

Gregory Crewdson's *Untitled*

An Exploration of Uncertainty



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Creating dynamic and visually stimulating images has long been achievable with evolving photographic technology, but Gregory Crewdson manifests his ideas through photography in a way that is more common in filmmaking rather than photography. According to the Guggenheim, Crewdson's work has been compared to the likes of filmmakers such as Alfred Hitchcock and Steven Spielberg ("Untitled" 1). This comes as no surprise as he cited them as inspirations for his works in a 2008 FilmInFocus article, listing *Vertigo* by Alfred Hitchcock and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* by Steven Spielberg as two of his five favorite films (1). During the 1990s, the United States was in a time of large political change with the end of the Cold War and rising number of terrorist attacks taking place. Climates in time of turmoil such as the terrorist attacks breed escapism in popular culture. Artists such as Gregory Crewdson set to differentiate the content they could make by providing a sense of the unnatural or perhaps the extraterrestrial. Crewdson's series *Twilight* captures an unsettling tone by depicting dark toned suburban images and illuminating them with shafts of light that weave the heavily produced and overstated with the unspoken messages that Crewdson is working to portray. *Untitled* (1999), which has also been referred to as Sod Man, depicts a man lifting part of the floor of a dirt and grass floor that is surrounded by suburban appearing living room walls to uncover a mysterious shaft of light.

Crewdson's images are not manifested with environmental factors, he employs full size crews to create sets, light, and generally produce his images. In *Gregory Crewdson: Brief Encounters*, a documentary film following Crewdson's *Brief Encounters* series, he does not even take the photos that he is producing. He maintains more of a directorial role in the creation of his images, and there has been some debate over whether he should maintain credit for the production of the images, as he does not directly create them. In the *Twilight* series in particular,

Crewdson's work required film quality lighting and sets to create the desired results. In *Untitled*, it is particularly noteworthy that the light rises from the ground up to the man, as the technical work for those light shafts require a false floor in which the lighting rig is set and calibrated to the desired effect.

Observing the image with a critical eye, it becomes apparent that there is much detail to unravel in every corner of the image. The background depicts a 1940s era living room which is characterized by the large white brick fireplace, neutral floral wallpaper, and varying decorations that depict a traditional looking household. In the middle background there is an upright piano that has two candles, some tchotchkes and sheet music on it, as if it has been used somewhat recently. There are hanging landscape paintings on the left and right sides of the background and there are two portraits hung above the piano. There are lights on the ceiling of the room, and there is a table lamp on the right side of the frame that provides ample light for the landscape paintings on the wall. The foreground is characterized by the overgrown, earthy ground on the floor. All the set that depicts a suburban life has a warmer, more neutral color palette, which heavily juxtaposes the nature in the foreground. The left side of the frame depicts a large mound of dirt and grass that has obscured the left side of the frame but has a vibrant cool toned green that gives a supernatural feel to the greenery in the frame. The center of the foreground is where the only character is located.

The man is wearing a dirty pair of grey pants and a stained white shirt. He is clean shaven with a short haircut and is in the age range of his late forties to early fifties. He is kneeling, sweating profusely and has his hands on a section of the floor, as if it was just set down after he unearthed it. His expression is eerily empty; there is no surprise, anger or happiness apparent on his face after he has made this discovery. The hole that the man has uncovered is surrounded by

cigarette butts, an ashtray, and two empty, squashed cartons of GPC cigarettes. The hole appears to be made up of conventional flooring materials: there are torn and exposed wood beams that are meant to provide the floor with structure and stability and the grass like texture appears to be made of fabric materials, as there is stitching, threads, and partial bits of material showing at the edges of the hole.

The most important aspect of the image, as mentioned previously when discussing the *Twilight* series in its entirety, is the lighting that streaks upwards in the frame. As mentioned previously, there is a white light that is emerging from the hole, which illuminated the man's face. Not only is this an astounding technical feat, the light provides a focus to the image, as the eye is drawn from the man's illuminated face towards the hole. Interestingly enough, there are also two other sources of light that appear to be originated in the ground. Each of the shafts in the background are visible in the air, an effect that would be achieved by pumping a smoke-like substance pumped onto set, where the light would reflect off it and show on camera and to the naked eye. The left side of the frame has one beam that is pointed upwards that is stationed between the upright piano and the large hill of grass. The smallest beam is located in front of the left side of the piano. It is barely visible, but it adds a subtle glow to the background. On the right side of the frame is one smaller shaft of light that is located slightly to the right of the table lamp that is placed on a dresser. There are large differences between the tone of lighting in the foreground and background that create a larger gap between the action in the foreground and the presumed setting in the background. Each part of the background, including the three beams of light, have a distinctly warm glow to them, indicative of the suburban household that it is meant to represent. The scene in the foreground has a slightly cool toned illumination to it. Even the tone of the white light from the hole is less yellow and is a purer white, which adds to the almost

blue tone that is being cast on the grass. The man, however, is lit in a way that incorporates both the warmer tones, which are more apparent on his skin, and the cooler tones, that reflect more cool to neutral on his clothing.

Aside from its physical characteristics, the imagery in the photo lends itself to many of the themes that Crewdson is trying to convey to his audience. There is a certain posed feeling to the photo, which provides a more cinematic feel to the image. It is only added to with the use of the different tones in lighting, as they provide a more produced, but more surreal feeling to the piece. It provides a kind of stiffness to the photo, but it is clear that there was action before the photo, during the photo and after the photo. On deeper consideration, the image could be interpreted to be a moment in a film that feels less organic, but is used for advertising because it has conviction in its action. The audience knows that the man had taken action, and the image produced provides the result of the actions with a finality, instead of attempting to capture the moment that the action was done.

Without context, the empty expression on the man's face continues to confuse more than it elucidates a clear message. There appears to be a subtle patience or hesitance, as if the light surrounding the man is indicative of the arrival of something new or unknown. The scenario that the man is finding himself could easily be the inciting incident for a suspenseful extraterrestrial film. Perhaps a more intriguing detail would be the cigarettes that surround the hole. They are an indication that the audience is presented this photo in media res—a story being entered where there has already been action—which Crewdson employs heavily in his works. The “punctum” of the work would be the isolated action of the man, as Crewdson creates drama, visual appeal, uncertainty, and deliberate action together to set the tone for the image. Without the man, the image would lack a story and the thematic use of the unknown would be lost on the audience.

In the context of modern photography, Crewdson's works represent a theatrical and more dramatic side of photography that relishes in the creation of new and unexplored scenarios that would not occur naturally but represent themes that are relevant in culture. Crewdson's employment of film level production elements provide the audience with ample opportunity to explore the details of the image without any hesitation because each part of the image was created and manifested with intent. Theatre professionals and educators insist upon the idea that every concept and detail of a production needs to be examined and deliberate because when a director can decide every detail, they should care enough about the product to put some thought into it. Crewdson captures many themes in his works, and his *Twilight* series is no exception. The tying characteristics of the light in each photo creates these concepts of isolation and discovering the unknown that places the audience in uncomfortable positions. *Untitled* continues that trend, and truly explores what the mundane and the unnatural look like when they collide.

Gregory Crewdson's works have long been recognized by the art community as unique and have allowed Crewdson to continue his work in the photography world both as an exhibitor in many museums across the world, including the Museum of American Art in New York, the Guggenheim, and many more ranging back from the 1990s when series such as *Twilight* was being produced ("Gregory Crewdson" 1). According to the Guggenheim, he taught at four colleges before beginning at Yale University in 1993, where he is currently employed.

Conceptually, *Untitled* juggles the deliberate nature of the theatrical style with the uncertainty of the thematic use of light to create an uncertainty. Crewdson masterfully produced a piece that is consistent in theme with his other works in the *Twilight* series, but the photograph also strikes out on its own as a fully formed conceptualization. The juxtaposing color palettes in

the background and foreground create visual interest, and the light in particular create focus and communicate some of the intricacies of the thematic tones of the work.

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