

GREGORY CREWDSON

By William J. Simmons



GREGORY CREWDSON "RECLINING WOMAN ON BED", 2013
CATHEDRAL OF THE PINES; 37 1/2 X 50 IN.
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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.



GREGORY CREWDSON "THE DEN", 2013
CATHEDRAL OF THE PINES; 37 1/2 X 50 IN.
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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 deconstructing 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.

WILLIAM: I think postmodern photography is more associated with political content, which I know you have an ambivalent relationship with.

GREGORY: I'd say, generally, that all photographs are political, but it's not something that I really think about when I am making pictures. I am much more interested in

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 CREWDSON "WOMAN IN BATHROOM", 2013
CATHEDRAL OF THE PINES; 37 1/2 X 50 IN.
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something that's more psychologically rooted; something that's murky or more mysterious. At the same time, I think that all art has to be relevant to the time in which it was made. In that way, whether an artist intends it or not, the work offers a commentary.

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.

WILLIAM: Well, you and Lynch also have an interest in bodies, it seems. While watching the documentary, Gregory Crewdson: *Brief Encounters*, I saw you directing people and placing their hands or limbs for a photograph very precisely but with great sensitivity. Why does your vision of America usually connect to bodies?



GREGORY CREWDSON "THE PINE FOREST", 2014

CATHEDRAL OF THE PINES
37 1/2 X 50 IN.
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GREGORY CREWDSON "THE MATTRESS", 2014

CATHEDRAL OF THE PINES
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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 townscape. 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

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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 endeavour. 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
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GREGORY CREWDSON "RECLINING WOMAN ON SOFA", 2014
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GREGORY CREWDSON "WOMAN IN LIVING ROOM" 2013
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