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Show: Gregory Crewdson's Cathedral of the Pines

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The Motel, 2014, from the series Cathedral of the Pines © Gregory Crewdson, courtesy Gagolian Gallery

The Photographers' Gallery has devoted its entire gallery space to a very personal series by this giant of contemporary photography.

“From day one, I responded to photography’s stillness,” says Gregory Crewdson. “It’s a moment frozen in mute, without a before or an after. It’s of this world, but separate to the world as well.”

Crewdson is dyslexic, “like a lot of visual artists”, but he discovered an ability to read and understand a still image, to analyse the way an artist had framed, lit and composed a subject, as a child. “It came very naturally to me,” he says. “I grasped how a photograph is connected to our actuality, but also has way of fictionalising our realities as well.”

It’s a perfect way to describe Crewdson’s very singular creations. We’re facing each other on two fold-out chairs surrounded by his large-format works from Cathedral of the Pines, Crewdson’s latest series, on the top floor of The Photographers’ Gallery in London. The series, a set of intimate, fragile pictures of people in various forms of undress, situated in makeshift homes in the vast pine forests of Massachusetts, takes up

all three floors of the gallery – the first time the photography space has given itself up to one artist.

In a few hours the exhibition will launch with a private view, before opening to the public tomorrow. Crewdson flew in from the East Coast yesterday. If he feels in any way hustled by events around him, he doesn't betray himself for a second – such is the sense of calm and self possession he exudes.

But the work surrounding us does not speak of calmness, nor did it come from a calm mental space. Cathedral of the Pines has had a long gestation, and is the product of a lot “personal upheaval”, brought on by a “very tormented relationship” and, finally, a bad divorce. It is, by some stretch, Crewdson's most personal work to date.

The series came after Crewdson left New York, where he was born and where he lived for more than 25 years, and moved into a converted church in Becket, Massachusetts. It's a small town of around 2000 people, but Crewdson often visited close by with his family as a child. “I always saw Becket as a refuge,” he says.

“It's a place I associated it with making work and reconnecting. I love New York and I love Brooklyn, but it was necessary to leave, because I felt completely in crisis. It was hard because I have two children, but I knew this was what needed to be. I still go back and forth all the time, but as soon as I set foot in the church, which I rented at first, I knew this was going to be my home.”

The Church itself had a huge impact, he says, though he only came across it because it was owned by his longterm cameraman's ex-girlfriend. “I found the church to be beautiful and transcendent, and then there was a second building which I could use as a studio,” he says. “It used to act as the firehouse of the town, and the idea of being able to use the church and the firehouse of the town was very special to me.”

Crewdson originally studied photography at Yale in the 1980s. It was, he says, quite a serious, conservative look at the great documentarians of American photography – figures such as Walker Evans and Robert Frank. “Then I would travel to stay in New York and see shows by Cindy Sherman, Jeff Wall and Richard Prince, and the first generation of post-modern photography. And then I'd also look at new documentarians like William Eggleston and Joel Sternfeld

“I think my work came out of both traditions – documentary and post-modern,” he continues. “I see my work as the photography of truth and the documentary of fiction coming together.”

This marriage of two approaches is evident in Cathedral of the Pines – as well as the natural landscape that Crewdson revelled in after so long in the big city. “I started taking these long walks up the Appalachian trail and these long swims in Goose pond, and then during the winter I'd cross-country ski,” he says.

One day on a walk deep in the forest, he found a little trail with the name ‘Cathedral of the Pines’. “I immediately knew that was going to be the title of the body of work, and I immediately could visualise the entire project in my mind's eye,” he says, adding that he responded to both the natural and spiritual references of the title.

“I’m not religious in any way, but it was certainly a time of searching for something,” he says; he was also struck by the light that he found in the forest. “Light is at the core of all photography, but for me light is the essential element of my pictures,” he says. “It’s how I tell the story. I see a spiritual dynamic, a spiritual presence to it.”

In previous series Crewdson has used cinematic lighting rigs to create this dynamic – closing entire Brooklyn streets to shoot *Twilight* and *Beneath the Roses*, for example, and working with a producer and a casting director as well as a director of photography and his team. “Since my very early stages as artist,” he says, “I’ve always been fascinated in cinematic production.”

But here he worked with a stripped-down, skeleton crew, letting the light of the forest do the work. From his initial inspiration he spent a lot of time location scouting in the forest; when he had found a location he liked, he would work out the framing and angle, then write a description of how the final image would look, including the objects or subjects he wanted to insert. Only at that point would he talk to his long-term director of photography, Richard Sands, to come up with a lighting scheme.

Working this way “precipitated a real change” he says. “We’re used to closing down full streets and working with huge lights in the sky. This was a much more introverted enterprise, so we had to work with a sensibility that felt quieter in tone. The ambient light was light number one. Even in the interiors, we waiting for the perfect moment with the light outside.”

Crewdson, Sands and the rest of the crew would work in the evening when the shadows lengthened, before trekking back to civilisation as the sun set. “I’ve worked with the same cameraman and line producer and casting director for five years or more, so I have a team now,” he says. “And the longer you work with a team, the less you have to say. You develop a shorthand. We barely have to speak sometimes.”

He breaks from our conversation to pause and look at the works around him. “I love their vulnerability, their stillness,” he says. “These pictures seemed to capture exactly where I was at that time. It was one of those unusual aesthetic awakenings. We have a few of those in our life. They came once in a great while.”