

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

VOGUE  
ITALIA

Gregory Crewdson

*An interview by Alessia Glaviano with Gregory Crewdson on show at Gagosian from January 28th with the new series "Cathedral of the Pines"*

Alessia Glaviano



*Gregory Crewdson - Pickup Truck, 2014 - © Gregory Crewdson. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery - Digital pigment print - Image size: 37 1/2 in (95.3 x 127 cm); Framed size 45 1/16 x 57 9/16 in (114.5 x 146.2 cm) - Edition of 3, plus 2 APs*

I met and interviewed Gregory Crewdson for the first time at the Gagosian Gallery in Rome in 2011.

Crewdson is, in my opinion, one of those artists who succeeded more than others in capturing the sense of alienation and unreality that breaks into daily life creating a by now iconic collective imagination which every new up-and-coming photographer has to confront with.

Then the occasion for our meeting was the "Sanctuary" exhibition, a work made of 41 black and white images shot at Cinecittà studios during the early hours of the day or at sunset when the light is oblique; the result being photographs that recall the visual lyricism of Federico Fellini (see the video-interview in the gallery above).

After a few years' hiatus, Crewdson comes back with a new series titled "Cathedral of the Pines" on display at the Gagosian Gallery in New York from January 28th to March 5th 2016. I have therefore decided to write to Gregory to ask him a few questions about his new work and on the philosophical matters he investigates through his art.

***Tell us about your new series “Cathedral of the Pines”, what should we expect from it?***

Cathedral of the Pines is a very personal body of work. And a long time in the making — in both a literal and figurative sense. While I was making my previous body of work, Sanctuary, the pictures I made at Cinecittà in Rome over five years ago, my personal life (more specifically my marriage) was falling apart. Following that, I went through a very dark period. I couldn't make any work for over two years. My life felt turned upside down. I moved my home and studio out of New York City and into the country in an attempt to regain some stability. I started doing long hikes and open water swims every day in a tiny rural town called Becket, Massachusetts, which I knew well because my family had had a cabin there when I was a child. The geographical place was comforting to me. Nearly every day for over two years I hiked, or swam, or x-country skied in the woods of Becket. Finally, one day, I had a moment of revelation, like a cloud had lifted. I wanted to make pictures again — felt able to entertain the idea of making pictures — and in fact saw the whole body of work in that moment. I happened to be on a trail called “Cathedral of the Pines” at the time. I knew that would be the title of the body of work.

***In your elaborate productions you worked with famous actors as well as with ordinary people: can you tell us if you experienced any differences?***

I don't typically work with famous actors. The exception was when I made the Dream House series for Kathy Ryan at the New York Times Magazine. That was a unique situation, and I found that incredibly rewarding, and learned a great deal. But in general, I don't want publicly recognizable faces in my pictures. I did include friends and family in Cathedral of the Pines which was unusual for me. Overall, what I'm looking for from my subjects is for them to project almost nothing. I find it easier to work with non actors and non models. I'm looking for a very quiet presence, and something interior.

***If your pictures had a soundtrack which one would it be?***

I definitely don't think of soundtracks accompanying the pictures — and I don't play music on the set or reference music when coming up with the concepts. Part of the reason I'm drawn to photography is that it's a medium that's fixed and mute. However, in the rest of my life, I'm a huge music fan, and I follow popular music very closely. In fact, before I became a photographer — as a teenager — I was in a band called the Speedies. Ironically, our big hit, which I co-wrote, was called “Let Me Take Your Foto.” I have a lot of friends who are musicians and in that business and am a true fan.

***What do you think of the new awareness of self image and constructed image, caused by photography and social network: is there any space left for spontaneity?***

It's a really interesting time for photography. Because of social media and web media, we are inundated with images constantly, and in some ways it's become a social currency. It's how we communicate with one another in an immediate way. I'm part of that. I text and email images to people all the time. But it also creates a context where images are largely disposable. You look at them then trash them. The challenge for an art photographer in the midst of that is to create something meaningful and enduring. It's a different medium to create a picture that will hang on the wall rather than one that will be viewed on a screen.

***You prepare meticulously your pictures, everything, all the little details are scrupulously thought of, your sets look like the ones of the movies - for number of people involved, from actors to make up artist, assistants, director of photography, as well as for lighting techniques etc, and the amount of work to combine different negatives and retouching in post production - is there any space left for unpredictability? Can the perfect moment be constructed? Where does this take you?***

It's true that I prepare every detail of my pictures meticulously, with the help of my crew. It's a long process, and we painstakingly try to plan every single nuanced detail. And largely, there is no spontaneity in terms of the subject's position or the way the picture is constructed or lit. That's all decided in advance. But even still, things fail. Things fall apart. There is unexpected weather or a subject can't make it and we bring in someone new. And those factors, in the end, always add rather than subtract. For practically every picture there is a hidden backstory that involves a mix-up or coincidence or fortuitous bit of fate.

***Being so elaborate, is the process itself part of the meaning, or the reason, of your art? How?***

The best moment for me in the process is the moment when I'm standing on the set and I see the picture come together in front of me. What I see with my eyes is always going to be better than what ultimately winds up being captured by the camera. It's an inherently flawed medium in that way. Everything else in the process is in service of creating that moment on the set, and then trying to bring it back to life in the print afterward.

***You said "I think I'd be a terrible movie maker because all I know is the one image. I'm not really that interested in the before or after. I want the story to remain unresolved." Why is it so important for us to create meaning? To have a narrative?***

I'm not quite sure if I should have said I'd be a terrible movie maker. But I would certainly be an unconventional movie maker. The narrative in my pictures really exists in the moment between moments. Something just happened. Or something is about to happen. And in between there is a moment of reflection. To me, that is profound, and beautiful, and I leave it open-ended because I want each viewer to experience that in a personal way — in a way that resonates in the context of his or her own experience of the world.

***What does the cinematic quality of your pictures add to it?***

The cinematic quality is something I feel helps create a picture that feels both ordinary and heightened at the same time. But it's important to say that the Cathedral of the Pines pictures are less overtly cinematic than *Beneath the Roses* or *Twilight*. While I still used a cinematic process on the set of Cathedral in terms of my crew and the lights and the rigging, the reference point for these pictures were paintings, not movies. They're lit subtly — not overtly theatrical — and much more naturalistic.

***What inspires you?***

I'm an incredibly ritualistic person. I'm at my best when everything is consistent and the same every day. I like to eat the same things, wear the same things, have the same routines. I swim, hike, or ski — preferably a combination of two of those things — every day. That predictability has a way of eliminating minutia in my thoughts, and that allows for creative inspiration. It's just

the way I am. I became very inspired to make these pictures on those hikes, and swims, and while skiing. It was the feeling of being outdoors, but also it was the light in the forest, the comfort and peace of being out there, the sense of refuge that the wilderness offers.

***What do you look for in an image?***

I'm always looking for something that feels ordinary, but offers a potential for mystery, or transcendence.

***What do you think that makes one image stand out more than another?***

I'm simply looking for a picture that draws you into its world.

***Is it the form that determines the content? Perhaps, the most suitable context to the unravelling of chaos is the obsessive control over all governable aspects of photography? What happens beneath the surface?***

Artistic vision is a delicate balance between attempting to find your story and then projecting it out into the world in tangible form. It's central to picture making. These new pictures, more than any others I've made, reach back to more traditional values with light and color, the human form, composition, and atmosphere.

***What is the role of obsession, of being obsessive as an artist?***

Obsession is the thing that drives the whole operation. The obsession to make pictures is in every part of the process, it's the only reason, in the end, for the act of doing it. It's a pursuit of something that's always slightly removed from you.

***Our brain is prejudiced in the way that it believes that photography equals reality: the object is transparent and gets lost in the subject of the photograph. The prejudice is so strong that photographers had to fight hard in order for photography to be viewed as a form of art, freeing itself from the belief that it is a mirror of reality. It's also truth that in order to exist, photography needs real subjects (even if they can be modified during post-production or integrated into a multi-image collage) and, it is for this very reason, the fact that object and subject have to meet, that photography is so fascinating, magical and different from the other forms of art. What differentiates photography from other means of representation of the world is the fact that it is a trace, a clue, a sign of reality. The fantasies that come across in your pictures are particularly convincing because - if we did not know about the way they are constructed and also digitally manipulated - they look like "quotations" from the larger texts of the real world, What do you think of the documentary value of photography? What does having a "documentary feeling" do to your pictures?***

At its core, all photographs have a relationship to the real, and it's what gives them a kind of immediacy, urgency, and a heightened sense of intimacy. Even though my pictures are highly constructed and produced, I do still consider myself a realist. There is always a blurred line between truth and fiction happening within the narrative — particularly in the Cathedral of the Pines pictures because I was often working with subjects from my real life, in places that I have a deep personal connection with. And still, they're residing in a place between reality and a fictive narrative.

***'Every picture is a self portrait'—what do you think about this quote? The distinction made by John Szarkowski (Director of Photography at MoMA between 1962 and 1991) at the end of the 70's between windows & mirrors disappears today and the two functions coalesce. Every human expression is an autobiography, do you agree?***

Yes and no. All pictures are autobiographical, yet they're telling us everything and nothing about the photographer. It's a medium that creates a certain tension, intimacy, but also remove from what is happening in the frame. The camera has a distancing effect.

***Can the medium of photography be strongly charged with psychological power? how?***

Yes, I would say that making pictures that are psychologically charged is the only reason I make them. But there's a tension there also — because there is a distinction between the psychology of the image and the psychology of the maker.

***Photography is a lot about holding on to something...What are you holding on to?***

Photography is inherently about loss, and consequently death. There isn't a picture that was ever made that doesn't speak about mortality in some way. What is captured is fleeting, and once it becomes a picture it has already been lost.

***What does to your creative process the tendency to go back again and again to the same places, both geographically and metaphorically?***

I think many artists are tied to a sense of place. Novelists, painters. I've always felt connected to western Massachusetts. My family had a cabin there when I was a child. It's a landscape I love — both for its natural beauty in the forests but also for the ordinary street scapes of the towns. It all offers the perfect context for the stories I'm trying to tell.

***What is the role of mystery and the one of secrets in your art?***

What I attempt to do is put everything I have into trying to make a beautiful image -- using light, color, production value and so forth. But all of that is only the foundation for the thing that's elusive that the process taps into. And that's a sense of undefinable mystery, of something going on beneath the surface of everyday life.

***What do you think about appearance vs interiority?***

One of the reasons I'm not interested in literal actions and always trying to have my subjects do almost nothing in the picture, is because I'm interested in the moment in between moments. It's something invisible in terms of motivation or reaction. It's more of an interior moment for sure that I'm trying to capture and evoke in others.

***What does the twilight represent for you?***

On a literal and practical level, I like to shoot at twilight because it's the time when I can use natural light and artificial light in a way that works in perfect unison. I start shooting before twilight and shoot over and over and over so that I can capture that perfect window. But on a

metaphorical level, twilight is also a time of transition. A moment between day and night. It speaks to that idea of the time in between one thing ending and something else beginning.

***Photography doesn't move and doesn't speak, and yet there's a lot there without it speaking or moving. The limits intrinsic to photography become strengths in your images, which, masterfully suspended between a before and after, suggest the presence of a trauma whose unfolding is left to the viewer to imagine. What is the role of the viewer in your art?***

The viewer plays a central role in the pictures. I really want people to be able to bring their own personal narratives, and experience them in a personal way.

***What are the reactions that you get by people looking at your work?***

I get all kinds of reactions. Of course what I hope for is that I make a picture that the viewer will carry away with them after they see it. I hope that it has some kind of lasting impact or offers some kind of inspiration.

***What kind of impact do you hope to have with your images?***

My ultimate goal is to create something beautiful, and hopefully meaningful, and enduring.