

PHOTOGRAPHY

The Eternal Stage Set

Gregory Crewdson describes his new exhibition, featuring photos of Rome's fabled Cinecittà studios.

By **Valerie Bitici**•

Photographs by **Gregory Crewdson**

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Before college, New York–born photographer Gregory Crewdson aspired to become a psychoanalyst like his father. However, after taking his first photography class, Crewdson discovered that there were more artful ways of delving into the human psyche. He soon decided to abandon his interest in analyzing minds in favor of toying with them. Often criticized as a pseudo-filmmaker for his ostentatious photo productions, gargantuan crews, and carefully fabricated scenes of human drama, Crewdson deliberately uses his craft to blur the lines between fact and fantasy.

“My earliest indications of the power of photography came when I was 10 years old, when my father brought me to the Diane Arbus retrospective at MoMA. I had a very strong reaction to the psychological urgency of the photographs, and I think maybe in some unconscious way that’s when I had my first powerful connection to the medium.”



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“Sanctuary,” opening at New York’s Gagosian Gallery on September 23, is a show dedicated to Crewdson’s ongoing affair with photography and film. While visiting Rome two years ago, the artist decided to take a tour of Cinecittà, the famed studios where Fellini shot *La Dolce Vita* and Martin Scorsese made *The Gangs of New York*. Walking through the interlocking, melancholic streets of sets in ruins, the photographer became fascinated by the deserted ghost town of stages. “I saw these enormous sets in various degrees of decay and how nature was impinging on them, and I immediately understood,” Crewdson muses. “I guess you could call it an ‘aha’ moment.”

With “Sanctuary,” Crewdson reaches the culmination of his photographic work thus far. Comprising 40 black-and-white pictures, this series of eerie, haunting images describes Crewdson’s preoccupations with life and death. Devoid of human existence, these poignant photographs pay homage to the decrepit film sets that once breathed with energy. Shot on the heels of “Beneath the Roses,” a seven-year production of grand proportions, “Sanctuary” marks a drastic change in the photographer’s oeuvre while still harping on his deep-rooted interest in opposing forces.

Fittingly, the artist describes his experience as “a great adventure.” Epic in its own right, “Sanctuary” marks the first time Crewdson has shot with a digital camera, and the first time in a long time that he has worked with a skeleton crew and in a black-and-white format. “It was of a much smaller scale,” he says, “and I found that there was great freedom in that for me. It was a return to more basic understanding of photography, so it really was an amazing experience.”

“Sanctuary” opens on September 23 at Gagosian Gallery on Madison Avenue. An illustrated catalogue with an essay by New York Times film critic A. O. Scott will be published by Abrams to coincide with the exhibit.

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