Artist Talk: Gregory Crewdson

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Dallas Museum of Art
Horchow Auditorium

Bonnie Pitman: Hello everybody, I am Bonnie Pitman. I'm the Eugene McDermott Director of the Dallas Museum of Art and to say that we are thrilled to see so many people out on a night like tonight and there’s an overflow audience in the Center for Creative Connections, we are just absolutely delighted. But we know that you came not only to see your great museum but most importantly tonight to hear the wonderful artist Gregory Crewdson. I am very excited to have had an opportunity to tour three of Gregory’s works that are on view currently at the museum. So if you haven’t seen them, you should of course come back and see All the World’s a Stage. There’s a magnificent work in there called Sunday Roast from 2005. And then very importantly in a new installation curated by Charlie Wylie, our Lupe Murchison Curator of Contemporary Art, there are two others of Gregory’s works on view. One called, Brief Encounter and another beautiful photograph called House in the Road.

And my favorite moment this evening, and they are always when you see your friends and colleagues wonderful moments, was when Gregory said, “We have to stop and take a picture. This is one of the pictures that I have in my home and I look at it every day.” So the modern technology – he took the photograph and sent it off to his five year-old daughter in just a moment. It’s a lot of fun to see that immediate connection between art and place and people.

I do want to point out that we have a deep commitment to Gregory Crewdson’s works, and in partnership with the Rachofsky Collection currently we own eight works. I want to say I'm sure that number continues to grow rapidly and we are thrilled to have him here tonight to speak. I do want to make this dreadful announcement that if you haven’t already turned off your cellphone, please do so, or your pagers, or all of those other things. And I love it because then I see people twitching so I know that that was the right thing to say. But it is important. Gregory has a beautiful presentation to make for all of us.

[00:02:04]
The last thing I wanted to mention in addition to come back to our museum is to recognize my great partner and colleague at the University of Texas at Dallas in the division of Arts and Humanities, Dennis Kratz, where he is the dean. Since I’ve been in Dallas over the past ten years, one of the partnerships between our museum and universities of higher education has been with Dennis and his entire team. And whenever he has an idea or looks at a possibility in a new way, he forces us to do the same. There are very, very few opportunities in a community to look at the manifest that we see among UTD and the museum, and I'm just going to mention three: There’s a course that Dennis himself teaches here at our museum on creativity and learning; There’s a wonderful teacher-education program that occurs every summer; and we are endlessly involved with them in new technologies and so, of course, since it’s my job to invite you to come back many times to the Dallas Museum of Art, there’s a brand new installation that will be opening in the spring called Coastlines and there will be sound environments created using the sea and the coastline area that are all created by the students at the University of Texas at Dallas.

So it’s a partnership about creativity, about learning and about excellence. And to you Dennis and your entire team, I want to acknowledge how grateful we are and how honored we are to be a partner with you in this important series. Thank you very much.

[Applause]

[00:03:53]

Dennis Kratz: Good evening. There’s something especially and profoundly noble about having to worry about crowd control at a lecture on photography. Thank you all for being here. This evening’s lecture and presentation by Gregory Crewdson is part of a series sponsored by the School of Arts and Humanities at UT Dallas at its Center for Values in Medicine, Science, and Technology. This is the third of six lectures and we invite you to pick up a copy of the brochure and join us for some of the remaining lectures.

The first two lectures were psychologists speaking about the nature of creativity and we thought, and obviously wisely, that it was about time to bring someone to demonstrate creativity. I just want to second and expand Bonnie’s statements about the partnership and my appreciation for what we at UT Dallas believe is a partnership that has the power not only to transform our own institutions but Dallas and make this the center, this area, for the union of the sciences and the humanities, the
arts with technology, learning with creativity. This is just the beginning of what our partnership will create. So thank you Bonnie, especially.

[Applause]

Who better to introduce a photographer than a photographer? I'm very pleased to ask my colleague and friend, a photographer and an educator of the highest quality, Professor Marilyn Waligore.

[Applause]

[00:05:54]

Marilyn Waligore: This is fantastic. I just have a couple of comments I want to make before I introduce Crewdson. I was thinking about when photography critic A. D. Coleman wrote about the directorial mode 35 years ago and we have to wonder whether he could have foreseen the kind of world that Gregory Crewdson has created for us. A. D. Coleman noted that this process involves “Treating the external world as raw material.” He goes on to say that these images “Use photography’s overt voracity against the viewer.”

The emotional intensity derived from Crewdson’s selection of locations, his embrace of mixed light and his direction of characters remains uncanny, forming a body of work that draws us in. We seek to decode these mysterious narratives, these familiar yet foreign events.

Gregory Crewdson received his MFA from Yale University in 1988. His work is housed in major collections in the U.S. including the Dallas Museum of Art, the Guggenheim, the Whitney, the Museum of Modern Art New York, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the L.A. County Museum of Art, and abroad at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia, the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina in Madrid, Spain, the Musée des beaux-arts in Montreal, Canada. He’s had solo exhibitions of his recent series Beneath the Roses in Paris, New York, London, Athens, Greece and Los Angeles. His work has been documented in numerous books and catalogues including Hover, Dream of Life, Twilight and a 20-year retrospective from 1985 to 2005.

Finally, he has received the Skowhegan Medal for Photography, the National Endowment for the Visual Arts Fellowship and the Aaron Siskind Fellowship. Please help me in welcoming Gregory Crewdson.

[Applause]
Well, thank you very much. It’s a pleasure to be here and thank you for those lovely introductions. I feel very strongly that every artist has one central story to tell and the task over a lifetime is the attempt to tell and retell that story over and over again and hopefully reinvent the form of the representation of that story. So I feel that what I’d like to do this evening is I’m going to show a kind of selective retrospective of my work starting in graduate school and try to show how the central elements of my pictures, my preoccupations, my obsessions in some elemental way has remained constant. So as much as you try to get away from yourself, it’s sort of impossible in a way. It’s kind of depressing in a certain sense.

I’m starting off with a group of pictures that made up my thesis show at Yale. The pictures were made primarily between the summer of 1987 and they are essentially involved in trying to find the photographic language that hovers somewhere between documentary photography and something more fictive.

I should say that I grew up in New York and since I was a child my parents had a cabin in Massachusetts that I would go to during the summers, and for whatever reasons I chose this location as the settings for my pictures. And I think it’s important to say that I was less interested in having a documentation of this place than using it as a backdrop to explore my own story.

So from early on I was really interested in sort of the nature of narrative in pictures and the idea of telling a story in a frozen moment. But I wasn’t interested in a literal story as much as I was interested in using light and color to suggest more of an internal narrative, something more psychological or submerged. So primarily in these pictures, they are all photographs of strangers essentially. So I’d wander around the various towns in Massachusetts and try to create a series of pictures interiors, landscapes, nocturnal photographs that all sort of came together in a way to try to tell this story that was, in a sense, a projection of my own psychological fears and anxieties and desires.

I’ve mentioned many times before but I think it’s appropriate to say here that growing up in Brooklyn, my father was a psychoanalyst and one of my very early memories was he had his office in the basement of our
house, a brownstone in Brooklyn. And I have this early memory of attempting to listen to the floor boards in the living room and try to project the story of what I thought I heard. I was too young to actually know what a psychiatrist did, but knew that whatever that was happening under the floor boards was forbidden or a mystery and, in retrospect, I think that is like an aesthetic awakening for me because I've always, I think, looked in domestic situations to try to find an unexpected sense of mystery or a secret.

The other thing was that I think all photography in one way or another is rooted in a kind of voyeurism. So just by the very nature of putting a camera to your eye, you separate yourself from your subject. And I feel that that distance has always been important for me. So the distance of the floor boards from the living room into his office, or the distance that's created between me and my subject through a camera.

[00:14:06]

This is a dog looking into a basement. So it's a loosely veiled metaphor for me. [Laughter] I have a distinct memory of making this picture even though it was so long ago. I had these lights set up and I was trying to have the dog stay still for the camera. I keep saying “hold.”

So of all of the pictures of that sort of early series, I think maybe this one’s the most defining. I think there’s always certain photographs or artworks that artists make that even as you’re making them you sort of have an understanding that they sort of define something larger, I guess. But this was a house outside of a minor league baseball field. Throughout that summer I’d continually be drawn to photograph in this setting, less because of the actual baseball game, although I’m a big baseball fan, but just how artificial light transforms the ordinary. And there was a woman who lived in this house, who I knocked on the door and introduced myself to, who was a -- I sort of asked her if I could photograph her in and around her house and she agreed.

[00:15:52]

And over the course of summer I’d go photograph in this location in her house time and time again. It was an interesting relationship because as it turns out, she was this alcoholic and I would sort of wander around her house photographing and she would drink herself into unconsciousness. And I would always have to -- like she’d be passed out on the couch and I’d have to slip out -- but for me this picture was emblematic, just the window as a kind of division between interior and exterior space and the
sense of light and that idea of transforming the ordinary to try to find an unexpected sense of beauty and mystery.

This is one of my early collaborations with the local fire department, which I’ve gone on to -- would continue to have a rich relationship together. I convinced them to light this little hut on fire for me. [Laughter] And I love the impotent flow of water there, that’s really -- [Laughter]

So this is an image that I made towards the end of the series. And the way I work is I always have images in my mind of a picture I want to make. I knew I wanted to make a photograph of a middle-aged woman lying on her living room floor. And I found this woman who I didn’t know very well, and we made the picture together and there was this extreme sort of psycho-sexual anxiety that I felt in making the photograph, that kind of tension. So just -- which I think we both shared. [Laughter]

[00:18:18]

And as if to confirm this sense of guilt and anxiety, as I'm making the picture I see out the window, the picture window of the house, a police car come up and park in her driveway and the doorbell rang. She got up off to the floor and answered and he said, “So you’re the photographer that I keep hearing sort of wandering around the town?” And I immediately confessed to being that photographer and as it turns out, well he said to me “Well, I'm a photographer too.” [Laughter] “And I’m the forensic photographer.” As it turns out he was the forensic photographer for the town of Lee, Massachusetts. And as it turns out, I agreed to go down to the police station with him and he wound up showing me all of his work of forensic photographs of crime scenes and drowning victims. And it was very haunting and disturbing, and all that he kept asking was, “How would I get better contrast on this picture?”

[Laughter]

[00:20:03]

In any case, for some reason this experience stayed with me and really unsettled me in a certain way and I felt like in a certain sense I was sort of doing another version of what he was doing and felt like that for other reasons, too, that I needed to challenge my project. I needed to dramatically change my work in one way or another. I had graduated now from Yale and I had two options essentially, as most young artists leaving
school have very few options. My options were to try to move to New
York or move into my parents’ cabin in Massachusetts, which sounded
much more appealing to me. So I wound up going there for the summer
and for that entire summer did nothing but make series of dirt piles in the
backyard and photograph them over and over again. Now if that sounds
somewhat strange, it was made even more strange by the fact that I
never developed any of that film. So I don’t have a representation of that
work but I do have in its place...

[Video Clip]

...a sequence from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* which to me is one
of the great movies of all time. And if you remember, the main character,
the Richard Dreyfuss character, witnesses a series of extraterrestrial
events over the night sky of a midwestern suburban community. And in a
kind of irrational attempt to try to make sense of that, he starts for some
unknowable reason to make these piles out of his household materials
starting with shaving cream, graduating to mashed potatoes.

[00:22:43]

And as he sort of follows this compulsion, he increasingly alienates
himself from his family and the community; and I feel like this is, in a
sense, a very powerful metaphor for what the artist does, that they
follow this kind of irrational lead trying to find meaning.

And he says over and over again, he says, “This is important, this is
meaningful,” which is that obsession in that sense of search for meaning
is really part of the artist’s job in a way.

So this activity culminates in what to me is one of the great moments of
film history where he completes his masterpiece which is this totemic
structure occupying his entire living room made completely from the
debris and domestic material from in and outside of this house.

[00:24:10]

For me this is -- I’m particularly interested in this image because it
collapses a series of oppositions that I’m very interested in which is
interior/exterior space, domesticity and nature, and the normal and the
paranormal.

You see the window, again, becomes this mediation between him and
the outside world. So this being a part of a creativity symposium, I would
say that creativity is filled with loneliness and despair.
So, anyway, these dirt piles -- finally after months -- became these tableaux that became my next body work which is *Natural Wonder*. And these were photographs that I made in my studio that were very much influenced by dioramas at the Museum of Natural History. They’re completely constructed, there’s no -- this is before Photoshop, so they are all painstakingly put together, built as tableaux in my studio.

And they dealt with kind of these small interventions and disturbances in the domestic landscape. It’s hard to see that this is a dead bird, tulips and a hovering butterfly. I think it might be important to say that when I was in graduate school I saw for the first time -- *Blue Velvet* came out, David Lynch’s film. And I’ve always said that that’s, you know, there are films that you could objectively say as like the ten great films of all time, and then there are the films that change your life. And for me, well obviously, *Blue Velvet* did that for me. It was a profound sort of shift in terms of my work and I think this picture clearly shows that influence.

There is a combining in of two of my motifs, the pile and butterflies. As this series progressed, it became increasingly involved with a kind of morbidity that there is more of a tension between beauty and repulsion and it became more fantastical, too. This is probably the last picture I took in this body of work and it’s a cast of my leg as a cadaver with thorns growing, mutation.

Maybe it goes without saying, I wasn’t particularly happy at this period. [Laughter] Back to the forensic photographer. And so this was, again, a changing point in the work. And, as I was making these pictures in this period, I was going through a divorce and I knew that everything in my life was changing and started having these reoccurring dreams of floating, floating dreams, which my father I think rightly diagnosed as an anxiety dream at the time. So I decided to follow those dreams and moved outside of New York, again, back into my family cabin, and started my next body of work which is called *Hover*. These are photographs, black and white, done with a large format camera, all taken from the perspective of an elevated crane in the very same neighborhood that I made those earlier pictures. Here, from a very
different point of view, and I was very interested in that floating sensation, of being there but not there.

[00:30:00]

Again, a slightly alienated view. And these pictures were made -- well first, making these pictures, the most crucial problem, or the most that I couldn’t quite figure out how to resolve, is how do I get up there? And I wound up just looking into the Yellow Pages and found under “tree surgeon” this man’s name called Bill Markham. I called him out of the blue, he met me for coffee and I explained to him I want to make a series of pictures from an elevated view point in his crane and he was like, “When do we start?”

And we made this group of pictures without any permission or without any permits and I used entirely the people of the neighborhood to make the photograph. So here, this is a woman who lived in that house. Her husband was a landscaper and I said, “Let's do a picture of rows, of this woman planting rows down in the middle of the street.” And we just did it and the interesting thing about it was no one seemed to care one way or another, like no one even came out of their house to look. This is looking down the opposite end of the street and it's a picture of a man obsessively sodding his street closed and I looked at it as this kind of an optimistic photograph of trying to make connections with your neighbor. The interesting thing about these pictures is that obviously they're in a certain sense fictional but also in a sense very real because we did these things.

[00:32:01]

They were real interventions and in this case we had to drag people out of their houses to witness the picture but I still wasn’t quite happy with the photograph. So I called down to my assistant and I said, “Call 911, tell their police that there’s someone sodding the street closed.” I needed that sense of authority that under minded... And this is the local dog catcher. And he’s confronting a bear and there is a perfect line of Wonder Bread between him and the bear. And in one hand he has a gun and in the other hand he has a piece of Wonder Bread. And those of you who are curious, the bear is real but the dog catcher is stuffed.

And you notice that circles play a role in my photographs. You know artists create motifs, part of what they do is create a language for themselves. I'm not quite sure why circles are important but I did read once Hitchcock saying that he used the circle has a motif in Vertigo
because it represented romantic obsession. I’m not quite sure what that means but, anyway, I wound up -- I knew I wanted to do this picture of a circle in a backyard and kept looking for the right location and I found it.

[00:34:05]

So I knocked on the door and no one was home, so I wrote a note on the door and took a piece of paper out and said, “Dear homeowner, I’d like to make a photograph of a perfect circle of mulch in your backyard and photograph it from an elevated crane. Here’s my number.” And the very next day, I went back to the cabin and there was one blinking light on the answering machine. I always wish that I saved that message because it was a great response and I think great words of advice to any young artist who’s in the audience. All she said was, “Do what you have to do.”

[Laughter]

So the Hover pictures, I think there were only like ten in the series and they are really a conduit work from the previous photographs to my next body of work. I knew after this I wanted -- I knew pretty much exactly what I want to do. I had met through this process this guy name Rick Sands, who is a director of photography working in Hollywood films, who had come to, by strange circumstances, had come to Massachusetts and we met through a mutual friend. And I swear to God, I didn’t understand a single word he said, but I knew that he was great technician of light, like brilliant.

[00:36:01]

And I approached him this idea using lighting, cinematic lighting, in a series of photographs and he was very agreeable. Oh, by the way, this is the same location, the same field that [inaudible]. And we started working together, again, very sort of organically with a very small crew of local people. And this obviously became a big division point in my work where all of the sudden I was able to use lighting in a much more choreographed way than I ever imagined. And we started putting lights in Bill Markham’s lift and started making these pictures that dealt with these quiet moments in domestic spaces but using light to transform the setting.

And wasn’t until I was pretty far into the project that I made the realization that the only way we could use lights -- the only time you could use lights in this process was in twilight because it was the only
time that the artificial lighting, my artificial lighting, worked in concert with the ambient light of the sun.

[00:38:05]

So that was the initial reason that the pictures were made in twilight and then I started to think about the condition of twilight and how it’s a time in between times, and it’s a magic hour, and it’s transforming. And through that that’s how the title *Twilight* was established and now a major motion picture. [Laughter] This is a picture of young girl who lived on the street, she’s peeling off a piece of dead skin on her stomach -- transformation. And then this one of the earliest Twilight pictures where we actually convinced the homeowner that it was a good idea to build a garden in her living room. And it was a very exciting there in this period because we still -- we didn’t -- we were doing these things on the run. We didn’t have permits or insurance, we tied into people’s circuit breakers, so it felt really vital and exciting and, in retrospect, incredibly dangerous. We’re lucky we didn’t blow up the house or something.

At a certain point it became -- sort of years into the Twilight pictures -- it became prohibitive to shoot the kind of lighting that I wanted to shoot in peoples houses.

[00:40:01]

So I was invited by MASS MoCA to use their sound stage to make a picture. And I loved that the museum was right where I had made all the other photographs, so it felt like complete continuity. And I had in my mind an image of a floating woman submerged in her living room, so that was the first picture I made on the sound stage. We built the set in a tank and then filled the tank with water and nearly burned down the museum because all the water was going through hot water heaters and literally the fire department had to come and put out the fire. That was a very Crewdson-esque moment.

But the thing I like about this picture is really her expression. Like, to me, when I looked through the ground glass in making this picture it was terrifying in a certain sense. And I think that to me that that’s what the photograph is about that, like, that there is something terrifying and beautiful about it for me.

When I went back to the sound stage I began to realize that I can make the photograph -- the pictures didn’t have to be spectacular. Like, in fact,
I was more interested in starting to make the pictures more introverted, more psychological.

[00:42:59]

But I still liked using the sound stage because I could then pick the wallpaper and the color of the floor and the objects on it. Everything had meaning and everything I could control. I have a control issue some would say.

So this is then moving into *Beneath the Roses* which I think takes the whole way of I’ve been making pictures to another level. At this point, the pictures are much more like -- the whole process is much more like making a movie where we now work in productions. We have the whole crew and they’re much more sort of working on a large scale. But because of that, I wanted in *Beneath the Roses*, if the production is more ambitious, the narrative is smaller, the small events that have more to do with the setting and the figures are more diminished.

This is a photograph looking down on a street in Rutland and there’s a pregnancy center like halfway down the street. I knew that I wanted to make the photograph in some way about that. And this was like an 18-year-old girl who was just going to the center who happened to have come on the day we were shooting, and she was pregnant with twins and, again, it shows you that in my pictures, although there is big production, they’re very organic in a lot of ways, like, unexpected things always happen.

[00:44:06]

I think these pictures are also more about rootlessness about sort of, again, this moment in between moments.

I was saying earlier today that wasn’t until late in the project that I realized that I was making all these pictures of these nondescript cars with doors open, the door open, and it’s almost embarrassing now to look at it and say, “Wow! How did I not realize that?” But that’s part of the creative process, I think, this idea that you are drawn to do things over and over again not quite being aware of it. But if I was going to say what that’s about, to me, it's about using the automobile as a way of suggesting about being neither here nor there, being in between a moment.
This is on the sound stage. The sound stage pictures became more involved in trying to create a deep space, a psychological space, a lot of windows and doorways, reflections. This one here, I really do like this picture and -- this was not going to be the picture that -- originally the picture was going to be very different.

[00:46:01]

And that boy was going to be in another photograph. We’re working on the sounds stage and this woman and the boy drove up together from New York. And I was told that the entire four hours they were driving, they didn’t say one word to each other and I was immediately interested in that. And it thought, “Wow! Those two would be great in a picture together.” And you can see the meat is super red and the color of her sweater.

This has a similar story, strange, but in this case I don’t think I should tell it. Anyway, I like this picture, I’ll say that. [Laughter] I’ll tell it another time.

That was the boy named Shane who followed us around on the production and he was this young kid and he came from a very broken home and he was so innocent but obviously wounded in a certain sense. And he kept following us because we were in one location and I wound up making a picture of him underneath these train tracks with this light coming from above. And he’s -- I was so afraid he wouldn’t be stay still for the exposure but I kept coaching him. Every single time I’d go and put my hands around his shoulders and I said, “Just imagine you’re in the most beautiful place in the world.”

This is -- we used a rain machine to make this picture.

[00:48:30]

This is a picture that was on a sound stage. I wanted to make a photograph of a woman with a newborn infant. And so I found her through a midwife and she had never been in a picture before and she had this two-week-old baby. And I thought it was really important that they weren’t touching, that there was no -- that was that kind of ambivalence. So we built this entire set, put the snow in and every time we put the baby on the bed it started crying because it wasn’t being touched or wasn’t warm.

And then it was Bill Markham who was there to put the snow in and said, “Why don’t you put the heating blanket underneath.” And that’s how
he’s just sitting there. This set is entirely built, or references, the motel in *Psycho*.

[00:50:02]

And then this was a production which was definitely the hardest thing I ever did in terms of work was we did a series of snow photographs, which is a very big challenge and particularly a challenge in that for the whole first part of the production there was no snow. [Laughter] So literally, and I'm completely serious, all of the snow you see here we made through snow machines. And it was insane.

And then this one, which is in the collection, this one it snowed, thankfully, because there was no way we could have filled all of that space. And there was a snow storm on one of the last days of the production and we convinced the town just to close down the street and let it and just let it snow for 12 hours or 14 hours, whatever it was. That movie theater is actually a senior citizen something or other. I had to think of the -- I wanted to make the exact right title on the film and we were making lists and lists and then I just settled on *Brief Encounter*. The picture is really about the track for me.

And then I'm just going to end with some behind the scene views of the making of the photographs starting with some documentary images of the location pictures. You can see that, like, one thing we always do is put lights in cranes and I think that’s very distinctive, in terms of the palette.

[00:52:00]

But we also put lights in houses, in cars and we have -- so that this is really the most elaborate part of the process. You can see I like these very nondescript cars. Here’s the rain machine. Here’s making snow. And then here are photographs made in the sound stage. These are drawings of sets that I work with with my art director. Here’s an original sketch for that birthing scene. And then I wanted to make a picture of a burning house, returning to that motif, so I met with the fire chief and when we mentioned this, he had a glimmer in his eye. He was very excited. And then the very next day he offered us any of these houses to burn.

[Laughter]

And here’s documentation of that picture. That’s Rick and part of the lighting crew.
And that’s the fire. As it turns out, I decided not to burn the house down. I wanted a more controlled burn and we worked with this special effects guy named J. C. Brotherhood. The fire department was very excited, though, to be involved.

And you could see I have a very intimate relationship with my subjects.

So there’s really just a very short period where the ambient light of the sun and our lights work together, it’s really like 20 minutes maybe.

They still say “hold.” Position and hold.

And here’s the final picture which is a composite and you’ll see that many of those kids were digitally exterminated. [Laughter]

And ending with one last picture which is a very similar location to that snow photograph, in fact, but you could see the scale of the production, having to close off the street, clear the street of parked cars, get permission from all of the shops.

And so you could see it’s this enormous enterprise which starts months before hand.

We’ve got to keep the fire department involved. [Laughter]
[00:58:00]

[Video Clip]

A big fan of fog machines.

[Video Clip]

[Laughter]

[Video Clip]

Thank you.

[Applause]

[01:00:00]

I don’t know if there’s time for any questions, yeah a few questions? Yeah?

Male:  
I’m a great admirer of your work and recently I saw a couple of prints of your Firefly project and it’s such a departure from your style. And one of the things I’m wondering is as you get further and further in your career, developing a very specific style, a very cinematic style, does that become limiting in your creativity and where do you go from there, especially with your departure?

Gregory Crewdson:  
Yeah, that’s a good question. You know those Firefly pictures, which I didn’t show, they were actually made the same summer that I made the Hover photographs so I was -- and I was drawn to the mystery of it, but when the summer ended I couldn’t bare to look at the pictures so I just -- to me, they were just about being there and the experience of photographing this very elusive thing. So I put them in a box and it wasn’t until 10 years later that I opened the box up and I was startled by, to me, the beauty of it and the imperfection of it and the fact that they were so simple and so elemental. And so, in one way, so far from what I had sort of gone on to do and also so sort of similar in other ways, so I wound up printing that work.

In terms of your other question, it’s like, -- yeah, the Beneath The Roses project for me it was like an epic project that took seven or eight, I think that was seven years, eight productions -- and I knew when that body
work was complete that, yes, I had to do something dramatically different, and it would be nice to do something on a smaller scale.

[01:02:23]

And I just completed a project that I'm in the midst of printing now but I can't really – I don't want to really say anything about it but you'll see it's a very different direction. It was very scary to do, but it was very exciting. But looking at the pictures now, it really goes back to my original observation that you can't get away from yourself no matter what, so...

Anyone else?

Male: Was your Massachusetts cabin in Cape Cod or the Berkshires?

Gregory: The Berkshires and all of these pictures --

Male: I thought it was too pretty.

Gregory: Yeah, all of these photographs were made like in Pittsfield and North Adams and Lee. And, you know, I've often been asked -- it's like why do I continue to photograph in the same area over and over again? And I think that's a very complicated -- for me it's an unsettled question. I don't really know. Only to say that like, I think, every artist has this -- like artists do have a landscape, they do have a setting. And I think it probably also has a lot to do with my childhood and growing up and stuff like that. Anyone else? Yeah.

Female: In your work, the region seems like it's a character itself and you spoke to the happenstance of townspeople walking into your shots, but it's also clear that you pull a lot from film production with art direction and sketches and set building, would you speak a little to your casting process?

[01:04:09]

Gregory: Yes. Firstly, -- Wow, I had a laser pointer here and I never used it.

[Laughter]

Just to make one quick distinction before I talk about that is like in Beneath the Roses there's two dramatically different ways of making the picture. One was the location worked in neighborhoods and the other one is a sound stage and they're very different in terms of... But in terms
of casting, is that for the most part I don’t use known actors. I mean this last picture is Jennifer Jason Leigh, but she’s so tiny in the frame that I don’t think anyone would notice that. And I used her because, partially because, well, she’s a friend of mine and also I thought she was very Hitchcockian in the picture. But that’s really the exception to the rule. I tend to use people who either I stumble upon or that I do work with a casting director that -- a local person who helps me round up these people.

But I’m drawn to particular types of people. I’m looking for that certain sadness maybe or kind of something or other. But I don’t really like to have a lot of contact with my subjects, you know? I want to keep a distance so that what I usually do, or most often, is that very early in the process with my assistant I write a description of the actual...which becomes like kind of a screenplay but it doesn’t say anything about like motivation or plot. It’s just very descriptive and when I ask someone to be in a picture I’ll just -- I won’t -- the only thing that I really show them is this little thing and I will never talk about -- I want to there to remain a kind of distance between us. I think that’s good for the picture.

[01:06:37]

Female: There’s a photograph of yours that I often show in my classes that you didn’t show tonight of a woman who is in her underwear and she’s facing the car and it’s like the mother is coming up...

Gregory Crewdson: Yeah.

Female: And it’s like a teenager caught in --

Gregory Crewdson: The headlights.

Female: It seems like you often use women in a very vulnerable position...

[Laughter]

Gregory Crewdson: Maybe my psychiatrist…. Yeah, I don’t know exactly. Like if you noticed how they’re made and the production of it and my sort of obsession to try to make them perfect but in terms of the -- what you’re really asking me is more of the murky content of the work which, I think for me, I want to remain a mystery like I don’t really -- like I don’t want to know exactly what any particular picture means or -- and I know I’m being elusive here and that’s part of my job I think.
But you're right, I think the transition of vulnerability, but I would also say there's a certain kind of passivity of a lot of the men in the pictures. Yes?

Male: You mention...[inaudible]

Gregory Crewdson: Right. I always do that and if you noticed that the camera -- once the camera’s framed, it never moves; the camera is stationary, it’s static. There's a lot of reasons for that because it mostly has to do with lighting, but the most important reason is that we shoot 40, 50 pieces of film and then later in post-production, which I really didn’t talk about today which is very long and labor intensive and painful, is when you see the picture at the dining room table here you'll see that there’s a -- I hope you don’t immediately see but you will see that everything’s in heightened focus. Everything from the very foreground to the background is in focus and, quite frankly, no camera really sees that way and the human eye doesn’t see that way but I’m interested in that compression of space to try to create a psychological anxiety, almost unnaturally sharp. And also it suggests that everything in the picture is important, like if you -- for instance, most movies there’ll be the main subject in focus and things fall out.

I’m really invested in this idea that there has to be this absolute clarity in the picture and that everything means something.

Female: In the beginning of your talk, you said something about how you’re interested in the relationship between documentary and fiction.

Gregory Crewdson: Yeah.

Female: And so I’m interested in what we are to deduce from your work in how we understand reality, if it -- you know, in terms -- because everything is so radically fabricated.

Gregory Crewdson: Right.

Female: Would you care to comment on what we understand or what we’re supposed to take away from reality, if we understand your picture to be some representation of it?

Gregory Crewdson: Well, yeah, I mean I would say slightly ironically maybe that I would call myself a realist photographer and what I mean by that is that I want
everything to have a kind of super clarity and detail where, again, going on the same idea where there’s almost like heightened sense of realism that -- but mostly, when a viewer looks at my pictures I want them just to fall into the photograph like just to -- like someone reading a book or watching the movie just like fall into the picture, falling to the diegesis of the picture.

[01:12:04]

So, in the end, notions like truth and fiction don’t really -- in the end, they’re not that relevant to me. When I was coming of age as a young photographer in the ‘80s, there were essentially two oppositions and it was the documentary approach to photography: the tradition of Walker Evans and Robert Frank and this idea of looking in and out into the world, and then there was the first generation of postmodern photographers, Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince, that sort of rejected the whole notion of photography as truth.

And to me, I embraced both sides. I loved both traditions and I thought of being -- I wanted to combine the disciplines in a way because the whole question wasn’t really relevant of like what is real or not. It’s been a problem in my life generally. Yes, back there?

Male: You talk about this idea of your inverted narrative and I wonder if, when you come up with these scenes where there isn’t anything about plot or motivation or anything like that, is it really what stops you from making a film because of having to expand on that idea? But then I also remember this one time I saw something when you said that the photograph doesn’t really have any narrative quality to it, so I’m wondering if you can maybe speak about that a little bit.

Gregory Crewdson: Yeah, I think that’s a very good question. I’ve been asked this before about story telling and the relationship to my pictures and that. I mean I can honestly say that I’m entirely invested in the single image, so when I make a photograph, when I’m location scouting and looking for a setting and then an image comes to mind, I will never ever think about what happened before or after. It’s completely irrelevant to me. In fact, I want it to remain a mystery so I’m just -- I feel like my only alliance is to that moment and trying to invest that moment with as much beauty and mystery as possible.
So yeah, so in that way I think that, unlike filmmakers, I don’t have to think about continuity or plot and I think that limitation might be a strength in a certain sense. Then it also would probably be a good reason for me not to make a movie because I just don’t think in those terms and I never have. The idea of just even moving the camera a degree is like terrifying to me. But most everyone in my crew works in movies and I think for them it’s been great. One of the reasons they’re drawn to working with me, often at very reduced pay and all that, is being really drawn to the idea of all working to try to create a perfect moment and not having to make cover or edit or shoot a scene from different angles. That we’re all sort of working together to create this moment. Yes?

Male: Kind of a lowbrow question.

[01:16:04]

Gregory Crewdson: Good, good, it’s about time.

Male: What’s your favorite camera, what’s your favorite camera to use?

Gregory Crewdson: Well, that old standby right there is the camera I’ve made all the pictures which is a 8x10 Sinar camera but this new project, it’s the first time I've shot completely digitally which was interesting, too. But to me it’s all tools; to me the most important thing is story that’s inside you. Every artist has a particular view of the world and that’s what’s interesting.

Maybe one more or two more. Yeah?

Male: Since so much of your work is preconceived, do you still surprise yourself and what does surprise you?

Gregory Crewdson: Yeah. Well, always there's necessary surprise. In fact, for me the mystery in my pictures comes from my compulsion, my need to make a perfect world in a photograph, a perfect picture, perfect image and the impossibility of doing so. So there's always things intruding upon your original concept and that's necessary. So when we're out in locations it's like changes of weather, it’s someone walking into a frame, it’s like unexpected light. There’s always some surprise and then of course in post production, it’s the surprise of trying to re-imagine this. The whole thing is filled with like surprise and failure in a sense. Yeah?

Male: How do you -- when I look at your work, you’re referring to this tradition of narrative that’s pre-modern, how do you feel -- do you feel like a burden when you look at say a Rubens constructing -- basically sort of
doing a lot of what you’re doing and constructing a narrative. Is that a burden for you, do you enjoy looking at art history or images?

[01:18:16]

Gregory Crewdson: I love it but it also shows you that we’re all mining from the same territory. I think the artist’s job in the end is -- you know you have this particular story that you have and then you have the whole tradition of art behind you and the artist’s task is to try to take sort of that history and try to reinvent it one degree. That’s all that’s necessary to make it new is just change it one degree and it sort of sets the boat off in another direction.

Well, it’s been a total pleasure so thank you for all turning up!

[Applause]

Dennis Kratz: Again, please join me in thanking Gregory Crewdson for investing his photographs and these moments with mystery and profound delight.

[Applause]

[01:19:46]