

Alec Soth & Rodarte: The Anti-Fashion Fashion Photographer
BY CARMEN WINANT FOR DOSSIER

You developed an entirely new body of work for the book you just collaborated on with Rodarte, Catherine Opie, and John Kelsey. I assume you must be pretty busy -- how did you manage with your schedule? How far out did you guys plan?

Shooting for this project took place a while ago - about a year and a half. But I am always busy. I have fantasies about the bad economy slowing things down for me!

Years ago I made a project called *Fashion Magazine*, and after I did that, I stopped doing anything fashion-related. I didn't want to become part of The Machine, so I regularly said no, if asked. When this project came up, it was different. First of all, I wasn't shooting fashion. And second, Kate and Laura Mulleavy were so cool in their approach; the spirit of the thing was unique and it really lit a fire under me. They approached me way out the blue - we hadn't met. In fact, we still haven't met! I didn't want to meet them before the shooting because of the way the shoot worked, the specialness of it. We are having a public discussion together next month at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, and I keep telling them how nervous I am to finally meet them.

Kate and Laura had this idea that I would photograph their influences; it got me really excited. They sent a beautiful package, tied in ribbon, that was full of pictures...like stills from horror films, for instance. It was incredible: a visual world that I could enter. That was the thing about not meeting them - Kate and Laura had given me a window into an imaginary world, and I didn't want real the world to touch that.

You took two weeks and were given over a dozen sites to try and visit. How much instruction did you have beyond that, and how much of it did you take? It must be pretty unique to take an assignment like that.

There was tons of freedom with this assignment, and that was the beauty of it. Laura and Kate gave me lists, which is how I often work in my own practice. There were two lists: one of places (Tijuana, Salton Sea, etc.) and one of thematic things (horror movies, punks, sleepwalkers, California condor). From their groupings, I did more brainstorming and came up with my own sub-lists. I ended up creating a map that I called the "California Sleepwalkers Treasure Hunt Map." I called it this because I imagined myself sleepwalking through their dream world, searching for treasures to be found. It was like a game; condors, for instance, are only in two places in California, and I had to seek them out. I charted out maps, I had my lists...it was a crazy-man race.

You are from, and live and work in, Minnesota. Had you been to any or all of those places in California before? Did you go alone?

California is huge; the feeling of exploring always exists there for me. I had been to a few of the places on the list, like the Salton Sea. Actually, I had a wild first experience at the Salton Sea, and this time was no different. We got stuck. It was sunset and I was racing around, frantic to get a picture with that light. So, I disregarded a sign, went off road, and promptly my car got stuck in the sand. And it was getting dark. I had two assistants with me, but it was scary. We laugh about it now, but one of my assistants, who is the nicest guy in the world, totally freaked out and started yelling at me while trying to dig the wheel out of this sinking sand. That place is the end of the world -- how do you get a tow truck to come? AAA doesn't assist off-road. We were there for hours. Finally, a special task force came to save us in the middle of the night on dune buggies. What a sight that was! That place makes people a little crazy -- not a place you want to get stuck.

For a fine art photographer, you have certainly dabbled in fashion: in 2007, Magnum published volume 3 of *Fashion Magazine* called *Paris Minnesota*, in which you explored the distance and

similarities between these two places and the culture and products of fashion in both. How do you approach working in fashion? And how does it differ from the strategies of your own practice?

It's a fascinating thing. I am profoundly unfashionable in my own life. Maybe that's their attraction in using me? It's not my scene; I'm from Minnesota. But that said, there is an interesting relationship between fashion photography, fine art photography, and even photojournalism; they pull from each other. So I have always been curious about that relationship, the ways that we learn from one another and draw inspiration.

It was a real adventure to do *Fashion Magazine*. I learned a million lessons -- how I didn't like working with models, about maintaining my own eye and not trying to play fashion photographer. In fact, I just did a shoot a month ago for a German fashion magazine (*Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin*) for which I insisted on not photographing models. And as for Rodarte, I wasn't photographing clothes. I really didn't think of it as a fashion job at all -- I thought of it as an artistic collaboration in which I had all the freedom in the world. Laura and Kate are clearly artists, and I regard their work very highly. In that way, I encountered it as an opportunity to explore their artistic imagination.

I didn't know that Cathy Opie was participating at the time I was shooting. I knew there was someone else involved, but I assumed it would be a straight fashion photographer. I didn't know and didn't worry myself with it.

Indeed, you really had to let go in a sense to make this work, whether it was not knowing that Cathy was contributing to the book, or the final look and feel of the book itself. Was it liberating or nerve wracking to surrender such control? And what did you think upon seeing the final product?

Well, I have good experience in this realm because I've worked quite a bit with magazines, so I am used to just handing over the pictures and not knowing what is going to happen. Sometimes I'm the last person to see it: that fashion piece I mentioned I recently made in Iceland...I just got it, after everyone else! So, I've learned to let go and let the work take on different lives. Of course, when I was shooting, I constructed the project as a little book in my head; that's the way I have to work. But I always knew that it was their book, and that I was handing it over. But I trusted them. And it was staggering how many pictures they kept of my original edit. I was really impressed by that, because I wasn't fighting for it. I was in really good hands.