

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The New York Times

Alone, in a Crowd, With Gregory Crewdson

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The Basement. 2014. Gregory Crewdson. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery.

One push through a revolving door and I was in complete darkness. I walked to the right to get a sheet of resin-coated paper and then turned toward the enlarger, where I could finally rest my mind. The most sacred moments were when I could just stand there and dissolve into the test prints. There were no New York hospitals, no expectations of my father's recovery or death. Not even the constant companion of intensive care beeping sounds, those Montefiore monitors I couldn't get out of my head.

My refuge was the camp Belvoir Terrace in the Berkshires which had an unusually advanced photography program. It had been developed by Shira Weinert, a recent Yale graduate who had studied with Gregory Crewdson and Lois Conner.

I wasn't good at taking photos, but the darkroom was a safe haven after a rough spring. My father had been hospitalized for a congenital brain defect which he ultimately survived. At the time, however, his prognosis was not clear. To cope with the uncertainty, I stopped eating. At 14, I began to feel as though life were not for me.

About midway through the summer, it was announced that Gregory Crewdson was coming to camp to find a central subject for his next photograph. He gave a lecture on his work and asked a handful of girls to stay afterward. I resorted to my constructed smile as he looked us over.

I got the part, but it wasn't for my smile: I would be playing a troubled girl "captivated by a red substance suggesting coming of age, loss of innocence, danger." The photograph would also include other girls engaged in happy activities. The shoot was to take place in Lee, a neighboring town, where we all were taken in school buses (*photo below*).



Untitled from "Twilight." 1998-2002. Credit Gregory Crewdson. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery.

Stepping off the bus in Lee was like stepping into another world. A crew of at least 30 paced a residential street that had been shut down. Mr. Crewdson was sitting high above in a cherry picker with a loudspeaker and his 8×10 camera. Our buses were lined up in a right angle. Some girls were asked to stay on the bus, others to draw hopscotch, and still more to bounce on a trampoline.

I was led to a pool of fake blood in front of a vacated home. A crew member told me to hold one arm out and tilt my head while he poured fake blood on my palm. Mr. Crewdson said that the photograph was about transformation and that I was to look sad.

I closed my eyes, exhaled and allowed the darkness that I knew so well to rise from my chest to the top of my head. I stood in position, glaring down at the blood, my isolation totally exposed by the raw light of day to the assistants, campers, film crew and eventually on "Plate 37," where it is forever captured in Mr. Crewdson's book "Twilight," published in 2002.

But was the isolation mine alone?

Mr. Crewdson's photographs almost always project solitude, whether it be a lone car on a suburban street or a pregnant woman deep in thought in her backyard at night. In his new body

of work, “Cathedral of the Pines,” which opens on Jan. 28 at Gagosian Gallery, Mr. Crewdson takes this theme even further. A girl stands alone in a barn; a woman sits at the edge of her bed; another woman stands through the door of a shed.

Mr. Crewdson projects his own solitude in how he works. His three-part process — preproduction, production and postproduction — establishes his organizational removal. Photographing from a cherry picker, he removes himself from his subjects physically.

Still, “Cathedral of the Pines” is by far his most intimate work. After a few years of not photographing at all after a divorce, Mr. Crewdson cut his core crew down to about 15 and worked in the hill town of Becket, Mass., with models he knew — including his daughter — a break from his tradition of hiring actors such as Julianne Moore and William H. Macy.

He says that his new work is “concerned with a central theme of longing and trying to make a connection.” How contrary that seems to my summer moment, which he depicted as isolation without the possibility of connection. But perhaps it is just a new turn in his road.

“Every artist has one central story to tell and that story is told and retold over the course of a lifetime,” he said. “But I think in these particular pictures, those things became very clear for me. And I think there is a sensibility in the work that for me is coming from a new place, a deeper place.”

“Gregory Crewdson: Cathedral of the Pines” is on view at Gagosian Gallery Jan. 28 until March 5.