

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



THE CRITERION COLLECTION

Gregory Crewdson's Cinematic Worlds

Hillary Weston



Woman at Sink, 2014. © Gregory Crewdson. Courtesy Gagolian Gallery.

For more than two decades, photographer Gregory Crewdson has been creating otherworldly images that expose the haunted side of Americana. His works, typically tableau portraits of small-town life, transform the everyday into the uncanny with a unique juxtaposition between detachment and intimacy. It's a quality Crewdson believes may have been inspired by his father, a psychoanalyst who worked out of the family's basement. "This is basically what he did in his practice," Crewdson told me. "There would be very private stories told, but all within this detached context."

The production of Crewdson's series *Beneath the Roses* was the subject of a 2012 documentary by filmmaker Ben Shapiro, called *Gregory Crewdson: Brief Encounters*, and in 2013, a traveling retrospective of his work, *In a Lonely Place*, was exhibited in museums across the world. Crewdson created his latest series, *Cathedral of the Pines*—the artist's first exhibition in five years, now on view at New York's Gagolian Gallery through March 5—while living in a church in rural Becket, Massachusetts. "I was cross-country skiing in the middle of the woods in a pine forest and there was a little trail name called Cathedral of the Pines—and that spurred the entire project," he said. "It was a moment of revelation, where in my mind's eye I somehow saw the whole body of work and knew I would be making this next body of work in Becket. I knew that it would be all interiors and landscapes on location, in nature one way or another."

On the morning of the exhibition's opening last week, I spoke with Crewdson about his influences and the sense of mystery at the heart of his work.

Your work has always been likened to cinema. Can you tell me about your relationship to the medium?

I've always loved movies, and I loved the way movies looked—light on a screen. When I was an undergraduate at SUNY Purchase, that was a very vital time for me; that's really where I discovered photography as a practitioner. But at the same time, I was taking classes with film theorist Tom Gunning, who was hugely influential to me. I started taking classes on Hitchcock, 1950s melodrama, horror films, et cetera, and for sure that had such a profound effect on me. I saw David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* when I was a graduate student at Yale and that definitely changed my life. There was also *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, which is a huge film for me. I love movies that are acceptable but also have a darker underside—I think that's what my pictures do, they have that same tension.

The construction of your photographs is such a large production—do you find a connection between your approach and that of a film director?

I feel like my pictures are about movies in as many ways as they're not about movies. When I make a picture I work very closely with Juliane Hiam, my partner, and we write descriptions for each picture, which is almost like a one-page screenplay. But it's very limited in terms of what it tells; it doesn't describe plot or motivation or anything like that. And those one-page descriptions become like the bible for each picture.

Do you ever think about what's happening outside the frame in the world of the photo? Does that story just end when the shoot is over?

I actually try not to think about what happens before or what comes after. I want it to remain a mystery, because I feel like if it remains a mystery to me, it will remain a mystery to my viewership—and I think that's important. Photographs are limited, they're not like movies or literature because there's no before or after. But I've always seen that restriction as a positive, as a way of trying to create even more mystery.

What I find fascinating about your photos is that they create a psychological space that allows viewers to create their own narrative. Two people can look at the same photo but tell themselves a completely different story.

Yes, and to me it's beautiful that that can happen. Everyone brings their own history, their own baggage, and their own particular meaning to a picture.

In addition to changing the nature of the work you create, it seems to me that being physically present in the pine forests, or in Becket—rather than on a set or in a studio—must make for a unique shooting experience. Is there a particular part of the process that you enjoy the most?

Yeah, I really live for the moment when I'm in front of the camera and the thing is happening and you can literally see it in front of your eyes. If it's all working correctly, you can see the

picture becoming something other than what it was, and to me that's the greatest part of it. And then there's the struggle afterwards of, in a sense, trying to recreate that as a picture, which becomes an entirely different process in postproduction. At a certain point it becomes something other than what you saw, and it becomes something equally powerful. But there's nothing quite like the actual physicality of being there.

Are there specific films you turn to for inspiration?

Rosemary's Baby is one that I return to over and over again. That's a perfect movie from beginning to end. I also love David Cronenberg, especially his early films. I mentioned Hitchcock. But there are also filmmakers who are making movies now that I really admire, like Wes Anderson, Paul Thomas Anderson, Spike Jonze, etc. I feel deeply connected to all of those filmmakers.