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REVIEW

**Submerged and Interior: An Interview with Gregory Crewdson**

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*Gregory Crewdson, Father and Son, 2013, digital pigment print, 37 1/2" x 50". All Photos © Gregory Crewdson.  
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Gregory Crewdson is a photographer, but he calls himself a storyteller. He has spoken of his belief that “every artist has one central story to tell,” and that the artist’s work is “to tell and retell that story over and over again,” to deepen and challenge its themes. True to this, Crewdson’s most recent body of work, *Cathedral of the Pines*, shares the aesthetic that has defined his career—cinematic scenes of domestic life in the Berkshires—but the images have quieted down. While once Crewdson burned down houses or called the police on himself in order to photograph officers, his concerns have shifted lately from the spectacular to the murky and internal.

The hallucinatory images for which Crewdson is best known—sod laid on living room carpets, crop circles and house fires, or tight beams of light emerging from a blank sky—evinced the magnetism of catastrophe and the titillation of the strange. Those older works defined Crewdson’s signature style of cinematic production values applied to suburban surrealism and made him one of the most recognizable and influential contemporary photographers. To give a sense of his stature, his gallery is Gagosian, he was the subject of a feature-length documentary, and he directs the graduate photography department at Yale.

Now in his midfifties, and coming off a six year hiatus from photography, Crewdson’s aesthetic hasn’t changed so much as deepened. His influences are still apparent: Spielberg, Lynch, Hopper, Cindy Sherman—artists who estrange the quotidian, fixate formally and thematically on

windows, and reference movies that don't exist. But his new work eschews the thrills of the old in favor of a bleak psychological realism. The common theme of *Cathedral of the Pines* is discomfort: gazes never meet, there's blood in the sink, and bare flesh is exposed to the snow. The only relief is in the beauty of the pictures themselves, the complexity and specificity of light that Crewdson has spent a career learning how to evoke.

Because of the debt that his work owes to cinema, Crewdson has, for decades, parried speculation about a transition to filmmaking. Though he insists that he is still a photographer first and foremost, he now plans to direct his first feature film. It will be an adaptation of Carla Buckley's novel *The Deepest Secret*, a family drama with all the markers of a Crewdson photograph: a mother committing a crime in the suburban darkness, a son with a rare and fatal sensitivity to light. The screenwriter is Crewdson's longtime creative producer Juliane Hiam, with whom he worked closely to conceive *Cathedral of the Pines*. I spoke with both Crewdson and Hiam about Crewdson's relationship to literature and storytelling and how his thoughts on narrative have evolved in light of his collaboration with Hiam on the screenplay.

#### INTERVIEWER

You talk about literature being influential to you. Will you tell me who your favorite writers are and what you like about them?

#### CREWDSON

The writers that are still influential to me are the writers that shaped me as I was coming of age as a young photographer. The ones I feel most aligned with would be, first and foremost, Raymond Carver and John Cheever. That brand of American realism. There are many more, but those are the ones I would say really shaped me in terms of storytelling.

#### INTERVIEWER

Can you say more about how they shaped you?

#### CREWDSON

Above all it's their exploration of the ordinary, the familiar. I think with Carver in particular it's the idea that you can find this sense of drama in a small domestic event, and it can be magnified and made transformative in some way. I see my pictures as being very much aligned with that, taking a familiar situation and making it dramatic, in my case through gesture and color and light. And then, of course, giving the impression that everyday life is unsettled in some way, or made mysterious or wondrous somehow.

I guess the story I most identify with is Cheever's "The Swimmer." And for obvious reasons—number one, I am a swimmer. But it's also the obsession in that story, and the hallucination of it, too. It's realism meeting a psychological strangeness—it's all located in a sort of familiar landscape and terrain, but it's transformed. The irrational activity of swimming home through the neighbors' swimming pools is similar, in my mind, to the act of making the dirt piles in *Close*

*Encounters of the Third Kind*. It's that same attempt to find meaning in a world that feels alien, trying to make sense of a world that you feel disconnected from.

What I love about Cheever's work—and Carver's, as well—is that it's grounded in something literal and ordinary. Of course, the main difference between those writers, or any other writer, and me is that I don't have the luxury of a linear story. My medium is a suspended moment. So the question then becomes, How do you get everything, all those associations, in a single image, frozen and mute?

INTERVIEWER

Has that question always driven your work?

CREWDSON

Yes, and that's maybe why I respond so strongly to those more minimalist writers, because they're essentially attempting to do what I'm doing. I've said previously that I do, in the end, consider myself to be a storyteller, but I'm just telling a different kind of story, it's a more restricted story. It's a story that almost by definition has no conclusion.

INTERVIEWER

You insist that your pictures have no before and no after—that they're not narrative. What is that distinction you're drawing between narrative and storytelling?

CREWDSON

Yeah, I mean that's the question, really, in the end. And I don't really have an answer except for the fact that if I look at the progression of my work from the early images through my most recent pictures, there is definitely an attempt to distill that story more and more as time goes on. If you look at *Twilight*, for example, when I first started using cinematic lighting and I became more engaged with narrative, the stories were more literal and explicit. The lighting was more hyperbolic or more saturated, and I think partially it's because at that time I was intoxicated by the possibility of using light in cinematic ways and using cinematic production generally. But I think for each body of work, the story that's being told becomes increasingly more submerged and interior. There's very little actually happening in any of the new pictures—they're emptied out of conventional storytelling, I think.

INTERVIEWER

How do you know when you've submerged too much? Have you ever made a picture where you've buried the story to the extent that it doesn't communicate?

CREWDSON

No, usually it's the opposite. Usually it tells too much. Some of my biggest, most extravagantly produced pictures have never seen the light of day because I went too far. You know, I made things too explicit or too spectacular.

INTERVIEWER

What made you decide that it was time to make a movie?

CREWDSON

The only reason to make a movie is to figure out a way to extend the language that I've already created—otherwise it's a losing proposition. I'm highly aware of that, of all the possible pitfalls and all the ways things could go wrong. I mean, the main thing is that I'm used to working in a medium in which I'm able to invest entirely in the single image. We put enormous amounts of energy into making single images as perfect as possible. The only way I'll go through with the movie is if I feel like I could do something equivalent, or at least somewhat similar, in terms of the control. But I love movies. I've always felt hugely connected to them and influenced by them—in the end, movies probably shaped my sensibility more than photography has.

INTERVIEWER

You say you don't want to describe plot or motivation in your photographs. What's it like to deal with those things in the screenplay you're working on?

CREWDSON

Well, that's obviously the big dilemma, and that's where Juliane has been fantastic—as you know, she's doing the writing.

INTERVIEWER

Juliane, are you the one more interested in character, plot, and motivation, while he's more interested in physical description?

HIAM

It's really not like we're separated in our roles that much. Gregory is such a movie fan himself. Even though he's never made a movie before, it's something he knows well. He adds just as many of the story elements as I do, but I would say the more visual things are definitely coming from him. He has a lot of specific suggestions, like, We're looking at them through glass here, and, There's going to be a pale-green color palette in this scene. When you're writing a screenplay you wouldn't normally impose those kinds of details on the page, but he's seeing it in his head as we go. And if he's not seeing it in his head, that means it's not working somehow.

INTERVIEWER

When you can't picture it, what is generally wrong? Are there patterns that you see your comments falling into?

CREWDSON

Yes. Less dialogue. That's number one. And less everything, basically. We're telling a story, mostly in visual terms, from beginning to end. I'm not used to having to deal with a story

unfolding through dialogue and plotline and all that, so we're doing it as much as we can through the visual descriptions.

INTERVIEWER

How do you know if something feels false?

CREWDSON

Usually it's something that feels, again, like it's too much, too active, too literal, too dramatic. Don't get me wrong, the only reason to make the movie is to tell a story. But in the end it's going to be a story told through the eyes of a photographer—it won't be seen through the eyes of a filmmaker. I have very close friends who are filmmakers and I think very differently than they do. I don't think in terms of continuity and linear action, I think in terms of still images, mood, atmosphere, and things like that, so the story will be told in those ways.

HIAM

The screenplay is like his pictures in that he's concentrating on moments where what's happening is purely internal. There are a lot of moments where, instead of focusing on a big, active event, we look at something internal that's happening with a character in the aftermath of that event. I think those are the types of moments he likes to focus on in general.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel like you're leaning on language and image in different ways, to serve different roles in the screenplay?

HIAM

Hopefully it all works together as a whole, but the way Gregory thinks about light is very psychological. In previous screenplays, I've rarely written about light in this kind of detail, but light is a very important script element for him. When I think about how he works with light, I think of what happens when you walk into a certain kind of a light in the forest and it's coming down on you and it causes you to have some kind of psychological moment because the light is so unusual or uncanny or unexpected. You can have a shift in understanding because of light in moments like that. I think that's sort of what happens to the characters in his pictures and in the movie—something internal is brought out by the way they look in the frame, the way the light is hitting them, and we, as the viewer, have that experience that this is an uncanny moment. Without the light, it would be unremarkable. There would be no story.