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ARTINFO

How Gregory Crewdson Found a New Path in the Haunted Backlots of Rome

By Emma Allen

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NEW YORK— It's likely that the critical reception of Gregory Crewdson's latest body of work, a black-and-white series titled "Sanctuary" that is now on display at **Gagosian's** uptown gallery, will focus on the difference between the somber new photographs taken on the backlots of **Cinecittà** and the artist's signature images. Nowhere in the show are his increasingly familiar suburban scenes: the abandoned streets, the eerie, anonymous ghost towns at dusk with the lone figure illuminated by some alien beam of light.



© Patrick McMullan Company

Photographer Gregory Crewdson
in 2006

One could see the new work as a brave departure from his previous photography — a refreshing break — or, alternatively, one could begrudge the pioneering master of the cinematic, Photoshopped image for leaving behind what for years he has done so well. Crewdson, of course, perched atop the throne that arrives when Larry Gagosian brings you into his empyrean fold, may not care either way. He can do whatever the hell he wants.

But while "Sanctuary" marks a significant technical break from his earlier work — he has left behind his crew of hundreds, his American Gothic film sets, his actors, his elaborate lighting, and his meticulous post-production manipulations in favor of making medium-format digital pictures in the ambient light of Rome — it slides neatly into the kind of mythical universe that he has been constructing for years. It is fitting that a credo Crewdson presses upon his students is that "as much as you try, you never get away from yourself — everyone has their story."

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"I really attempted as much as I could to try to change up every aspect of my production," Crewdson said of "Sanctuary" in an interview. "In the end, there aren't many changes. At the core, the story remains the same." Having just completed "Beneath the Roses," a seven-year project for which he helmed eight of his customary massive-scale shoots, he was ready for something different. En route to Rome for the opening of a museum show, the photographer recalled that his friend, filmmaker **Wes Anderson**, had often raved about his experiences at the city's legendary movie studio, where he shot much of "The Life Aquatic" on a soundstage, and where **Federico Fellini** filmed "La Dolce Vita."



According to Crewdson, the entire project came into focus the moment he saw the cavernous studio's desolated lots and weedy corners. Unfortunately, he didn't take into account the leisurely pace of Italian bureaucracy. He and his assistant **Così Theodoli-Braschi** overnighted a parcel with a long letter requesting access to the site and every book he'd ever made. Then he waited, and waited, without hearing any word — until about a half year later, when the phone rang, and someone cried, "Oh, Gregory! We just received your package!"

The red tape was swept aside, and Crewdson and a select few left for Italy, where they picked up a small Roman crew for atmospheric wet-downs and to man the fog machines. A stretch of bright, sunny weather posed a problem, since his vision for the project called for overcast skies. To compensate, he and the crew adopted a madcap schedule: get to the studio by 5 a.m. at the latest, shoot until sunup, return to bed, wake up at 5 p.m., and shoot until 10 p.m. This went on for six weeks. (That the crew didn't speak much English added a dose of farce to the endeavor.)

More than the reduced scale of the shoots, the use of a digital camera — a new move for Crewdson — marked a significant shift for the photographer, in a setting famous for being the birthplace of classic Italian neorealist films no less. "Maybe it's a paradox, I don't know," he said, "but despite shooting all high-end digital, the pictures are the most classical photographs I've ever made, and intentionally so. I wanted the pictures to feel very much grounded in the tradition of landscape photography. But there are all these weird kinds of contradictions. The entire thing is like a hall of mirrors."

This hall-of-mirrors effect is formally duplicated in Crewdson's photographs, which, as usual, employ the trope of nesting a frame within a frame — a door seen through an archway, for instance, seen through the final frame of the photograph's four borders — to convey the feeling of exploring a rich terrain of receding planes. "If you go back and look at my previous pictures, there are very few where there isn't some kind of framing device, whether it's a mirror or a window or a doorway," Crewdson said. "I love the idea of layers of space, then one deep space, and also the contradiction of a space leading to another space leading to nowhere."

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And although the photographer — whose best-known pictures exude a particularly American desolation, redolent of stale Main Streets and lonely tract homes — was shooting abroad for the first time, and shooting "straight" photography for the first time in a long time, what he focused his camera on was not the foreign place he had traveled to document but rather a set of that foreign place. He was drawn to those "very grand entranceways, which you then see are just being held up by scaffolding," he said. "The way I saw it was that any picture I took had the built-in set levels of reality and fiction inherent in it. So my job, I felt, was to try to make what was in front of me as real as possible."



The resulting images are bleak, devoid (with one exception) of human life — a fact that sets them apart from Crewdson's earlier work more than any other technical differences. Even without his repertory of actors to telegraph emotion, the pictures are suffused with sadness.

"I was preparing for these pictures and making them as banks were collapsing, and I think I was very conscious of that sense of things in ruin," the photographer said. "The pictures reflect that in some way — emptied-

out facades, and scaffolding. They do wind up being among my most direct and personal pictures."

He sees the narrative of "Sanctuary" as a "geographical journey" through the studio's back lots, ending at its outer parameter, at the gate that separates Cinecittà from the real world of an Italy subject to the modern-day economy's devastating twists and turns. Yet the final image of the series is the one that reintroduces human life, as after meandering through the uninhabited ruins one is returned to the sunlight with a feeling of catharsis and relief.

That last image was made after Crewdson watched the late Fellini film "L'Intervista," a movie about making a movie at Cinecittà, the opening sequence of which shows a car coming through the studio's front gate as fog machines roll out smoky clouds. Months before production, when Crewdson was waiting for his driver outside the studio, he realized that he should make one image in that spot, acknowledging the Fellini scene. The two people in the photograph — the woman in the booth and the man in the car, are a couple, close friends of Crewdson.

The title of the series, it turns out, came from a conversation the photographer had with the man playing the driver, James Barron, during a stroll through the studio's lots early one morning. Barron asked if Crewdson ever listened to music while shooting. "No, absolutely not," he responded. "I just listen to the beautiful sounds: the sound of the birds, and the doors of all the sheds opening and closing in the wind. You know, it's like a sanctuary." He meant a nature sanctuary.

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Crewdson said that Cinecittà "looks like a safe place," and it does, and it doesn't. One unusual image, at least, poses the question of how long-lasting or secure any feelings of safety can be. It shows a perilously tilted pair of feet, clearly broken off from what once was an imposing statue — perhaps a set piece that helped establish a scene of a powerful ancient empire.

The captured moment brings to mind Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem "Ozymandias," in which a "traveler from an antique land" recounts an encounter in the desert with a mysterious crumbling statue of an ancient tyrant. Next to "two vast and trunkless legs of stone" there lies "a shattered visage... whose frown,/ And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,/ Tell that its sculptor well those passions read/ Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things."

Shelley's belief in the longevity of the artist's hand, and tyrant's obsolescence, is reflected at Cinecittà, a cinematic fortress built by **Mussolini** that has given life to some of the most revered films in the Italian tradition. "One of the reasons I wanted to shoot there is that there are ghosts, and you feel this history, and ghosts," Crewdson said of Cinecittà's fascist history. But though the studio may be a haunted haven, it remains a place for fresh work to arise — which, according to the photographer, always comes from what came before.



"The whole thing was like a magical adventure," Crewdson said of the project. "It was a very small team, and we were essentially photographing on our own in this big ghost town. So it just felt indescribably magical. And for me, it was a real awakening in a way. Things had gotten so big with 'Beneath the Roses' that, essentially a lot of the organic or visceral aspect of the photography was lost. So in a certain way, I think I rediscovered photography."

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