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Gregory Crewdson: 'An Eclipse of Moths'

Elvis Mitchell



Photographer, Gregory Crewdson. Photo by Juliane Hiam and Harper Glantz

This week on The Treatment, Elvis Mitchell speaks with photographer Gregory Crewdson about his new exhibition of photographs "An Eclipse of Moths" currently at the Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills. The images depict decaying industrial environments encountering the natural world with figures in minimal, ragged clothing, but they manage to also portray the possibility of hope and redemption. Crewdson talks about the painstaking process of choosing the location and setting up the image and how his work is both informed by and differs significantly from filmmaking.



Gregory Crewdson, The Taxi Depot, 2018-19. Digital Pigment Print; Unframed: 56 1/4x94 7/8 inches, Framed: 57x96x2 inches. Edition of 4, plus 2 AP's © Gregory Crewdson. Courtesy Gagosian.

KCRW: Welcome to The Treatment. I'm Elvis Mitchell speaking with my guest, who is apparently protected, if not quite blessed in a church somewhere in rural Massachusetts, the artist-photographer Gregory Crewdson, whose new exhibition of photography "An Eclipse of Moths" is at Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills. What I've always found so striking about the photos is that they remind me of the moment in a dream just before you wake up, where everything feels crystal clear and almost normal, but not quite.

Gregory Crewdson: Yeah, well, welcome to my dream world. My pictures have the advantage of having no before and after. So whatever story they tell remains a question or a mystery. And rather than seeing that as a limitation, for me, I feel that that's part of the power of still photographs. They kind of exist in that in between place between something that might have happened or might happen, I guess you could say.

KCRW: I disagree a little bit about there being no before and after. I think what's so thrilling about them is as viewers, as participants, really, we get to bring our own stories to them. And I think they're really full of portent. There are so often what I would call ominous skies in your photographs.

Crewdson: Yeah, what I meant was, perhaps the pictures are a mystery to me. I'm entirely invested in the single image. And if I knew exactly what was happening, in terms of a literal storyline, I think I would be less interested in them. But to have these moments that don't finally reveal themselves to me, it becomes a more interesting equation. And particularly in this group of pictures, I'm really hoping for us to get a great sense of atmosphere or weather, not only in the skies, but in terms of the light and the color and the mood of the pictures. All of that's very important to me.

KCRW: I think atmosphere is a great word because in some of the fields, like there's almost a kind of humidity in them, a kind of density around the images.

Crewdson: Well, these pictures were all taken during the summer of 2018, during about an eight-week period, and they were really made at the very height of summer. And, you know, we used fog machines and also wet down the streets to increase that kind of hothouse atmosphere, I would say, to make it feel like there's a kind of heat to the pictures. Also, there's, in every picture, a sense of overgrowing nature. That is, I think, a theme in the pictures in terms of the relationship between these emptied out streets and the impinging natural world.

KCRW: Given the kind of year we've been through not just in political terms, but in climatic terms, these pictures seem to have a greater weight than they would have normally. I mean, given that we've had tropical storms and wildfires, it just seems like nature is such a presence. And in these photographs, it feels really kind of almost propitious.

Crewdson: Well, I made the pictures, working through themes that I really want to explore, including brokenness and dislocation, but also hope for some possible redemption and connection, and I guess I could never have known that the meanings would be transformed in the moment we're in now. I think that part of the job of art in a certain way is to try to create some kind of connection to the moment, but this is something you can never anticipate.

KCRW: It's so interesting that you use that word connection because in a photo like in plate number eight, which people have to go see the exhibition at Gagosian to see what we're talking

about. But I can feel the need for contact in that photograph, even though the subjects almost seem to be subscribing to social distance, and we can feel the need for connection you were talking about?

Crewdson: Yeah, well, for me, that's like the central theme in the work. And you know, the title, "An Eclipse of Moths" comes from a real term, that is the term for moths being drawn to light sources. And I set out to make a series of pictures where there are these lone figures, in these emptied out streets being drawn to street lamps. And I really do feel that there's a sense of possibility in these pictures, a sense of possible connection. And, for me, it's primarily through light, you know, using light as a way of telling a story, as a narrative code as a way of drawing the figures in, but also the viewers. So I'm glad you picked up on that, because I feel that it's maybe easier to see the sense of dislocation or alienation in the pictures, but I think they also try to provide some sense of connection primarily through form, through beauty, and atmosphere, and light.

KCRW: In these photos, we see streets that may be broken. It actually feels like nature, trying to reclaim what belongs to it and create some sense of balance. And I found these to be a really optimistic exhibition of photographs.

Crewdson: Well, thank you. I mean, for me, I think that's part of the job of the artist: to kind of look into a chaotic and seemingly almost cruel world, and find some sense of hope, or some sense of order. Like my first and foremost intention always in making pictures is trying to make it as beautiful and mysterious as possible. And then of course, there's the underlining psychological unease or disconnection in the pictures as well.

KCRW: That title, and what it connotes, and also the sense of urgency in these photos, really feels to me like you're doing what an artist should be doing, which is to capture the soul of where he lives. And there's some part of art I find always kind of prescient about these things. And I think this collection really feels like that.

Crewdson: Well, one of the things I attempt to do in my pictures is I want to create a world that somehow feels outside of time. If you notice, there are no signifiers of the moment we live in; no cell phones, no contemporary signs of life. I bring in prop cars; I photograph in intentionally nondescript locations. But at the same time, although the pictures feel outside of time, there's a paradox that I want them to also feel relevant to the moment. So this is strange coming together, or at least I hope so, of describing a world that feels both remote and also familiar, in one way or another. I want them to resonate with some sense of the collective imagination.

KCRW: What I'm getting at, and I think you're talking about it really beautifully here is that there's so often a sense of lived in drama in the photographs. And I think that's kind of key to the way you work is: you create something that feels, as you were saying, familiar, but there is a kind of mystique to it that feels like it's, again, a moment that's receding even as we're watching it. And so it feels like there's at least emotional movement in these photographs.

Crewdson: Yeah, but the whole process always begins with me location scouting, which is a really important part of the process, where I drive through these locations over and over again. And I'm looking for something that feels, again, non-descriptive in a certain way, but also like it has the potential to tell a story, the location itself. And as I return to these locations, an image will occur in my mind. And usually it's quite simple, like a lone figure getting out of a car, a

small occurrence of some sort. And then I, with my partner, write a description of this scene. And that becomes the kind of signpost or the bible for making the picture months later.

The actual narrative that occurs is I revise it over and over again, because I don't want whatever's happening to be overly determined or too literal. Yet, I want it to be evocative in some way. So there's that coming together as something that feels at least on the surface, small or uneventful, but then I want to take that and transform it and make it something larger, something more poetic or metaphorical at the same time.

KCRW: I think what we're talking about is there's a kind of an almost primal sense of longing in a lot of your work.

Crewdson: I think I really agree with that. I think longing is something that really is important to the work generally, and I don't want to speak for all photographers, but I do feel that at least, I am drawn to the medium because of a sense of feeling somewhat separated or disconnected from the world. Even the very act of putting a camera to your eyes is an act of mediation. It's an act of separation, just by the very circumstance of framing something. I do feel like there's a tension there or an opposition between being there and being absent in a certain way. I like the phrase "there, but not there." So I feel like that's a larger narrative that probably is coming from my own biography, my own history. And it's played out over and over again in the pictures.



Gregory Crewdson, Funerary Back Lot, 2018–19. Digital Pigment Print; Unframed 56 1/4x94 7/8, Framed 57x96x2inches. Edition of 4, plus 2 APs. © Gregory Crewdson. Courtesy Gagolian.

KCRW: You were talking about your own biography, and I want to talk a little bit more about that, about what it is that informs the work.

Crewdson: I grew up in Park Slope in Brooklyn, and my father was a psychoanalyst, and he had his office in the basement of our home in Park Slope. I feel that like one of my earliest aesthetic memories was attempting to listen to the sessions by putting my ear to the floorboards of our living room. When I think back at it now, I think that is a reoccurring kind of aesthetic motif in my work of trying to project a story about something that's beneath or removed from you is secret or forbidden, in some way. Secrets in the domestic space: I keep returning to that over and

over again, in my pictures. When I was 10 years old, my father brought me to the Diane Arbus retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. And I think that was my earliest understanding of how a still photograph could have psychological urgency.

KCRW: As you were talking about that, I found myself thinking about the moment in 'Citizen Kane,' where Bernstein talks about seeing the young woman and you saw for an instant and she didn't see him, and he says, there's not a week that goes by that I don't think about that moment. Just being lost in something and being in it and being distant from it at the same time. That moment is kind of what you're talking about.

Crewdson: Yeah, I love that moment, too, because it's the defining moment that I think we're all doomed in a certain way to circle around these early obsessions and fixations. And I feel that every artist has one story to tell. And, we spend our lifetime revisiting these central motifs, our preoccupations, and we do our best to reinvent them. But, the central story remains the same; you can't get away from yourself, ever.

KCRW: When we first met, I brought up the old Burt Lancaster movie 'The Swimmer.' We ended up talking about John Cheever a little bit, but that sort of dipping in and out and entering people's lives, and people wondering about who or what you are as you enter those lives. That idea of this kind of almost active voyeurism is something that I connect to your work.

Crewdson: Yeah, that's one of my favorite short stories. And I love that movie as well. And I don't know if you remember, but I'm a long distance swimmer. I swim daily, religiously, in local lakes around here, it's very much a part of my routine. And it's also part of my aesthetic process, I believe. So I strongly relate to that character, for sure.

KCRW: When we met, we talked about how different those things are: the movie and the short story, how they're really about this fundamental need to sort of enter and leave, make an impact and not make an impact and all these things that are really so powerful, and ephemeral, almost. When were you aware that you have the ability to create all these motifs, and to evoke all these emotions in these photographs? I wonder at what point that occurred to you that you could do this, or if it feels like it is a constant process of you trying to refine it, and make it work.

Crewdson: My original plan was I wanted to follow in the footsteps of my father and become a psychiatrist. But I suffered from severe dyslexia, still suffer from it. And academia was very difficult for me. In fact, the innate sort of nature of test taking or linear thought was almost impossible. It wasn't until I took my first photo one class actually, with the artist Laurie Simmons in college. And I saw literally my first picture come to life in the developer. I realized I understood still images maybe precisely because there's no before and after, and no linear narrative. I immediately understood that this is like my medium. This is how I kind of understand the world.

From moment one, I wanted to try to create a photographic language that hovered between the still photograph and cinematic production. Because I always loved movies, I love movies, probably more so than any other art form. I love the way movies look and light on a screen. And so I think from a very early moment, in a very modest way, I attempted to bring elements of moviemaking into still pictures. And that of course, evolved to where it is now where, you know, making my pictures is very much like making an independent movie. I've been working with the

same DP and same camera operator and crew for over 25 years now. And it's all in an effort to try to tell the story that I'm trying to project outwards.

KCRW: I'm aware of the way you use the center of the frame in a way that photographers often don't, and it strikes me as being a cinematic thing, but also there's a way to use the top of the frame that doesn't feel like a movie at all. So you bring in elements that are particular to both, but in a way that makes these photographs feel like their own thing.

Crewdson: I always say that in many ways, my photographs are like making a movie, but as in many ways, they're not. As you suggest there, it's its own thing. And, you know, a lot of my crew that I work with, for so many years now who primarily work in movies, I think one of the reasons they're drawn to being on our productions is because essentially, what we're after is finding one perfect moment, 16 times. The effort always is to make a picture and invest everything we can into trying to make everything feel important and vital. And so I go through great efforts both in production and post production, to have absolute clarity in the pictures, everything is completely heightened in terms of focus, and every aspect of the frame is important from the street signs to the cracks in the pavement to the skies. All of it is adding to create the world of the picture. We're privileging that moment over any other moment. Unlike a movie, we don't have to worry about dialogue or continuity, or editing or sound, or any of those vulgarities.

KCRW: One of the things I find so great about the work is that there's not that sense of the eye being guided to a certain point, a kind of often subtle manipulation, often not so subtle in moviemaking and still photography, where there's something that's foregrounded. Or in filmmaking, the deep focus is because your eye is supposed to go to the back of the frame first and then read backwards from there. But by offering so much information, it really does feel like an immersion that demands some kind of fluency that both photographs and movies demand.

Crewdson: Because it's this one moment, and there is no additional continuity, everything in that frame matters. Everything has meaning. I think in particular in this body of work, where it's first and foremost, about these locations. The scale of these pictures is vast, and usually we're looking from a kind of elevated vantage point, usually about 30 or 40 feet in the air. And the figures are small. So they're very much about these lone figures and these large spaces, and because of that, they're equally about the buildings and the the cars.

KCRW: As I suggested, all these elements come together to create some ultimate meeting. It feels like such a mix of media because the title suggests something literary, "Beneath the Roses" or "Cathedral of the Pines" with this new collection, and "Eclipse of Moths," that it really is like you're trying to get people involved in ways that they often silo. I mean, literature is over here, and film is here, and still photography is there. And I hate to use the word intersectionality, so I won't. I'll say instead, that you want to involve people's attention in a way that is kind of singular.

Crewdson: I think first and foremost, if I would describe myself as a maker, I would call myself a storyteller. I really do want to use any aspect of storytelling I can whether it's cinematic or photographic or literary. In fact, there's some very quiet literary references in these pictures. One street sign that we put in is Starkfield Lane, which is from Edith Wharton's 'Ethan Frome,' and then there's a Melville Street. Edith Wharton and Melville both lived in the area and wrote here so there's little references in the pictures that are giving the work a literary dimension of some sort.

KCRW: What do you say to your camera subjects when you're getting them where you want them in the frame? How do you direct them?

Crewdson: I actually say as little as possible. We have this written description that we use for casting all the people and the pictures, all the subjects are people that we found in the area in the neighborhoods. That was really important. By the time they come on set, I know exactly where they're going to stand or how they're going to be positioned. And I want there to be a kind of slight disconnection between me and the subject. I want that almost something uncomfortable to happen. And firstly, I just make very small changes in the way their bodies are positioned in terms of gesture and exactly their viewing point. There's no improv whatsoever in the pictures. My only instruction is saying that I want less, you know, give me less, I want there to be almost nothing in terms of any projection or any motivation. I want them to feel kind of emptied out.

And we pick the people based on just the quality, a sense that they could feel like they exist in this world, and they're haunted in some way, maybe, or lost. And then if you notice in a lot of these pictures, what they're wearing is very ordinary, usually like stained clothes. There's a lot of flesh in the pictures. There's a lot of bare feet, a lot of times figures are feeling that sense of loss and disconnection. But on the verge of something, I guess.



Gregory Crewdson, Redemption Center, 2018–19. Digital Pigment Print; Unframed 56 1/4x94 7/8, Framed 57x96x2inches. Edition of 4, plus 2 APs. © Gregory Crewdson. Courtesy Gagosian.