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How photographer Gregory Crewdson captured the sad heart of Trump's America

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Father and Son, 2013 CREDIT: © GREGORY CREWDSON /COURTESY THE GAGOSIAN GALLERY

In 1979, a power pop band called The Speedies released their biggest hit 'Let Me Take Your Foto'. Playing in the group was a teenage Gregory Crewdson. The track proved prophetic for the American artist, who later gained recognition as one of America's most important contemporary photographers.

Now aged 53, the photographer has become famous for his elaborately staged cinematic colour photographs presenting rural America in an unsettling light. The production levels on every picture are staggering – commanding budgets and crew sizes of movies, and are accompanied by an equally colossal price tag – reaching \$140,000 at auction.

Crewdson is also Director of Graduate Studies in Photography at Yale, where he studied his undergraduate, and his works are included in major collections around the world, including London, New York and Melbourne.

Cathedral of the Pines, opening at The Photographers' Gallery in London, is the first solo-show of the artist's work in London, and is also the first time that the gallery has given over all three of

its galleries to a single artist. Featuring 31 large-scale digital pigment photographic prints, the series was completed in 2013 – 2014 in Becket, Massachusetts.

There is an undeniable sense of melancholia and foreboding in the series, which is a theme that runs through Crewdson's entire oeuvre. In *Twilight* (1998 – 2002), he explored the relationship between the domestic and the fantastic, and in *Beneath the Roses* (2003 – 2008) he explores the recesses of the American psyche in theatrical yet intensely real panoramic images.

Often compared to the likes of David Lynch, Alfred Hitchcock, Edward Hopper, and Diane Arbus, his work excavates the darker side of Americana, that anxiety and unease that flows beneath the shiny, domestic interiors.

“It's about finding a theatricality in everyday life, and something about the light, the atmosphere and the vernacular. I feel that's a tradition I belong to in some way.”

In 2013, following a “difficult divorce” the artist relocated from Manhattan, New York to Great Barrington, Massachusetts, just 35 miles south of Becket, to “start over”.

He moved into a converted church, and took up long-distance swimming, hiking the Appalachian Trail, and cross-country skiing. Becket has a lot of personal and historical significance for the artist, so returning there was a cathartic experience for him.

“I guess the central thing is that my family had a cabin on the land, two miles up a dirt track, and we used to spend summers there, so consequently it's very much connected to my childhood.”

One day, he was out hiking when he had an epiphany moment. “It was deep in the forests of Becket, Massachusetts, that I finally felt darkness lift, experienced a re-connection with my artistic process, and experienced a period of renewal and intense creative productivity,” he tells me.

One of the central themes in the series is the Uncanny, the Freudian theory of something being both familiar and strange at the same time. In *Mother and Daughter* (2014), for example, a mother and daughter watch the television in a typical domestic scene, however, the mother's breast is exposed and there is snow pouring in through the open door.

“My father was a psychoanalyst and he had his office in the basement of our house in Brooklyn,” explains Crewdson.

“I have in my studio his original bound Freud essays, and particularly the one about the Uncanny, which has all his original notes all over it – it may be a strange coincidence that that's always the overriding impulse of my work.”

Another one of the most important influences on *Cathedral of the Pines*, is 19th century landscape painting. In many of the domestic scenes, the outside appears to be encroaching on the interior space, and light pours through the windows.

“In the period between bodies of work, I had writers' block, or what you can call the equivalent, and I went to see an exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art of 19th century painting

called Rooms with a View. The main theme was figures in interior spaces looking out through windows, and that really struck me.

"I took certain motifs from this, the main one being the lighting from the exterior into the interior space."

This body of work is undeniably his most intimate and small scale, which pales in comparison with the production values of his two previous series' Twilight and Beneath the Roses.

"When I was younger I was showing the scale of my work, closing down full streets, using rain machines and snow machines. I didn't feel the need to do that here, I wanted to make simpler, more subtle, quieter pictures."

The intimacy is also harboured by the fact everyone that appears in the series is either a friend, family member, or a resident of Becket.

"I didn't use any actors or models whatsoever. Almost everyone in the pictures are either family, friends or residents of Becket."

It's hard not to see the series within the political context of contemporary American life, especially since the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States of America. The theme of the pictures is small-town disenfranchisement and melancholia. We see people struggling in quiet desperation.

"There's an undeniable sense of sadness and regret in the pictures, and in the light of the political climate, they do take on new meanings," he says.

"It becomes impossible to separate works of art from the times they're made in, taking Raymond Carver's Cathedral as just one example, they're imbued with a Reagan-era atmosphere. It's also worth noting that Massachusetts is overwhelmingly a blue state that supported Hillary Clinton."

Photography is a way of life for Crewdson, if not the source of meaning within his life. He explains how his students at Yale regularly asked him how they could continue working after the election of Trump.

"I don't know how many times I heard that – but there's only one way forward, and that's to continue making pictures. That's one way of making sense of the world."

One gets the sense that Crewdson's elaborately constructed worlds are a way of him exerting some control on the chaos of existence.

"For me, they're concerned with trying to reach back to nature, trying to make sense of the world," he explains.

"And in a certain sense, that's the theme. You could say all the subjects are searching, but I'm, in a larger sense, reflecting on my own search, looking to art to create meaning in a chaotic world."