

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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How Gregory Crewdson Spends His Summer

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The photographer Gregory Crewdson likes to start his day with a long swim. For most of the year, he resigns himself to pools in Brooklyn, New Haven and Great Barrington, Mass. But come June, it's finally warm enough to swim at his preferred spot: Upper Goose Pond, a lake in the Berkshires not far from where he spent summers growing up. Accessible via a tranquil, wooded stretch of the Appalachian Trail, the lake is a secluded spot — and the hike to get there has become part of a summer ritual for Crewdson and his partner, Juliane Hiam. After his requisite morning cup of coffee from Fuel, a local coffee shop in Great Barrington that Crewdson has frequented for the past 20 years, the pair sets off for the trailhead.

On the trek up to the lake, Crewdson and Hiam discuss work and logistics — they go through emails and jot down ideas for his meticulously staged photographs. An intensely visual thinker, Crewdson isn't fond of writing, so Hiam transcribes notes on her iPhone, doing her best not to trip over roots along the way. When they reach the lake, Crewdson ducks behind a nearby shed to change into his swim trunks, and puts in his nose plug — “the most important piece,” he says, laughing, before wading in.

Crewdson's tableau photographs are incredibly detailed; every prop and aspect of the set is painstakingly selected and arranged. So it's not a coincidence that he prefers to keep the details of his day-to-day life as simple as possible. This is part of the appeal of swimming: The water

provides a space where he can think about his work with minimal distraction. “The ideal is when you’re finally in a place where you feel like you could keep swimming forever,” he says. “Once you’re in that state, you can really start thinking about ideas. It’s not even conscious. An image will just come up in my mind, and then we’ll discuss it on the way down.”

Crewdson grew up in Park Slope, spending summers with his family at a log cabin in Becket, Mass. — and has always felt a strong connection to the small-town scenery of his youth. He’s been shooting his uncanny, quotidian scenes in Western Massachusetts towns, including Pittsfield, North Adams and Lee, for three decades.

After his marriage ended in 2010, Crewdson felt dislocated. “My life was completely chaotic. I was going through a kind of depression,” he says. “There was a two-year period where I wasn’t even up to the task of making pictures.” Searching for some stability, he left New York for Great Barrington, where he found an old Methodist Church and adjacent firehouse — which eventually became the space where he now lives and works. He connected with Hiam — an acquaintance from Becket who had helped with casting for his photographs in the past — and they began going on ritualistic hikes on the Appalachian Trail. “It was definitely therapeutic,” Hiam says.

Their time in the woods became the inspiration for Crewdson’s most recent body of work — his first in five years — “Cathedral of the Pines,” which he showed at Gagosian Gallery earlier this year. He shot the series in Becket between 2013 and 2014, with a crew of about 15 people — small by Crewdson’s standards. (He’s known for shutting down main streets and bringing in cranes for lighting.) The series includes pictures of Hiam and her children, and Crewdson’s 11-year-old daughter, Lily, shot on the Appalachian Trail as well as in Hiam’s childhood home. Crewdson has called the series his most intimate work, though he clarifies: “When I say ‘intimate,’ it’s as intimate as I get. The pictures are still chilly. There’s still a lot of disconnect and remove.”

Though his images are intricately staged, he’s never been interested in constructing an explicit narrative. Instead, he tries to create an uncanny sensation — which he describes as something “that feels very familiar and ordinary, but at the same time unlocks some kind of memory, or unexpected sense of beauty or mystery or terror. It triggers something that feels new and old at the same time.”

For Crewdson, the summer is a crucial time of creativity, since his schedule is hectic the rest of the year. He divides his time between Brooklyn (where his kids go to school), New Haven (where he is the director of graduate studies in photography at Yale) and Great Barrington. But from June through August, he avoids making travel plans or other big commitments so he can settle into a more mellow day-to-day rhythm, which helps him recenter. Though it’s not always easy for him to come by during the year, Crewdson says that he needs stability in order to work. “My pictures are not easy to make,” he explains. “They’re complicated, there’s a lot of moving parts, there’s a lot of chaos on set.”

When he can, he keeps things consistent — even his meals. For breakfast, it’s toast with smoked salmon. For dinner, he prepares a highly specific meal his 9-year-old son has named “the Gregory Crewdson salad.” “It has to have the type of greens he likes, and the mushrooms from the specific farm in Ghent,” Hiam says. “And the right kind of pesto,” Crewdson adds (Oliva Lacinato Kale & Walnut Pesto, paired with chilled tortellini). “And it’s served with a piece of grilled salmon,” Crewdson says. “Salmon’s my thing.”

This summer is also a time of transition for Crewdson, as he is between projects. For the first time, he and Hiam, who is a writer, playwright and filmmaker, are collaborating on a screenplay. With the cinematic quality of his photographs, people have been approaching him about directing a film for years. Even so, he says his priority will always be his photographs — he’s gearing up to start scouting locations for his next series this summer. It will be more urban than “Cathedral of the Pines,” he says, and with a different tone. He doesn’t know much else yet, but one thing is for sure: the location. As he puts it: “It goes without saying that I’ll continue to shoot up here.”