One can love a photographer purely for their skill and historical relevance—which is certainly the case with Gregory Crewdson—however there is something else at play here when I consider his work. The emotional registers of his photographs, which remind me of my favourite melodramas, touch an extremely raw part of my inner life and, I expect, the inner lives of many others. We have all longed for glamour and, so too, experienced the potency of despair. We have seen evil and joy. We have felt estranged from a world that once felt so near to us. We have all lusted for someone, only to discover that they are a mirage, or a nightmare even. Crewdson captures these emotions with the intensity of someone who has felt them deeply, and combines this sensitivity with a highly complex art-historical rigour. I approached this interview primarily as a historian, but also as someone who wants to live in Crewdson’s world—with all its beauty, decay, intimacy, and alienation. Here, we discussed the multifaceted historical registers of his photographs, the nature of artistic control, and his intimate relationship with the images he creates.

William: What is the difference between conceptual photography and documentary photography? For example, historians separate you and Laurie Simmons from William Eggleston or Stephen Shore. You seem to exemplify both worlds.

Gregory: Just a few notes that I think are relevant to the discussion—number one, Laurie was my first photo teacher at SUNY Purchase. Then, when I was in graduate school at Yale, it was very much aligned with the documentary tradition of photography with the lineage of Walker Evans, Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander, and Eggleston. It was very intellectual, and I loved that tradition. At the same time, I was also going down to New York and seeing first generation postmodern photographers like Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, Barbara Kruger, and Laurie. If you make a crude parallel, you could say that the documentary tradition is interested in photography as truth—a poetic truth—and postmodern photographers are interested in precisely the opposite. They are interested in photographs as lies. All of their work, in one way or another, deals with reconstructing photographic truth. Although I was equally influenced by that generation of artists, I didn’t fully embrace either documentary or postmodern photography.

Rather than embracing the photography of truth or the photography of fiction, I took certain sensibilities from both schools and created a third aesthetic. I tried to create my own particular view of the world. I think postmodern photography is more associated with political content, which I know you have an ambivalent relationship with.

William: Speaking of the psychological, I was thinking about how your work connects to David Lynch’s films.

Gregory: We share an “American” vision. There’s something in our work that deals with ordinary life, the American vernacular, and finding an unexpected sense of unease or something uncanny. I think one of the main themes of my work is a sense of longing. There’s often a figure who feels separate from the world, who wants to connect with something larger.
Gregory: It goes back to my interest in the psychological, storytelling, alienation, and desire. I think one of the main themes of my work is a sense of longing. There's often a figure who feels separate from the world, who wants to connect with something larger. I use the body within the interior, a landscape, or a townscapes. There is always a relationship with the setting. It is never just the body, and it is never just a place.

William: Rather than an overt political meaning, maybe there is a politics of estrangement. You're never going to be fully integrated into the world.

Gregory: I have a phrase for that, which has become a mantra: "there but not there." That's the condition of being a photographer. Just the act of taking a picture separates you from the world. The photograph is there but not there, and the figures in my photographs are there but not there. It's a play between those two conditions.

William: This connects to your relationship with film. I'd love to hear more about your filmic influences. Your work reminds me of Lars von Trier's Melancholia. It oscillates between an aesthetic mundane and the spectacular. Some people have called this fascist.

Gregory: I like most of his work, definitely. I find it really beautiful. There's issues of control in my work and in von Trier's work as well—trying to will a picture to life by controlling each aspect and making it perfect. This is of course an impossible feat. There's a nice tension between a need to control every aspect of your production and things going wrong. That's the mystery of art. Representation by its very definition has an impossibility of duplicating reality or creating a surrogate for reality.

When you're working with people, everything is an improvisation, and you need people's trust and their respect.

William: Your work, in that way, defies the modernist narrative of the lone, male photographer who goes off into the woods to find inspiration all by himself. There's a community aspect to what you do.

Gregory: Yes, that is very important, and I work with the same group over and over again. That's part of the nature of the work. These pictures would be impossible to do alone, although I would still argue that photography is a lonely endeavor. At its core, the camera is an alienation device. Maybe it has to do with the medium itself that separates you from the world. And, in the end, the pictures have to reflect your particular view of the world. The pictures have to feel subjective and authored in some way.

William: Does seeing your photographs in a state of completion—after all that went into them—make you feel alone?

Gregory: Yes. After going through all the stages of making these pictures you have to separate yourself from them and allow them to exist in the world without you.

William: I'd love to hear about the film you've been working on.

Gregory: We have been working on the script for two years now and we are finally getting to a point where it feels like it's possible to do.
GREGORY CREWDSON "SISTERS", 2014
CATHEDRAL OF THE PINES
37 1/2 X 50 IN.
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