

Look Closer

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Gregory Crewdson's perfectionist photographs have a unique power to unsettle, encouraging their audience to gain a sense of understanding about what is taking place within the frames. Through a systematic approach similar to that of a filmmaker, Crewdson constructs his pieces practically from scratch—carefully creating sets and lighting them, composing his frames, and placing his characters and props within. His work is not overtly disturbing—in fact, despite their boldness of color and composition, his photos exhibit a haunting, disrupting subtlety that leave us questioning, not knowing for sure what is going on in their shaken worlds.

In his series *Twilight* and *Beneath the Roses*, Crewdson explores American suburbia and its potential to unsettle. Utilizing this distinctly welcoming setting, he creates frames that maintain a careful balance between expressionism and subtlety, resulting in an off-kilter image of the suburbs, one we can no longer associate with comfort and peace. In *Untitled (40)* of *Beneath the Roses*, a naked middle-aged woman sits half-submerged in her bath, staring off, haunted, at the wall before her. The composition allows the entire bathroom to be seen, leaving a wide expanse of floor at the bottom, making the room seem slightly distorted, unsettlingly large. Other expressive details include the greenish-bluish tiles, grimy and cold, which contrast with the pale sickly flesh of the woman. These details contribute to an overall feeling of emotional alienation and self-disgust. But the tiniest details are the most disconcerting. To the left of the frame, sitting on a sink, is a red bottle of prescription pills, open, with two pills beside it. To the right is a mirror, reflecting another room in which an unmade bed and strewn clothes are visible. The story is vague, but the feeling is concrete—the walls and bathtub that the woman might seek refuge in have turned into a cold, uncomfortable room of emotional penetration.

This same feeling pervades *Untitled (Penitent Girl)* from the *Twilight* series. The suburban surroundings (emphasized by a repetition of rooftops, windows, and trees) are juxtaposed with a strange situation: a young, gender-

less figure, facing away from us, stripped down to bra and panties, looking down in shame in front of a female figure presumed to be his/her mother. They stand in the driveway of their home, their only witness a horrified sister sitting in the car (presumably the owner of the underwear, if the figure is a boy). The cool colors of the lush green grass and darkening blue sky contrast with the yellow-lit windows and headlights of the car, and, in a more unsettling way, with the bare flesh of the figure. The mother's light blue jacket further separates her from her disturbed child. The lighting is eerily unnatural and bright, bestowing an even more surreal quality upon the event. Despite their pleasant serenity, these surroundings, associated with refuge and comfort, become a collective antagonist, in physical and visual conflict with the humans in the frame. As with *Untitled (40)*, Crewdson's background compels us more than his characters do.

In a 2001 interview, Crewdson explained the origins of his obsession with setting: "I was just very interested in museum dioramas, actually, and I've always been interested in wanting to construct the world in photographs . . . one of the things we can get from photography is this establishment of a world" (Lopez). Crewdson is not interested in documenting; rather he strives to create a world that merely feels real and only exists in a photograph. This is not a study in physical abstraction. Every detail in his frames establishes some eerily familiar, knowable world that we get sucked into.

But why does an artist like Crewdson, who grew up not in stereotypical suburbs but in New York, have the desire to "create" this world? Crewdson argues that his lack of experience with middle America "provides [his work] with a sense of alien perspective," and it is precisely this sensation of alienation that makes his photographs interesting (Lopez). But there is something else. Suzan-Lori Parks notes that we should not worry about knowing too little about subject matter, because "there is a truth that undercurrents" works of art "regardless" (28). As an artist, Crewdson's power to take stereotypes of American suburbia and create a convincing world reveals both the fragility of his images and our gullibility as an audience. His settings are detectably fake.

The characters in his photographs seem to be on the threshold of understanding this notion about their surroundings, dolls in a dollhouse they don't belong to. This manifestation of physical and emotional disconnectedness is exemplified in *Beneath the Roses' Untitled (19)*. Its main composition device is an eerily wide archway leading to a dining room in which a mother and son sit, staring wide-eyed at their roast. This frame-within-frame technique is further emphasized by another archway behind the mother and the photo's symmetrical composition. Both devices are used to create the sinking feeling

of looking down a long hall, which plays up the gravity of what we and the characters feel—suspension and anxiety.

This reliance on set-building makes Crewdson unique as a photographer. Not only is he manipulating worlds, he's creating them and exploiting their inherent fakeness. He doesn't try to convince us that these places exist and that these situations happened. The lighting in *Penitent Girl*, the eerily wide expanse of floor in *Untitled (40)*, and the archways in *Untitled (19)*, despite their look-twice subtlety, ultimately call attention to themselves. The walls that are supposed to comfort us become suffocating, unreal. This image of home, which largely makes up our own self-image, is frail, artificial, and unreliable.

But is Crewdson merely trying to comment on the stereotype of American suburbia? Anne Bogart argues that “a stereotype is a container of memory”—and also truth (277). We dismiss stereotypes as unoriginal constructions, but Bogart argues that “lighting a fire under a stereotype” can provide a nuanced understanding of some discovered truth (276). If this is so, stereotypes can be a manifestation, or physical creation, of some metaphysical truth; and Crewdson's stereotypical variations could very well reveal the darkness that lurks beneath *all* suburban settings, real or constructed. Now, we're searching for that penitent girl, that red prescription bottle in everything we see.

The dark side of American suburbia has been explored before by many other artists—by David Lynch in his film *Blue Velvet*, by Alan Ball in *American Beauty*, and by Richard Yates in *Revolutionary Road*. These works, too, reveal to us what sadness and horror can be found behind trimmed bushes and red roses. Crewdson's series title, *Beneath the Roses*, might be a direct reference to *Blue Velvet*'s opening sequence, in which we see ideal images of a small-town suburb, only to dissolve in closer and closer, to the point where we go underneath the green grass to discover a nest of ravenous beetles making animalistic chewing noises. But Crewdson, unlike Lynch, consciously calls attention to the artifice within his photography and his sets. The stereotype Crewdson is lighting a fire underneath is not the image of suburbia itself, but the notion of its inherent fakeness. His preoccupation is not just with “what lies beneath the surface” but with the idea of artifice.

This idea arches over the breadth of his work, connecting *Beneath the Roses* and *Twilight* with his most recent endeavor, *Sanctuary*. In this series, Crewdson no longer works with color or people, and dispenses with America in favor of abandoned movie sets in Cinecitta, Rome. Without people, *Sanctuary* becomes less about social alienation and more about a broader kind

of alienation—from time, care, and people themselves. What was once accessible has become stark and objectively isolated.

The unsettling nature of Crewdson's earlier photographs translates well into the black-and-white works in *Sanctuary*. The absence of color and use of low contrast photography in *Untitled (14)* ostensibly serve to convince the audience that the location is real, not a set. Roman buildings, complete with rows of Ionic columns and rounded archways, line a cobblestone street overrun with dry, skinny weeds. A cloudless sky further emphasizes the feeling of emptiness, of abandonment. These dark archways seduce us, as if we can learn something important about ourselves by revisiting our abandoned past. And yet, as with *Untitled (40)*, the tiniest, most unsettling detail pops out: the metal support poles revealing the artificiality of the set. Artifice also emotionally removes us from the setting in *Untitled (17)*. At first we are attracted by a warm rectangle of light on a slate street in a dim alleyway; but the rectangle, aided by the frame's symmetrical composition, leads us to a door far away, where we infer that we are viewing a set. Crewdson's photographs in *Sanctuary* do not offer any one-frame stories; they offer instead the remnants of storytelling itself, neglected and forgotten for years.

Crewdson cruelly reveals to us that the comfort we might find in these places is shallow, ill-founded, perhaps nonexistent. The grandeur and ghostliness are all figments of our imagination, projections of what we want to see and feel. In the lowest sense, Crewdson seems to be mocking us and our inherent need to judge stereotypes to understand the world and ourselves. They make up the fabric of who we think we are and how we live our lives—suggesting the fragility of our own identities, and our need for false comfort. We try to avoid this truth, this fact that our understanding of ourselves is unstable and vulnerable.

When asked why he prefers photography to film, Crewdson explains that he is “interested in the limitations of a photograph in terms of its narrative capacity . . . [he wants] to use that limitation as a kind of strength” (Lopez). His photographs seem to be stills from a film that has never been made, and they trick us into thinking there is a before and after, a resolution. The clues in the frames are not there to tell a story; they push us to create a story from them, to better understand the fascinating details behind the so-called stereotypes. *Sanctuary* brings us to a place that was once a projection of some filmmaker's thoughts about Ancient Rome, but the photographs, the images themselves, still *demand* some kind of projection of our own thoughts. The closer we look, though, the more we are pushed away, recognizing the photographic, stylized deception. But as an audience, we want to stay convinced.

Sanctuary toys with us, illustrating the great circular relationship between us and the art we must interpret. Just as art demands our response, so too do we demand that it convince us that we understand. Despite art's ability to move us—to make us dream—there is a very crucial, but fragile requirement that it stay real, accessible, and worthy of our emotional investment. Over time, we come to realize that our art, or our understanding of it, is just as fragile as our sense of self.

To be unsettled is to be in an emotional state of not knowing. Crewdson is an artist whose work challenges us to be unsettled and stay that way. Naturally, when unsettled, we either look away, or we look closer, trying to find something emotionally manageable. But the closer we look at Crewdson's photographs, the less we can manage, the more we have to look inward, too.

Gregory Crewdson is not just an artist on a mission to tell stories, but one who wants to shake us up a bit, encourage us to question ourselves and our surroundings. His power to unsettle is a reflection of our own capability to reinvent the world and our sense of self. We can choose to take our thoughts, our settings, ourselves, at face value, and accept the stereotypes that frame our lives; or we can choose to look closer and spot the dissonant, metallic contradictions that are most assuredly there. If we do the latter, what we find may disturb and disrupt us. But it will also open our eyes.

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