

GREGORY CREWDSON

RETROSPECTIVE

Exhibition Facts

Duration	May 29–September 8, 2024
Opening	May 29, 2024 6.30 p.m.
Venue	Propter Homines Hall The ALBERTINA Museum
Curators	Walter Moser, Astrid Mahler
Works	80
Catalogue	Available for EUR 36.90 (English & German) on-site in the Museum Shop as well as via https://shop.albertina.at/en/ and in bookstores
Publisher	PRESTEL Penguin Random House LLC Editor Walter Moser
Contact	Albertinaplatz 1 1010 Vienna T +43 (0)1 534 83 0 info@albertina.at www.albertina.at
Opening Hours	Daily 10 a.m. – 6 p.m. Except Wednesday and Friday 10 a.m. – 9 p.m.
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Gregory Crewdson

Retrospective

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Gregory Crewdson (*1962, Brooklyn) is one of the world's most renowned photographers. Since the mid-1980s, Crewdson has been using the backdrop of small American towns and film sets to create, like a director, technically brilliant and colorfully seductive photographs that focus on human isolation and the abysses of society. The enigmatic scenes self-reflexively raise questions about the boundary between fact and fiction but can also be related to socio-political developments.

The retrospective at the ALBERTINA comprises a total of nine groups of works, created over the last three and a half decades and conceived serially. The exhibition starts with his *Early Work* (1986–1988), Crewdson's final photography project at Yale School of Art. It includes residents of the Massachusetts town of Lee depicted in the context of their domestic settings. With relative ease, Crewdson transforms real places into mysterious settings that portray suburbia as a scene of isolation and anxiety.

Also on display is Crewdson's famous series *Twilight* (1998–2002). In scenes shaped by cinematic language, people are depicted being confronted by unexplainable phenomena in their everyday lives. The photographs, which Crewdson refers to as "single-frame movies," contain multiple references to classical painting and popular culture.

The impressive, mysterious large-scale scenes from the *Beneath the Roses* series (2003–2008) deal with people's isolation and alienation from their environment.

The most recently completed group of works *Eveningside* (2021–2022) portrays an unheroic image of a fictional small town of the same name in atmospheric black and white. Crewdson's arrangements ingeniously position the protagonists in space through lighting influenced by film noir and motifs like shopwindow and mirror.

Following *Cathedral of the Pines* (2013–2014) and *An Eclipse of Moths* (2018–2019), *Eveningside* represents the final part of a trilogy through which the artist examines the social decline of society far removed from the American dream.

Crewdson's large-scale pictures are preceded by months of planning; they are created with the participation of hundreds of people from casting, wardrobe, and art departments, plus technical specialists. Crewdson's work is characterized by the highly elaborate process of design, culminating in an extensive post-production process in which the final photographs are assembled from multiple shots.

As a generous gesture, the exhibition is accompanied by a significant donation to the ALBERTINA's photo collection. This extensive assimilation of works strengthens the focus of the collection on contemporary photography.

Exhibition Texts

Early Work, 1986–1988

Early Work was created as Crewdson's final project at Yale University's School of Art. Among other places, Gregory Crewdson photographed the series in the US state of Massachusetts, mostly in the small town of Lee, which is very close to the family's summer home. Due to his personal connection to this region, the artist still realizes almost all of his photographic projects in the Massachusetts area. In the photographs, Crewdson arranged the town's residents in the context of their domestic settings. Using relatively modest technical devices at the time, he transformed the real places into mysterious, uncanny scenes with the help of artificial lighting. Introverted protagonists rendered in tightly cropped views present typically American suburbs as places of human isolation and oppression. David Lynch's surreal masterpiece *Blue Velvet*, in which the main character encounters human abysses behind the idyllic façade of a small town, served as a major model. The film, which came out in 1986, turned out to be stylistic inspiration for Crewdson and also became an important source of reference for his subsequent series. Crewdson also dealt with more documentary positions, such as those of Stephen Shore and William Eggleston. On their journeys across the United States, they enhanced everyday motifs with symbolic meaning through close-up views and vibrant colors. Especially Eggleston employed these means to allude to disconcerting aspects in society.

Natural Wonder, 1991–1997

Inspired by the dioramas in natural history museums, for *Natural Wonder* Gregory Crewdson built three-dimensional models in his studio, which he then photographed. The pictures show enigmatic rituals and cruel incidents happening in nature, which take place against the backdrop of the suburbs without people realizing. For example, birds sit around a mysterious circle of eggs, or nature takes possession of a decaying animal carcass. As a metaphor for suppressed anxieties and traumas, the

depicted landscape functions as a mirror of the unconscious and the human psyche. In Crewdson's series, autobiographic elements—his father was a psychoanalyst—and overriding social themes characteristically coincide. The symbolism of *Natural Wonder* has essentially been inspired by cinematography: in Alfred Hitchcock's film *The Birds* (1963), the eponymous animals, suddenly infesting an idyllic world, symbolize dysfunctional relationships and human fears. In *Blue Velvet* (1986), David Lynch eliminates the line between reality and illusion, between the familiar and the eerie, between idyll and violence through the motif of a prepared robin or of a severed human ear covered with ants, which is found in a meadow.

Hover, 1996/1997

In *Hover*, his third series, Gregory Crewdson abandons the aesthetic achievements of earlier works: he takes pictures in black and white from a bird's-eye view with the help of a crane. The strategy characteristic of Crewdson's work to merely adumbrate a narrative while abstaining from resolving it and keeping it in mysterious suspense reaches an early climax in *Hover*. With a distanced, objectifying gaze he shows familiar occurrences in a small town as they tip over into the unusual. The recurring motif of the circle refers not only to popular science fiction movies and works of land art, but also quotes Alfred Hitchcock's film *Vertigo* (1958), in which the circle is considered a metaphor for romantic obsession.

Gregory Crewdson now began to plan his sessions in advance and in great detail. As were other series, *Hover* was shot in the real place of Lee with the aid of residents performing as protagonists. Occasionally, Crewdson still resorted to improvisation; for example, he called the police for the purpose of integrating the police car into the photograph.

Twilight, 1998–2002

Twilight is one of Gregory Crewdson's most well-known works. It is informed by cinema even more than earlier series. In its scenes, which are mostly set at dusk, Crewdson resorts to the fantastic as the principal theme. Inexplicable phenomena intrude into everyday life. Familiar objects are repurposed, and people give the impression of being exposed and unprotected because of their nudity.

Similar to a film production, a crew of about sixty took part in *Twilight*. In this series, Crewdson arrived at his characteristic repertoire of motifs, such as open cars, windows, and mirrors, which he varied

and put together like vocabulary and would also use for subsequent works. Crewdson began to fully concentrate on the *mise-en-scène*, leaving the technical implementation of the shots to Richard Sands for the first time—a practice continued to this day. This high-profile director of photography from the world of cinema has worked with Steven Spielberg and Francis Ford Coppola, among others. The photographs, which Crewdson refers to as “single-frame movies,” contain multiple references to classical painting and popular culture, a telling example of the latter being Steven Spielberg’s science fiction film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977). Gregory Crewdson’s postmodern approach becomes manifest in these images: starting out from the idea that reality is no longer “authentic” but merely experienced through the media, the recognizable references reveal the staging they are based on.

Beneath the Roses, 2003–2008

In *Beneath the Roses*, the surreal, uncanny atmosphere of earlier series gives way to an essentially melancholic and psychologizing key tone. The protagonists, captured in desolate surroundings, are shown frozen and motionless. Lonely, isolated, and without interacting, they appear totally alienated. Especially for his interior shots, Gregory Crewdson borrows from Edward Hopper’s painting. Situations of human introspection in anonymous, everyday architectural settings that both suggest intimacy and accommodate a voyeuristic gaze are unmistakable parallels.

Beneath the Roses is the most elaborate series in Gregory Crewdson’s oeuvre, which he originally developed as an idea for a film and to which more than one hundred specialists from casting, costume design, technical, and art departments contributed over the extensive period during which the series was realized. As in *Twilight*, he staged the interior shots in studios, whereas outdoor shots were taken in real places he had profoundly transformed according to his ideas. The artist meticulously prepared the shoot with architectural models, storyboards, scene scripts, and location shots. The focus was particularly on the choice of props, which appear both quintessentially American and timeless. Using different aperture settings, Crewdson took multiple photographs of each scene. In postproduction, which lasted over several months, he combined forty to fifty negatives, so that the constant depth of field in the final picture gives a hyperrealist impression.

Sanctuary, 2009

Sanctuary was created after the monumental large-scale project *Beneath the Roses* (2003–2008). The series marks a period of transition during which Gregory Crewdson put new artistic approaches to the test. When staying in Rome in 2009, he visited the Italian city of cinematography Cinecittà, where, in its film sets, his first group of works was realized outside the United States. He completed the project within two months with a small team and little technical and financial input. In *Sanctuary*, Crewdson heightened the tension between reality and fiction known from earlier series by making the sets as such the actual subject. The black-and-white photography accentuates the morbid appeal of the sets as ruins. In contrast to Crewdson's usual practice of conveying loneliness and isolation with the aid of performers, in *Sanctuary* he creates an essentially melancholic atmosphere through the complete absence of people. In particular, the artist makes palpable the discrepancy between the hustle and bustle of past film shoots and the now ghostly desolation.

Cathedral of the Pines, 2013/2014

Cathedral of the Pines was created after a period of personal and artistic crisis. In the midst of the mighty pine forests near the city of Becket in Massachusetts, where Gregory Crewdson has lived since 2010, he discovered the eponymous path that became the starting point for this series. *Cathedral of the Pines* is one of the artist's most personal groups of work. For the first time, he engaged persons from his family and circle of friends as performers. Moreover, he staged his interiors in real houses, working with a comparatively small team and a minimum of artificial light.

Cathedral of the Pines examines the subject of the human condition through the relationship between human beings and landscape. The nocturnal atmosphere of earlier series gives way to cool daylight and cold colors: completely in the nude or only partially covered and staring absent-mindedly, his performers seem frozen and withdrawn into their own emotional worlds. By placing windows prominently, Crewdson contrasts the relationship between interior and exterior space, as well as interior and exterior light. With its references to the Romanticism of the early nineteenth century—such as compositions by Caspar David Friedrich—or seventeenth-century Dutch painting—such as the art of Jan Vermeer—the motif of the window is also in the tradition of a symbol of contemplation and unfulfilled yearning.

An Eclipse of Moths, 2018/2019

Gregory Crewdson photographed *An Eclipse of Moths* during Donald Trump's presidency, thus formulating his analysis of society as sociopolitical criticism. In the city where the series was shot, Pittsfield in Massachusetts, the majority of the population had worked for the local General Electric plant and many lost their jobs after the firm had closed down. In addition to high unemployment, the company left behind a devastated environment. Crewdson describes the situation of neglected postindustrial places through the contrast between light atmospheres rendered in vibrant colors and desolate motifs of everyday life. Potholed streets or dilapidated houses symbolize the fragility and frailty of a society that has lost its footing.

Different from *Cathedral of the Pines* (2013/2014), his previous series, in *An Eclipse of Moths* Crewdson returned to the cinematographic widescreen format. The artist depicted his protagonists as small figures in proportion to their surroundings and at a distance from one another. He frequently arranged his seemingly disoriented protagonists around streetlamps, comparable to the eponymous moths circling around the light in the darkness. Apart from a multitude of props, he also used smoke and artificially sprinkled streets for this series so as to masterfully stage his light effects.

Eveningside, 2021/2022

Gregory Crewdson's most recent series is set in a fictitious small town called *Eveningside*. Its imaginary geography is made up of various places in western Massachusetts the artist had used as scenes for earlier works. After *Cathedral of the Pines* (2013/2014) and *An Eclipse of Moths* (2018/2019), this atmospheric work in black and white constitutes the final part of Crewdson's trilogy, which deals with the sociopolitical dark sides of a society removed from the American dream. In *Eveningside*, the artist often depicts people going about their work. Frozen in absolute standstill, they seem caught in their respective social contexts.

Crewdson's arrangements ingeniously position the protagonists in space through lighting influenced by film noir and motifs like shopwindow and mirror. The artist shows their faces in reflections from irritating and slightly shifted perspectives with the aid of montage. Windows frame the protagonists as pictures within the picture and underscore the act of image-making as a self-reflexive practice.

Press images

The following images are available free of charge in the Press section of www.albertina.at.
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Gregory Crewdson
 Untitled, From the series: Beneath the Roses, 2003–2008
 144 x 223 cm, Digital pigment print
 (The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna – Permanent loan,
 Private Collection © Gregory Crewdson)



Gregory Crewdson
 The Basement, From the series: Cathedral of the Pines, 2013–2014
 94 x 127 cm, Digital pigment print
 (The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna – Permanent loan,
 Private Collection © Gregory Crewdson)



Gregory Crewdson
 Madeline's Beauty Salon, From the series: Eveningside,
 2021–2022
 88 x 117 cm, Digital pigment print
 (The ALBERTINA, Vienna – Courtesy of the Artist ©
 Gregory Crewdson)



Gregory Crewdson
 Untitled, From the series: Sanctuary, 2009
 72 x 90 cm, Digital pigment print
 (The ALBERTINA, Vienna – Courtesy of the Artist ©
 Gregory Crewdson)



Gregory Crewdson
The Mattress, From the series: Cathedral of the Pines,
2013–2014
94 x 127 cm, Digital pigment print
(The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna – Permanent loan,
Private Collection © Gregory Crewdson)



Gregory Crewdson
Untitled, From the series: Twilight, 1998–2002
122 x 152 cm, Digital pigment print
(The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna – Permanent loan,
Private Collection © Gregory Crewdson)



Gregory Crewdson
Redemption Center, From the series: An Eclipse of Moths,
2018–2019
127 x 225 cm, Digital pigment print
(The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna – Permanent loan,
Private Collection © Gregory Crewdson)



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144 x 223 cm, Digital pigment print
(The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna – Permanent loan,
Private Collection © Gregory Crewdson)



Gregory Crewdson
Untitled, From the series: Early Work, 1986–1988
39 x 58 cm, Digital pigment print
(The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna – Permanent loan,
Private Collection © Gregory Crewdson)



Gregory Crewdson
Starkfield Lane, From the series: An Eclipse of Moths,
2018–2019
127 x 225 cm, Digital pigment print
(The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna – Permanent loan,
Private Collection © Gregory Crewdson)



Gregory Crewdson
Untitled, From the series: Hover, 1996–1997
51 x 61 cm, Digital pigment print
(The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna – Permanent loan,
Private Collection © Gregory Crewdson)