

TO SWIM.

Photographer Gregory Crewdson seeks inspiration through immersion in one of Massachusetts' most beautiful lakes.

TO THINK.

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TO CREATE.





What can one say about Gregory Crewdson that hasn't already been said? The accolades and superlatives come thick and fast when describing this most cinematic of photographers. The work, exhibited widely, is a poetic art form that by its very scale and formation has fans queuing around the block, eager to bathe in these oddly silent epics.

Production is a complex process requiring time and patience: a Crewdson image does not come easily. If they look difficult to execute, and they are, think of the toll it takes on their creator. Indeed, the man himself, tucked away in the Massachusetts countryside, does sound a tad edgy this afternoon. "I put a lot of myself into the work," he says quietly. "It's a long and grueling process."

For the uninitiated, Crewdson has built a reputation taking photographs on the scale of huge cinematic productions. Imagine a single frame from a feature length film — lit, staged and cast, in search of what he calls "the perfect moment." His images are mostly vivid, dramatized tableaux, offset by often mundane settings. Critics revel in what they see as 'banal beauty'. "I prefer familiar," he says, clearly bored by the clichés. Whatever they depict, it never strays too far from this particular neck of the woods.

Born and raised in Brooklyn, Crewdson now resides a little way outside the neat town of Great Barrington, ten miles from Becket, the backdrop to so many of his images. "I've been photographing here pretty consistently since the late '80s," he says, "but it wasn't until about 10 years ago, when



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I divorced and left New York City, that I could really call it home. You might trace it back to the fact my family had a little log cabin in Beckett, because that memory has never left me. My kids live in Brooklyn, and I still go back to New Haven, where I teach at Yale. There's a lot of moving back and forth, but this is definitely home."

He warms to the theme of duality and admits it has become an intrinsic part of his personality. Is he country gent or city slicker? "I think it's somewhere in between. A byproduct of being a photographer is that you are always slightly outside of things, no matter where you are. It's a consistent trait of any person who looks through a lens. So I always feel, even up here, at a slight remove. It's always good to have that aesthetic distance."

This part of Massachusetts is a place of captivating beauty. You get a glimpse of it from Crewdson's low-key Instagram feed, which reveals both the bucolic nature of the area and the photographer's somewhat surprising daily routine. Gregory is a big open-water swimmer and during the summer months, from late May to the end of September, he traverses deep freshwater lakes, only accessible by long, rambling trails. I'm impressed by the steely reserve, but also slightly in awe of his dedication.

"I'm a very routinized person," he tells me. "When I'm the most productive, when I'm the clearest, it's usually when I'm doing the same kind of routine every day. So swimming is

just part of that. It's a really important way for me to not only clear my head but also be somewhere that allows me to think in more abstract terms and remove myself from the tasks of everyday life."

What a wake up call. Immersing yourself in freezing water every morning sounds like a task to me. "I'm impervious to the cold," he laughs. "I'm so used to it. When you're swimming, you always have to be aware of your core body temperature. You also have to have an eye on the elements, like the sun, wind and the ways of the water. It's not just purely blissful, you get a heightened sense of awareness. I think I use all of those things in making pictures. When you're making a picture all of those considerations are so important."

Crewdson's images are nothing if not aware. Arresting and evocative, they are inspired by some of cinema's greatest auteurs. When pushed, he tells me he is in thrall to Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* but veers more aesthetically to the work of David Lynch. "I'm the biggest fan, he smiles. I came of age when I was a graduate student, when *Blue Velvet* came out in 1987. I can honestly say that that movie changed my life in a certain way."

Blue Velvet, alongside much of Lynch's output, was certainly thought-provoking. At once shocking, provocative and dreamlike, it contains all the things people attribute to Crewdson. The word 'spooky' crops up frequently when attempting to describe the photographers work, "but it's not



existed in the first place. I think nostalgia, in some ways, is like a false memory. Again, all photographs have a certain kind of longing built inherently into the medium. Almost immediately after we take a picture there is a sense of loss, no matter what. So I think maybe I play off those things in a certain way.”

I proffer that the images are hard to place, almost outside of time. “Exactly! As you know, I go through an enormous amount of energy to remove any signifiers of everyday life in my pictures. There is a quality that’s outside of time, I guess, a nondescript element you see in the houses and the people, in streets and the cars. There’s an emptiness.”

What about melancholy? Reflective moments work best in repose, surely? “I definitely think there’s a quiet sense of alienation and loneliness in all the pictures,” he admits, “but first and foremost I’m also trying to make a beautiful image, in terms of lighting and the color and the production. I don’t think that something completely bleak would be as interesting. For me, the tension between beauty and sadness is a powerful one. It’s something that I strive for.”

The mood of our conversation leads us to *Fireflies*, the series of images he unveiled in the mid ‘90s, shot prior to his current style. Photographing swarms of the incandescent bugs performing their wonderful summertime light show, the slow exposures are abstract yet retain stories he still tells to this day. “I think however hard an artist tries, you can’t get away from yourself,” he reasons. “On the surface, the

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a word I particularly like,” he shrugs. “There’s an ethereal menace at the heart of many of them, though. They’re certainly enigmatic.”

Does he strive for enigma?

“As a person, or in my work?”

In your work.

“One hundred percent. Firstly, I feel the medium of photography is inherently unresolvable. Photographs, unlike movies or a book, or any other narrative form, are just a frozen moment in time. There are only a limited amount of resolutions you can get from any picture, and I feel like rather than see that as a limitation, I see it as one of the strengths of the medium. It’s the enigmatic quality. This is definitely the moment I’m most interested in — moments that remain open-ended and mysterious in some way.”

What elements of his personal life enter the work?

“I certainly feel in the last 10 or 15 years of my life I’ve made a very conscious effort to move away from the art world, especially living up here. It’s not like I want to be enigmatic, but I feel like it’s important for me, and I feel best when I’m slightly isolated. I know it’s really good for me just in terms of my well-being.”

We talk about nostalgia and the lingering ennui it conjures up in many artists’ work. “Nostalgia is a very interesting word because I feel it conjures up a longing for a past that never

pictures couldn’t be more opposite to the highly produced photographs, but in another way they are very much aligned. The life of the firefly is a narrative code, it tells a story. It’s a mating call.”

Crewdson is foremost a contemporary artist and yet the ghosts of his predecessors still haunt his vision. Arbus, Eggleston and Avedon all spring to mind. Each focus on isolated figures, viewing their subject through a detached but emotional lens. “By its very nature, when a photographer, whoever it maybe, holds up the camera to their eye, it’s an act of separation from the world,” he says. “You’re always peering in on something. There is always that inherent voyeurism, I think it’s built into the medium.”

What sets him apart? “If there’s one word I would use to describe my work, the one I would return to again and again is ‘uncanny’. Ordinary and familiar, but also strange and mysterious. It’s a frozen moment in time that tells you all you need to know about what you’re looking at.” ■

Gregory Crewdson’s Fireflies series opens June 6th, ’20 at berkshirebotanical.org. Crewdson is represented by Gagosian Gallery. Paul Tierney is an arts, culture and travel journalist, writing for The Guardian, The Independent, The i, and Neue Luxury. @paultierneysees Martin Crook shoots for Tiffany & Co. Hole & Corner and Conde Nast Traveler, among many others. martincrook.com





Untitled, 1996, by Gregory Crewdson © Gregory Crewdson. Courtesy Gagosian.