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## Behind the Scenes with Gregory Crewdson

GREGORY CREWDSON: BRIEF ENCOUNTERS takes us deep into the making of Crewdson's larger-than-life cinematic stills.

By [Glen Helfand](#) February 23, 2016

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'Gregory Crewdson: Brief Encounters'

As if a film boiled down to a single frame, [Gregory Crewdson](#)'s photographs are potent hits of artifice and actual feeling. His are lush, extravagantly produced images of cinematic surrealism that have the entrapments of Hollywood gloss, yet invariably are set in small New England towns past their prime. Buildings are haggard here, and sometimes the feral intrusions of nature reclaiming its space and the human psyche. In one memorable photograph, glowers bloom, in fecund bursts of color, in a working class living room as a woman in a slip digs her hands in the dirt. Her expression is inscrutable, lost in a curious reverie, a feeling that is often experienced by his viewers.

Often, his twilight-set images are suffused in a smoky fog that adds a dramatic smolder to ambiguous moments. In one, a woman stands in a rumpled slip in the unpaved dirt outside some kind of dispatch center. Nearby is a taxicab, the door still open from which the woman has alighted, and inside a shirtless older man sits behind the steering wheel. What has happened could be a moment of sexual violence, or perhaps a something more interpersonally nuanced. It could go either way, and the narrative ambiguity is what gives his aesthetic clarity its punch. We are required to activate the stories, and we viewers do so with pleasure.





'Gregory Crewdson: Brief Encounters'

Crewdson is the kind of artist who is perfectly fitting for documentary treatment. His images are created with the scale of crews, and budgets, that create entire indie features, and fittingly, [Gregory Crewdson: Brief Encounters](#), a film that offers insight into this artist's practice, has the feel of an extended behind-the-scenes DVD extra, with a deeper layer of insight. The film follows the making of a major Crewdson body of work, a series of lush melancholic images together called *Beneath the Roses*, which he created over six years starting in 2002.

The artist himself, an endearing, slightly shaggy man who exudes unfettered passion for his work, is the key to his work. In the film, directed by Ben Shapiro, he offers uninhibited access to the painstaking process of making his pictures. While he has a calm demeanor, he admits he has "a preoccupation with trying to make something perfect." He has a good rationale for this— "The still is frozen, so everything has to be exactly right."



'Gregory Crewdson: Brief Encounters'

As this series was made in small Massachusetts towns, location seems to be an important part of his inspiration. These places serve as backdrops, he says, "for submerged psychological drama." He seems to flesh them out during long swims in a lake. It's not as bucolic as it looks: Crewdson, who grew up in Brooklyn, New York, is the kind of guy who devilishly relishes telling us that the police found a dead body floating there the week before. He shows no fear of the reality, even as he conjures images suffused with anxieties, fears and desires. It is in the fictions that he finds deeper resonance.

(To add to the resonance of fiction, writers Rick Moody and Russell Banks are recruited to each weigh in on the uses of narrative in the photographs. Secrets, says banks, are at the core, while moody notes writers like visual art that is narrative in nature.)







#### 'Gregory Crewdson: Brief Encounters'

With images of home movies and slide shows, Shapiro reveals some of the underpinnings of Crewdson's m.o.— his father was a psychoanalyst, and the artist recalls there were patients who met with his father in his basement office, a forbidden room suffused in a cloud of psychological mystery, of stories that could only be imagined. Crewdson, the younger, also thought he would be a shrink. And in an uncommon moment of bonding, the photographer recalls his dad taking him to see an exhibition of Diane Arbus pictures, unsettling images of extraordinary outsider characters, which had a deep impact on the future artist's perspectives.

Crewdson studied photography at Yale (where he now teaches), a school particularly influential in the medium, though one long known for a stiff emphasis on documentary forms. Crewdson, who earned his MFA in 1988, however, found his inspirations with younger artists such as [Cindy Sherman](#) and Laurie Simmons who worked with photography as a fiction, inventing narratives. He became clearly interested in a sense of mystery, hovering between documentary and something more cinematic—artificiality that is able to contain a deep sense of narrative truth.

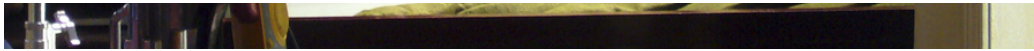


#### 'Blue Velvet'

He was further catalyzed by a viewing of [David Lynch's Blue Velvet](#) (1986), a film whose dark, small town surrealism that influenced Crewdson's early work. The series of photos he took through the 1990s involved suburban diorama tableau that undercut Astroturf perfection with monstrous elements of gored animals and even a leg that seems to be sprouting thorns. The photographer, whose work emerges from the intersection of everyday life and some sense of theatricality, admits his marriage was failing at the time.

If those works found inspiration in natural history museum displays, his subsequent work grew increasingly cinematic in inspiration, and ambition. Starting with unpermitted shoots on residential streets—where he'd lay sod across the divides or arranged ominous mounds of dirt between the traffic lines—he has moved on to productions that channel studio films, like the high keyed production design of films by [Alfred Hitchcock](#), who Crewdson admires, and are as often shot on sound stages as in set dressed actual locations.





### 'Gregory Crewdson: Brief Encounters'

The film concludes with Crewdson's most elaborate picture, *Untitled (Brief Encounter)*, 2006, an image of a main street dusted with snow a calm moment, but one that involved negotiating with city officials, actors and marshaling actual weather, places cinema front and center—and a movie theater at the center showing the David Lean film of the title, at 7:30. It somehow seems fitting that he would follow up the series with a more modest project, in which he photographed decaying historical film sets at Cinecittà outside of Rome, another vision of poignant artifice and endless possible narratives.

Gregory Crewdson's work is currently (at the time of writing) on display at [Gagosian Gallery](#).

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