Photographer Gregory Crewdson made his name with elaborately produced, moody images. When darkness fell on his own life, the only way into the light was through a new series of work, Cathedral of the Pines.

BY TEA LOOS
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—Gregory Crewdson

**Seated in a drafty old church**  
Methodist church on a bright fall day in the Berkshires, Gregory Crewdson could almost be the subject of one of his own photographs. There are copious indirect light sources, casting the perfect amount of illumination on him and the 19th-century woodwork and original windows of his chapel-turned-home, which surrounds him.  

Crewdson, 53, is opening up about his powerful new series—shockingly, his first in five years—but there’s something formal in the air, too. It’s exactly the dynamic that has always powered his work and has led him to the front rank of contemporary artists, and to the directorship of graduate studies in photography at Yale.  

“All my pictures thrive on distance and intimacy, those things working together,” says Crewdson. “It’s not that dissimilar to what my father did as a psychiatrist. There’s always a chilly remove, I think that’s in every picture.”  

But with his new series Cathedral of the Pines, debuting in January at Gagosian Gallery’s mammoth 21st Street space in Manhattan, Crewdson is going deeper, using friends and family in some pictures (a rare departure), making smaller-scale prints than usual—and generally honing his famed psychological acuity.  

As always, the pictures don’t really lend themselves to description. In one image, a woman is standing at the sink looking toward the window in early morning light, with a faint echo of Edward Hopper; in another, two stock-still figures are seen at a far distance, standing by a river, framed by the arch of a bridge’s base. But in their stillness and utter clarity, they rivet the viewer.  

“The tension is quieter, more evocative and less literal,” says Crewdson of Pines. He adds, “These are the most personal pictures I have made. The theme is the search for some kind of connection in the world, the search for intimacy.” And he says the series is more like painting than film, which is a particularly significant shift.  

As usual, the images were shot in a town not far from where he is sitting. “I love being here, I feel connected to the world,” he says of western Massachusetts, where his unusual home has an adjacent studio next door. But getting to this new series took him on quite a journey—in all senses.  

Crewdson is a Park Slope native who was exposed to photography greats early on. “Diane Arbus was my first big influence,” he recalls. He studied at SUNY Purchase in the 1980s, with the good fortune to have Laurie Simmons as a photography teacher.  

“Obviously, Hitchcock was a major influence,” says Crewdson, who has been able to mine tension and menace in the vein of the great director. He cites Shadow of a Doubt (1943) as a touchstone, for its use of a small town as a moody
setting—something Crewdson has done with Becket, Massachusetts, in Pines. And Vertigo
(1958) made a deep impression: "It's a meditation
on how pictures are, at their core, some kind of
illusion, some kind of mirage. That's such a
beautiful notion."

Once at Yale, Crewdson had two useful, very
different forces shaping him. "Yale was very
traditional then, but I was going down to New York
to look at Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince," he
says. "At the same time, I was getting a great
education in Walker Evans and William
Eggleston. Both those oppositional aesthetics
influenced me equally."

Crewdson established a reputation by staging
everlasting, cinematic-style productions lasting
weeks and employing large crews, all to create a
few haunting still images. And then five years ago,
while making his Sanctuary series in Rome, his
personal life started to fall apart.

"My marriage ended, and I have two children,"
says Crewdson. "It was a very difficult period. I
went into a period of darkness." And his working
life suffered. "It was the equivalent to writer's
block. It went on for a couple of years. The period
of non-activity really took a toll on me."

Crewdson emerged when a friendship with
Juliane Hiam, a Berkshires local who had been
featured in one of his photographs (naked and
pregnant, no less), turned into a romance—and
when a visual epiphany on a winter day stirred his
poetic side. He and Hiam, now a couple, were
cross-country skiing at the time. "There's a path
in the woods called Cathedral of the Pines, and
the whole series came to me in that moment,"
says Crewdson. "The backdrop of the forest was
a kind of signal."

Hiam, Crewdson's creative producer, now
handles his casting, and even lent her parents'
house as a location for Pines. She collaborated with
Crewdson on the "picture descriptions" phase,
which plots out the ambiguous scenes. "It's like a
screenplay for a single image," Hiam says. "He
never wants me to load it with too much motivation."
She and her son appear in the series, too.

The Pines photographs were made with
much less fuss than Crewdson's previous ones.
"I already proved to myself I could make these
huge pictures, close down streets and make
snow," he says. "I wanted to tell a more intimate
and private story."

As he plots his future course, Crewdson feels
that he is back to the right balance of light and
dark—for a photographer, an essential
equilibrium. Without some shadow, it just wouldn't
be his work. "My pictures will always feel slightly
alienated and slightly mysterious," he says of his
upcoming show. "But I really tried to make the
most beautiful pictures I could."