

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The American
Conservative

Telling a Story Within a Single Frame

Like a great filmmaker, photographer Gregory Crewdson captures the human vulnerability in places we'd rather forget.

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Gregory Crewdson, "Woman at Sink," (2014). (Digital Pigment Print Image size 37 1/2 x 50 inches (95.3 x 127 cm) Framed size 45 1/16 x 57 9/16 inches (114.5 x 146.2 cm) Edition of 3, plus 2 APs ©Gregory Crewdson. Courtesy Gagolian Gallery.)

Gregory Crewdson's photography is known for its meticulous composition and for its cinematic—and sometimes painterly—quality. While this is something of an overblown descriptor for any lavish stylist of the medium, it is actually quite apt in this case. A typical Crewdson shoot is not far removed from the collaborative chaos of film production, involving full crews, special effects, and performers, all in the service of telling a story within a single frame. For his efforts he has garnered comparisons to Malick, Lynch, and Hitchcock while his own influence in turn seeps back into film. His haunting fingerprints, by cinematographer Mike Gioulakis's own admission, can be found in nearly every frame of the 2015 indie horror breakout "It Follows."

Yet at the same time, this quality is better understood in the abstract, or at least at a certain remove, say, looking at images of his work in Google search. It does little to prepare one who is to come face-to-face with it in a gallery. Standing mere inches, even feet, from his stills, the glowing screen in our heads is in fact an opened door in experience. The line between spectator and intruder, starkly demarcated from our theater seats, is swept away like dust from a mantle. The viewer is now stuck in an immediate moment, overwhelmed and out of focus. Not only do we need to ask what we need to know, but how are we to know it. Is it gained from the compromising position of the people we walk in on? Or is it in the messes we find around them?

The mindset required borders on, perhaps even crosses well into, the criminal, something that is not lost on Crewdson. “All my pictures are very voyeuristic,” he says.

Depicting the suburbs artistically has always been something of a race to the bottom. It has always been something many of its residents have wanted to escape, yet contra Thomas Wolfe you can, in fact, come home again, and moreover you can contort, deconstruct, and even demolish its psychic landscaping, and peel back what desperation and hypocrisies lurk beneath. This tradition comes in many forms, whether from Alexander Payne, Tom Perotta, or Edward Hopper. Crewdson, like them, is a visitor of small towns and an observer of its dwellers. But he is more than a satellite orbiting around these planets. His depictions seem less like revelations and more like projections. Yes, his work is voyeuristic, “but,” he continues, “ultimately I’m looking at what lurks in my own interior.” And perhaps by extension, our interior.

“Cathedral of the Pines” takes its name from a trail in the town of Becket, Massachusetts, where Crewdson spent 2013 to 2014 living in and creating this set, on exhibit until March 5 at New York’s Gagosian Gallery. His year was immersive, to say the least, crossing civilized and semi-civilized locales and warm and decidedly less warm seasons. And while each piece is narratively independent, they are all threaded through conceptual consistencies that range from the familiar to the identical.

The exhibit contains 31 photographs, all digital pigment prints and all in the same 37.5 by 50-inch framing. Though the scopes of these photographs vary—some take place in a single residential room with sizeable occupants, while others are dwarfed amid immense forestry—Crewdson has a way of making use of space and giving as much context as he, and not the elements, is willing to permit. The titles are deceptively simple—“Pick-up Truck,” “Sisters,” “Haircut,” “The Den”—and not labeled next to the photos. Walking past each I immersed myself as a viewer as much as Crewdson must have immersed himself as a director, taking inventory of everything I saw first. My notes form a dreadful poetry: “two cop cars, forest, man in plain clothes, weird slab, flower petals” is what I used to describe “The Mattress”. It is one of the most unnerving and confounding works of the set: the flower petals are crushed on the slab found in the middle of the forest, a man—presumably a detective—stands over it while a pair of police cars—one marked, one unmarked—is parked in the background. It bears all the disorienting elements that enchant and irritate “True Detective” viewers, with the narrative threads left to be connected to whoever sees it. For instance, one could conceivably connect it with *The Shed*, wherein a woman in a nightgown and hands dirtied, stands over a freshly mauled flower bed.

More understated (relatively speaking) but more ominous are Crewdson’s interior shots. His camera comes into living rooms, bedrooms, and kitchens. The walls are paneled, the carpets are shag, light bulbs are exposed. Their inhabitants are often nude or partially uncovered, and in various states of activity. In “The Basement,” a man sits in a reclining chair while a younger woman lounges sideways on the couch, the television glows in the darkened room, showing a floor littered with VHS tapes. “Reclining Woman on Sofa” seems less about the nude woman resting in her living room than it is about the frozen body of water that occupies the window space from outside. “Father and Son” shows the reflection of a boy seated next to a bedridden man in full view. The boy is looking down, but it is not revealed at what, at the photo’s edge you can see the Bible. In “Seated Woman on Bed” we are drawn immediately to an exposed shoulder marked with abrasions whose mirror reflection embellishes their damning purple hues, and secondly to the foot of her sleeping bedmate.

In his catalog essay, Alexander Nemerov hones in on passage of time as Crewdson’s linking theme: “A vaster time ... —of American history—governs Gregory Crewdson’s work.” “The

key to that past,” he continues, “is place.” I stopped reading soon after that, admittedly, because although elements of passing time were there—in structural ruins and in generations, for instance—I did not see it as pervasive compared to the inertia that came in much more clearly. Nearly every subject seemed fixed in their current situations, and never in a way that is quite satisfactory. Each subject has an entranced facial expression, whether in peaceful contemplation of a rare solitary moment or in pained resignation following a traumatic one. There is, at the same time, a longing for escape. The titular “Woman at Sink” stares out of her window seemingly hoping to disappear from her world, the lone nude couple in “Pickup Truck” seemingly look to banish their world entirely, while the woman and child in “The Haircut” look deserted by theirs.

And there is the challenge, if not exactly the problem, of intruding onto Gregory Crewdson. Though he refers to himself as a “storyteller,” the fleshing out (no pun intended) is left largely in the viewer’s eyes. It is one thing for us to switch on this or that prestige program or art film and be fed a desolate context, it is entirely another to create contexts on our own. The world of “Cathedral of the Pines” is beautiful beyond doubt even at its most desolate and sparse. Whether it is towering pines, a frozen lake, uprooted flowers, dead birds in a box top, or a raging brook with an oblong box struggling to go down it, Crewdson is a renderer of nature’s brilliance and resilience. Yet this is contrasted with the haunted and vulnerable humanity that peoples it, where complacency and indifference are the highest rungs of the emotional ladder, and where the viewer’s options of estimation of the subjects range somewhere from pity to condemnation.

That this is what Crewdson’s work invites is not necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, most viewers have no problem taxing their imaginations, to, in effect, showrun their own convoluted HBO series. But enhancing a place is not the same thing as depicting a place. Contrast Crewdson with that of William Eggleston, another brilliant visual stylist but with an entirely opposite method. Eggleston is perhaps best understood (not wrongly) as a kind of predecessor of Instagram. Unlike Crewdson, his work was not the result of meticulous planning and production; rather he walks around Memphis and the surrounding south, allowing himself only a single shot of whatever location, image, or person strikes his fancy. Moreover, Memphis is Eggleston’s hometown (Crewdson hails from Brooklyn), which he documented plainly, letting the people and colors of the area stoke our curiosity but not our judgment.

This is not to condemn Crewdson, who at his best captures with empathy and honesty the human vulnerability, weakness, mystery, and tragedy that we’d rather forget than confront as we experience them. It is, however, to show that there is more than one way to look at a place. To be sure, the simple ethics of suburbia does little to disinvent Manichean readings, and when something bores us, making it interesting is often as simple as lifting the tarp and watching the frenzied creatures dig. Yet our towns are nuanced, perhaps in spite of themselves. There is understated value in seeing things as they are, for good and for ill.