speak up for his less rarefied subjects. 'Some people see the Minnesota pictures and they chuckle. But I see a real beauty there. There's a certain sophistication required to be sensitive to the beauty of simple things. It takes time to have an appreciation for the less spectacular. I now have much more affection for Minnesota than I used to. Though I still hate the winter.'

As he neared completion Soth began to see two distinct characters emerging in the magazine that represented the two locations: 'For me, Paris is this glamorous older woman and Minnesota is this beautifully awkward teenager.' To emphasise the point he set up one final shoot in Paris with a suitably poised and stylish older model. 'We found Jane, who was perfect, the ultimate sophisticated Paris woman. It turned out she's originally from Wisconsin, right next to Minnesota. I loved that.'

By the final shoots he was working so quickly, people would comment, 'What? You're done?' But breaking into a broad smile, he offers the assurance: 'I'm learning how to slow down again.'