

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Gregory Crewdson: Cathedral of the Pines, Gagosian Gallery, New York — 'Brutally precise'

Ariella Budick



'Mother and Daughter' (2014). Digital pigment print. © Gregory Crewdson. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery

For Gregory Crewdson, time froze in the mid-1970s. He proffers no rosy nostalgia, but a brutally precise reconstruction of unhappiness. In the domestic scenes he stages with obsessive theatricality, the panelling is always pine, countertops Formica, floors carpeted in fusty tan, and beds covered in the kind of slimy synthetic you still sometimes find in no-name motels. On the street, boxy Chevys sport long snouts and chrome bumpers. Every item summons a suburban past that hovers creepily, like a recurring dream.

Crewdson returns to the spotlight with his first new work in five years, *Cathedral of the Pines*, now on view at Gagosian Gallery in New York. Set against the western Massachusetts backdrop he has mined for decades, the series feels like a repetitive sequel. Twilight lingers, figures slump dejectedly in mid-epiphany, and sad interiors give out on to haunted landscapes. Yet his lens has panned away from the post-industrial gloom of *Beneath the Roses*. Instead, nature reasserts itself in the scruffy woods of Becket. After a long exile, a troubled Eden seems close at hand. (In case all the forests and pristine snow don't hold out that promise obviously enough, Crewdson sows his interiors with clues: books called *Outside Eden* and *Snakes and their Ways*, and a vintage board game *Snake Eyes* appear in more than one family den.)

“Every artist has one central story to tell and that story is told and retold over the course of a lifetime,” Crewdson has said — often, and with slight variations. Whether or not that mantra describes all careers, it certainly applies to his. Look back at an image from 2007. A pale girl

perches on a twin bed, her face alight with the glow of revelation. Like the young heroine of Edvard Munch's "Puberty", the whitened figure is menaced by shadows and haunted by the future. Next to her, a much older and more mottled female body stretches out on a matching twin bed. They may be mother and daughter, or a younger and older self, each imagining the other.

Flash forward to "Sisters", from the new series. Crewdson arranges two female doppelgängers on parallel beds. The seated figure is naked, clothed only in that same cool, gauzy light, which bounces off the frozen lake outside the window and illuminates the set. The other lies on her side, staring into her own thoughts. Schlocky framed prints hint at constant struggle for meagre rewards. "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," Thoreau wrote on the banks of another Massachusetts lake, and those are Crewdson's people: speechless, glum, only vaguely aware of their own discontent.

Mild depressiveness can get tiresome, and though his elegance and expressive mastery remain as sharp as ever, Crewdson hasn't found a way to pour new vibrancy into old moods. By rights, these photographs should be even darker than they are. In 2010, his marriage fell apart and he moved out of New York to the Berkshires, the landscape of his childhood summers. "My sense of self, security, confidence and equilibrium had been shaken," he writes. "Whereas picture-making had always been my compass and the central meaning in my life, during this time, for over three years, I did not make a single picture."

Instead, he repurposed a rural church and firehouse into a home and studio and surrendered himself to nature. Hiking a trail called "Cathedral of the Pines", he underwent the sort of epiphany experienced by his characters. He knew he wanted to work again, right there among the trees.

And so Crewdson returned to nature, accompanied by an army of set dressers, costume designers, props masters, hair stylists, make-up people, lighting designers, production assistants and models. As in *Beneath the Roses*, he constructed Hopper-esque tableaux that tell uncanny half-stories, with no prelude and no denouement. We see pairs of people who seem hardly to know each other, ensconced in sublime greenery or staring at snowed-over lakes. Summertime: a tattooed woman sits on the tailgate of a flatbed truck that's parked amid trees and ferns. Tan lines are etched across her naked torso, and a pasty-buttocked lover stretches out, his face turned away.

The pairing of seated and horizontal figures tolls repeatedly through Crewdson's work. Here, a 1970s Adam and Eve, trying to get themselves back to the Garden, despoil nature as they go: squashed beer cans litter the ground.

What woods these are we think we know. Scrub and scrawny pines have reclaimed land that was cleared in the 19th century for pasturing and toxic mills. Rivers once ran red here and the hills were bare. The scars of that environmental outrage have not yet healed, and already the innocents in the truck repeat it. Crewdson offers a natural cycle that's more ashes to ashes than intimations of rebirth. The Puritans' New Jerusalem has become the scene of a crime.

The final photo takes us back to this same spot, only this time on a winter afternoon at dusk. A cross-country skier, seen from behind, pauses in the clearing, like Frost's narrator. Arcadia has been tainted again, this time by an outhouse planted incongruously next to the trail. We have seen the same little hut at the beginning of the show, where it appeared forbiddingly dilapidated.

Here, it has been spiffed up and illuminated from inside, like a portal to another world. The comfort station appears to dispense various forms of solace: a brassiere hangs on a hook above the toilet paper, and a pair of panties lies discarded in the snow. The lonely traveller looks torn: whether to seek unknown and possibly dangerous succour in the strange, glowing toilet, or to keep pushing on into the dark.

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