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The big picture: hard times in Pittsfield, Massachusetts
Gregory Crewdson's meticulously staged landscapes explore post-industrial decline in small-town America

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Gregory Crewdson, Redemption Center, 2018–19.

Gregory Crewdson's photographs understood social distancing before it became reality. His landscapes, which have a broken-down, apocalyptic cast, usually include a few figures, set adrift in different ways, apparently unable to connect with one another, or with the place in which they find themselves. Redemption Center is the first of a series of 16 taken between 2018 and 2019 on the edge of a town called Pittsfield, about 20 miles from Crewdson's home in rural Massachusetts. He calls the series – huge pictures, seven feet across – An Eclipse of Moths after the effect of a swarm of insects around an outside lamp, that causes the light to dim.

Crewdson, 57, who is director of graduate studies in photography at Yale University, spends a long time scouting locations, then embellishing them, painting billboards, towing in car wrecks. He will contact businesses and authorities and ask them not to mow the verges or collect the rubbish for a while. Fog machines provide a dispiriting miasma; the puddles come from water trucks. Lighting on 40-foot cranes casts an otherworldly, even-handed light over the scene – nothing is out of focus; the list of credits that accompanies the pictures is like the roll call at the end of a movie, a legion of best boys and gaffers and key grips.

Despite the resulting exaggerated blight, the deprivation in Pittsfield is real enough, and the people who inhabit Crewdson's photographs are mostly living it. General Electric dominated employment in Pittsfield, until its vast plant closed in 1987; the area has high levels of opioid addiction. When Crewdson took these pictures he was in the midst of a difficult divorce and unable to sleep for nights on end. His intention was like that of any landscape artist, he suggests: "To find that tension between something very intimate and something very removed."