

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### THE NEW YORKER

#### Naked and Afraid

Gregory Crewdson



*E. J. Snyder and Kellie Nightlinger on “Naked and Afraid.” PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY DISCOVERY CHANNEL*

It’s twilight, and we are deep in the jungle. Before us, there is a clearing, with a primitive shelter made of bamboo and leaves. A nude man, covered in tattoos, lies in repose, facing away from camera. A naked woman is seated beside him, and tends a small fire. Both are covered in dirt and bug bites, and appear ragged and hungry. The woman gazes into the rising smoke.

This past March, around the time my photography show “Cathedral of the Pines” was coming to a close in New York, I stumbled onto the TV series “Naked and Afraid.” I was doing a lot of travelling around that time; I kept landing on the show on hotel televisions. I found it mildly amusing at first—a good distraction. After a few more episodes, however, I was transfixed. I couldn’t stop watching. This isn’t my usual sort of TV fare. But this show was tapping into something that felt familiar to me.

Here’s every episode, the abridged version: a man and a woman are flown to a remote location and stripped of their clothing. They meet each other for the first time, naked, and set out on a journey into the wilderness together. They have to find food, water, and shelter, and survive for twenty-one days. They quickly become thirsty, hungry, cold. Their morale is tested, and they’re pushed to their limits, both physically and mentally. Some make it, some don’t. Contestants can “tap out” and ask to leave at any time.

At its core, the show is about the search for meaning. People want to find something fundamentally human and primal within. They want to know if they have what it takes to survive when stripped of all their creature comforts. They want to be pushed: to feel, to suffer, to experience dirt and pain, and to wake up—to not be numb. But, let's be real, it's also about people wanting to be famous, if only for an hour—the duration of each episode.

By watching, we're participating in all of those wants, too. The contestants become our surrogates.

The fact that the show now runs nonstop on the Discovery Channel every Sunday, and was recently parodied on "Saturday Night Live," means that I'm not the only one who is fascinated. It has captivated our collective consciousness. I started wondering why.

The more I watched "Naked and Afraid," the more I realized the uncanny similarity between this reality-TV show, my work, and my life. As in my pictures, the situation that brings the subjects to be isolated, estranged, and stripped down to an essential human state is elaborately staged. But something real is captured, nonetheless, by the cameras. Ultimately, we learn something about the nature of truth and fiction, participate in the relationship between exhibitionism and voyeurism.

I lived through my own personal episode of "Naked and Afraid" several years ago. Mine was instigated by a divorce. I left New York City with one suitcase of possessions, put the entire contents of my studio in storage, and in a sense went out into the wilderness. I bought a side-by-side church and firehouse in the country, with the idea that they'd one day be fixed up to be a proper home and studio. But that would happen someday. For the moment, I was completely dislocated. I more or less camped out in the spaces for two years, living out of boxes and eating off paper plates. I was the living manifestation of a figure that could have been found in one of my pictures—gazing contemplatively across a huge, empty sanctuary at one lone, ripped sofa left behind by the previous owner. A cardboard box, still taped shut, with the word "Gregory" written across it in magic marker, served as my coffee table.

By now, I've told the story many times of how I found my way back to my work and myself. I got up each day. I drove to an Appalachian Trail trailhead in Becket, Massachusetts, hiked forty-five minutes to a remote pond, swam one mile, hiked back, drove back. There were days interspersed that were focussed on being a good father and others focussed on teaching students. But I made no work. Two years passed in this way. Nature became my refuge—the one place where my existence didn't feel punitive.

Much like the contestants on "Naked and Afraid," I had profound experiences in the woods—emotional epiphanies and personal revelations. As with the show, I was confronted by my shortcomings, but also by my strengths. I took pride in the simple but meaningful accomplishments of walking and swimming. I reconnected to basic things, such as hearing myself breathe. I found inspiration. And just like on the show, the whole journey came down to one moment where I had to face all my fears. On the first day of production, after not shooting a picture for years, I was on the set in the morning before my crew arrived. Naked and afraid. I had slept on location the night before and wandered out, undressed, to stand by my camera. I was terrified. Could I even make pictures anymore?

Eventually, I produced a body of work centered on the theme of a search for home. There are many temporary shelters in “Cathedral of the Pines,” including huts, shacks, and outhouses. And there’s a lot of nakedness, both literal and figurative. I hope that there is also a sense of redemption.

“Naked and Afraid” is not a great work of art, elevated, or sophisticated. The show is merely a construct, with very abrasive narration, an overwrought score, and a predictable, formulaic structure. It reduces the man and woman to the most archaic definitions. But, nonetheless, each episode exposes something eternal, and true. The awkwardness of being naked quickly dissipates, then transforms into something innocent and pure (all sexual body parts are blurred, so nothing is actually visible to television viewers). The contestants realize they’re vulnerable. They need each other’s bodily warmth. There’s a palpable tension between estrangement and intimacy. Without fail, they either work together, or they don’t make it.

It doesn’t take a photographer to realize that, in the end, the two people are never really alone. That only adds to the intrigue of the show. Behind the camera, there is a crew. Like my pictures, it’s a theatrical experience as much or more than it is a real one. That only adds layers to its meaning.

Each show ends with what is meant to be a sense of achievement, success, and celebration. After twenty-one days, the man and woman have to make a final journey to an “extraction point” where a car, truck, helicopter, or boat comes and rescues the contestants. They drive, sail, or fly into the sunset, back to civilization. It’s an inherently sad moment, though, and it propels you to watch yet another episode. Even in the last shot, as the contestants are feeling the sense of victory themselves, you can already feel a sense of longing. You don’t want them to leave Eden.

I feel that way, too, when I tell and retell the story of the dark time in my life. Along with memories of the pain and isolation and loneliness, I feel nostalgia for that time. There was something magical about finding my bearings again, reclaiming a sense of myself both as an artist and as a father. My home is now furnished. I’ve returned to civilization. And I’ve realized that taking a journey into the wilderness is sometimes the only way to really figure out how to get back home.

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