

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### The New York Times

#### Chasing Fires in the Dark

#### *'Gregory Crewdson: Fireflies' in the Bronx*

Susan Hodara



*Gregory Crewdson took the photographs in his series "Fireflies" during a period of personal upheaval. A selection of the images will be displayed this summer in an exhibition at Wave Hill. Credit Gregory Crewdson, Courtesy Gagosian Gallery*

In 1996, Gregory Crewdson left New York to spend the summer living alone in his family's cabin in the Berkshires. Upon his arrival, he devised a plan: He would go outside nightly to photograph fireflies.

This was relatively early in Mr. Crewdson's career as a photographer known for his large-scale, meticulously staged and often disturbing domestic scenes. With his first marriage collapsing, it was a period of personal upheaval, and Mr. Crewdson, then 33, sought refuge in his work and the familiar surroundings of his childhood.

Every evening, with near ritualistic obsession, he donned mosquito netting and headed out. After two months and thousands of shots, he had the film processed. But when he began examining the contact sheets, he found he couldn't look at them.

"It was a very strong reaction," Mr. Crewdson said. "The pictures did not represent what I had experienced, so I was blind to them."

He packed the negatives and contact sheets in a box and forgot about them until 2006. Then, when he was deep into his project "Beneath the Roses," a series of photographs of small-town life, he opened the box. "I was stunned," Mr. Crewdson recalled. "For all the reasons I couldn't look at them 10 years earlier, I fell in love with them. I became entranced by their beauty and their flaws and their elusiveness."

He whittled the images to 61 selections and printed two sets. They were published as a book; some of the prints were shown, and many were sold. Now, for the first time, the entire series can be seen together in “Gregory Crewdson: Fireflies,” the summer exhibition at Wave Hill.

Visitors will probably want to get close to the photographs, which hang in the Georgian Revival-style Glyndor Gallery, a onetime home on the former Bronx estate that is now a 28-acre public garden. All of the images are black and white, set in the murk of twilight, trees silhouetted against dusky skies. The landscapes are still, save for the activity of the fireflies, their light scratching the night, blowing in all directions like snowflakes. They look like specks, bubbles, dashes, teardrops; their motion appears as dotted lines, glowing squiggles and blurred flashes of white against blackness. Some are clustered like distant cities; others are indistinguishable from the stars.

The photographs are small, just 6 3/8 inches tall. They are uniformly spaced and are hung at the same height, forming a horizontal line that traverses three galleries. Each room has windows that frame the garden’s lushness and the Hudson River beyond. The effect is one of meditative quietude that befits the show’s content.

For those acquainted with Mr. Crewdson’s photography, that content and the artist’s approach to creating, it might seem antithetical to the rest of his work. Shot with large-format cameras, his series “Twilight,” “Dream House” and “Beneath the Roses” compose the human figure in elaborately constructed and controlled scenes that required pre- and post-production teams comprising prop masters, production and lighting designers, a camera operator and a director of photography. But with “Fireflies,” Mr. Crewdson ventured out on his own, using a 35-millimeter and a panoramic medium-format camera to capture the insects in their natural setting. “I had never done anything like it,” he said, “and I can’t imagine doing it again.”

Nevertheless, Mr. Crewdson, the director of graduate studies in photography at Yale University, does not consider “Fireflies” to be an outlier. Like most of his photographs, “Fireflies” was shot during the short window of twilight in and around Becket, Mass. (He is currently shooting his newest project there, a series titled “Cathedral in the Pines.”) And as in his other pictures, light played a defining role. It is not the insects themselves that are visible in the images, but their intermittent glow. The firefly’s light was particularly poignant because it is the creature’s mating call. “It is light as meaning,” Mr. Crewdson said, “light as desire.”

The artist’s least-known series, “Fireflies” emerged from an impulse that persists for Mr. Crewdson. “What is fundamentally of interest to me in all of my pictures is looking at the ordinary and the familiar and trying to find a sense of mystery and wonder,” he said. “The light of the firefly is emblematic of that.”

For the artist, “Fireflies” echoes themes that recur throughout his work: isolation, loneliness, beauty and a longing for connection. “You have that one central story to tell,” he said, “and as much as you might try to radically change the production and form of your pictures, you can never get away from yourself.”

For gallerygoers, perhaps the images will trigger different stories. “This is a show that can transport people back to their memories of being outdoors on summer nights,” Jennifer McGregor, the curator of “Fireflies” and Wave Hill’s director of arts, said. “It brings back the excitement that fireflies engender as bits of magic in our lives.”