

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Gregory Crewdson

Matthew Weiner



Illustration by Juliane Hiam

In his newest series, Cathedral of the Pines, photographer Gregory Crewdson returns to his home in rural Massachusetts to stage elaborate interior and exterior tableaux against summer's overgrown forests and winter's bright snow. His images evoke a dreamlike hyperreality in which subjects appear suspended in a state of anxiety, often isolated or in repose, while light filters through doorways, windows and treetops. To create his signature atmosphere, Crewdson requires intensive production, similar to that on film sets—a full crew, location scouting, motion picture lighting, set-building and posed models. Cathedral of the Pines is his first body of work since 2011's Sanctuary and comes after a period of intense personal upheaval. Crewdson speaks with friend Matthew Weiner, creator of Mad Men, about this process.

Matthew Weiner: First of all, I got your [behind-the-scenes] pamphlet for *Cathedral of the Pines* in the mail, which was a great teaser. I don't know quite how to describe it, but it felt very, very private, which was exciting to me. Then I just saw the actual pictures, and they're incredible, as usual. I've asked this question before, but I'm going to ask you again: going from the basic tradition of photography into full productions, what drove you to have this elaborate control?

Gregory Crewdson: It's a great question. I would identify myself as a storyteller in a very limited sense of the term. One reason I've always been drawn to photography is because it is limited, as I think I am limited in a certain way. Unlike you, I'm not responsible for plot or dialogue or motivation, just purely responsible for the singular image.

I think that's the way I sort of see the world anyway—in terms of frozen moments in time.

MW: You talk about these things in terms of limitations, yet I don't know that they're really limited. They're verbally limited, but in an almost Aristotelian way—they have the unity of place and time. So even if you're not encouraging us to put these photographs together in a linear way, there is a unity of story there going on. There are characters for sure.

GC: When I say storyteller, I suppose what I mean by story is my core obsessions, desires, fears, anxieties and that sort of murky subject or content of the work.

MW: I wonder what the story is, particularly with this series. I'm always struck by the juxtaposition of the natural world and the psychology and interior experience of environments, financial realities, neighborhoods. This series feels like it's taking place in a subculture, in a way. It feels less "suburban." We talk about David Lynch a lot—*Blue Velvet*—there's less of that here.

GC: Yes, for sure, and I should circle back to your first comment: when you received the booklet in the mail, your reaction was that it felt private, and that's exactly what I was hoping for in terms of this whole body of work. In fact, there was a long period of transition before even making a single picture. So maybe I can just tell you some of that.

MW: I'd love to know what that is.

GC: I think you know that about five or six years ago my marriage ended. I moved to a church outside of Great Barrington, Massachusetts, and I was in a real period of dislocation—like, complete collapse. It's embarrassing for me to even say, but there was a period of about two years before I was even able to make a picture. I was slowly bringing myself back to life by doing long walks on the Appalachian Trail and long-distance swims. This is all in Becket, (Massachusetts) about 30 minutes from where I live, and it's where I used to have a family country house.

MW: So you have a childhood association with this place?

GC: Yes, I was trying to make sense of my life and reconnecting with my past and who I was as a person and as an artist.

MW: This sounds like an elaborate meditation.

GC: It was a meditation. The process of doing the long distance swims was really healing for me.

MW: What happens to your mind when you do that?

GC: It's one of the few times where I feel like I could open up and allow myself to connect to my imagination. It's a womb-like state, swimming in lakes.

MW: My wife loves swimming, and to me it's so boring and exhausting.

GC: Juliane [Hiam, casting director] and I would go on these walks together and talk a lot. During the winters, we would cross-country ski in Becket. There was a moment when we were out on a trail in the snowy winter in the pine forest and came across a little sign marking the name of the trail. It said “Cathedral of the Pines.” Right at that moment, the entire body of work became clear to me—that would be the title. Honestly, there are very few moments in my life where there’s a complete moment of aesthetic awakening. All the pictures would be made in Becket. It would all be done on location with a small crew. The pictures would be very private, very intimate and, as you said, related to nature because that’s the central thing in the work.

MW: It’s interesting—I’m in a state of figuring out what to do next myself, and you do sort of expect the lightning bolt. It’s unusual, as you said. Now, did you tell Juliane this right as it was happening?

GC: What I said to her was, “This reminds me of a moment when I was a young teenager.” I had a reconnection with my past in a very profound way. That’s all I really said. It was later that evening when we were texting that she brought up the title *Cathedral of the Pines*. I said, “That’s the new body of work.” It still took a couple months to start up the whole production, as you know.

MW: Explain Juliane’s involvement in the rest of the work.

GC: She was involved in the entire process from beginning to end. She has not only influenced the pictures, she’s in the pictures. The first production, the photographs were made in her parents’ house [in Becket], the house she grew up in. We cleared out her parents for six weeks to make those pictures.

Altogether, there were three productions: the first in Juliane’s family home; a second winter production for the snow-related pictures; then we did the third production the following summer, which was all exteriors.

MW: That’s that lush, wet, summery... You can see the moisture in the air in those pictures.

GC: I wanted the pictures to feel almost more painterly than cinematic. They were very influenced by 19th century painting.

MW: You definitely achieved that. There’s often tension in your work of what was before and what was after. But this feels more like people are in contemplative states. They’re actually not going anywhere. There’s a posed quality to them.

GC: If you really look at the pictures, I’ve kind of drained them of literal narratives.

MW: You took out the tension.

GC: Yes. I feel like the tension is deep...

MW: That’s not a criticism. It’s an achievement.

GC: I was hoping to make optimistic, loving pictures, but there’s still the darkness in them.

MW: They're definitely dark—the décor and everything. No offense to Juliane's parents, but I do feel like there is a darkness and a prominent sense of isolation. It has to do with light, but also color palette. There's a lot of ochre and green.

GC: The color palette is carefully thought through as an aesthetic choice. I want everything in the picture to feel timeless. "Nondescript" is a word that we use over and over again in building these things. Nothing in the picture should feel extraordinary—it must be part of the world. Nothing should stand out, but everything should mean something.

MW: That house must be really filthy to be that dark.

GC: Oh, it's beyond filthy. Often wet. A lot of what we do is stain things. Nothing should feel new, nothing should feel expensive or like a commodity in any way. It has to all feel like part of the world of the picture. And then once we've got those things set, it comes down to the way things are lit. I wanted the main light sources to always come from the exterior, to light the scenes from outside, in. I think that's a painting trope.

I was very influenced by this show I saw about five or six years ago at the Met called *Rooms with a View*. The main theme was figures in interior spaces pondering the exterior world in one way or another. I was using that as the kind of central metaphor going through my work, so we had to figure out a lighting sensibility that would work for that. That was a big part of the battle.

MW: I think you really captured a sense of shelter. Not just the shelter of the trees when you're outside, but the idea of the window—having four walls that open up into something. There's protection inside.

GC: That's beautifully put. "Refuge" is the word we talked a lot about—the window being a dividing point between not only interior and exterior space but between something familiar and domestic and something mysterious and unknown. There's also a lot of nakedness in these pictures. There's a lot of skin, a lot of flesh. I would say that's definitely another theme in the work—longing.

MW: Longing for contact?

GC: Yeah, I think in my work there's always tension between a certain kind of alienation and wanting to make a connection with something, whether it's a body, landscape or something larger than yourself. I certainly think that's emblematic of what I was going through with the pictures.

MW: Now, we've previously talked about your subjects—that you frequently don't have a lot of contact with them. But you obviously know Juliane very well. How do you arrive at her expressions, in particular?

GC: Juliane is like a muse in this work. She knows essentially how to be in the picture. She knows how to position herself. In fact, half the time I'm interacting with her in everyday life, she's doing the same pose, and she's completely unaware of it.

MW: She's a physical presence. And no matter what, even with this beautiful naked woman, the face is still where you end up. And what is the expression? It's almost an expressionlessness.

GC: I always want less—that's essentially my one directorial instruction.

MW: It's so striking to see human skin outside in those trees. It feels very primitive, like some kind of a subculture or a tribe—human wolves or something.

So this is a bigger question: When you're working on a series like this, how do you know when to stop?

GC: I think there's a pragmatic answer for me, and that's: when the money runs out. [laughs] Otherwise, I would still be doing it. Prior to *Cathedral of the Pines*, I went through a few years without making a picture, and you do feel fraudulent. The one time when you truly feel alive is when you're producing, when you're making things, and when you go through a period like that, without making, you do feel like you're living a lie in a certain way.

MW: Obviously, you must love the scouting, sketching, casting and the anticipation of it as much as you like being there on the set and actually getting it done.

GC: I really love the pre-production. Location scouting, writing the descriptions with Juliane and all of that, because everything's possible at that point. Every single picture in your mind is perfect. Of course, once you're in production, you immediately have to give things up.

MW: I think part of the success of your work is that it reminds people of their dreams. I always wonder, when you're done, are you striving to see something you've seen before?

GC: Yes. Isn't that the very definition of the uncanny? The thing you make feels both familiar and mysterious at the same time. According to Freud, the uncanny is the thing that feels familiar on the surface but for whatever reason becomes terrifying because it opens up a connection to some repressed event.

MW: But you can't get enough of it, so it is a sensation of comfort on some level.

GC: Well put.

MW: What was that teenage moment you talked about earlier, when you saw the trail sign "Cathedral of the Pines"? And is it in the work?

GC: It was like I was reconnecting to a moment in my youth when I was skiing with my brother in the woods. It's hard to describe—just that sense of weather, the white snow and the bond I have with my brother. A return to childhood, like a "rosebud." That was uncanny in its purest form.

MW: As always, I really enjoyed talking with you. The fact that I know you helps a lot, and that I'm not scared of you.

GC: Was a pleasure talking with you too, even though I'm still scared of you.