

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Slate

For Photographers, Living Life Is a Constant State of Preproduction

David Rosenberg



The Motel, 2014.
Gregory Crewdson, Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery

Around six years ago, during what he describes as a “dark time” in his personal life, Gregory Crewdson left New York for the Berkshires, where he’d spent a large part of his childhood at his family’s home in Becket, Massachusetts. For a few years, he didn’t produce any photographs.

“It’s very difficult to be an artist who is not producing work ... [it] can make you feel part of you is dead, or at least dormant,” he said.

Instead, he spent his time out in nature: hiking, swimming, and skiing. During one of his cross-country skiing treks, he ventured into a trail deep in the woods where he had a flashback to childhood.

“I came to the edge of a frozen lake, and the light came through the trees, and it was just like I woke up,” he said.

Ready to take pictures, he knew the next series had to take place in Becket. The trail on which he had this reawakening also became the title of the body of work, “Cathedral of the Pines.” It is on view at Gagosian Gallery in New York City through March 5.

Turning the ideas that were developing in his mind into actual images took a bit of time. Crewdson breaks his process down into three clear and familiar parts: preproduction, production, and postproduction. He describes preproduction as a time when “life and the artistic process are very intertwined in my daily routine.”

Although there is a logical rhythm to it, including location scouting and writing descriptions for the actors with his partner Juliane, going over budgets with his producer Saskia, and determining lighting format with his DP Rick, Crewdson said the more abstract part of preproduction is always happening.

“When I’m hiking, skiing, driving—sleeping even,” he said. “Any time I’m connecting with creative ideas and thinking about pictures; so that’s almost always.”

What Crewdson loves most is production.

“When I’m standing on the set, looking at the picture—not through the camera—but actively, with my own eyes. It’s essentially perfect in that moment,” he said. “The act of trying to capture that in the camera, then reproducing it in the print is by contrast imperfect.”

“Postproduction ... is a very long attempt to recapture and transform that magic surreal moment that you saw when you were standing there seeing it with your own eyes.”

For Crewdson, making prints is crucial in the world of photography today where most images are fleeting and disposable.

“It’s very important for me, as an artist, that making a picture be something permanent and lasting. In that sense, making a picture that will hang on a wall is a very different thing than making a picture that you’ll text to someone. And I strongly believe in the power of that permanent object, the printed photograph.”

Crewdson isn’t a religious man, although apart from the title being borrowed from the trail, Crewdson also bought an old church where he now lives in the area.

“I do think that making art is a spiritual endeavor, a search for some sort of larger meaning in life,” he said. “And particularly after going through a time of personal crisis I was engaged in that search. There are religious overtones in my life and art I suppose. ... My life over the past years has been an act of seeking refuge, of finding solace.”