OF UNFETTERED LIGHT AND LIMITLESS ENERGY: AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF GREGORY CREWDSON’S *BENEATH THE ROSES*

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The Berkshires of western Massachusetts is a special place. Nestled at the southern end of the Green Mountain range, and part of the larger Appalachian system—the oldest mountain chain in North America, these landscapes and rivers are a rich environment where humans have interacted with this space in creative and spiritual ways for millennia. Humans have not always had, or made the best time of it here, starting perhaps with a European-vectored smallpox outbreak which killed or drove away nearly all of the indigenous people living in the area in the 17th century. However, the land around what has become Pittsfield Massachusetts remains a space for culture and wonder, home to art houses, craft production, museums, and schools.¹ Yet all is not picturesque in western Massachusetts. Industrialization, a concomitant feature of the Anthropocene, continues to levy devastating effects on the region. Land, skies, rivers, and people are poisoned by pollution from mass production and profit-seeking which incentivize the dumping of waste into the environs. More recently, the region and the families who live there are threatened by fracking as petrochemical firms continue their extractive drive to produce the energy consistent with the demands of contemporary American life.² Tourism, the financial lifeblood for local artisans, craftspersons, innkeepers, and other small-scale labor sectors of the economy, brings both millions of dollars to the region annually as well as congestion and the pollution of cars, vans, trucks, and busses full of visitors eager to experience the magic and wonder of the region.³ When talking about or producing art inspired by this unique area of North

America, it is, therefore, necessary to consider the environmental implications of socioeconomic development, both on the landscape and the people who live in the region. Countless artists, writers, and other creative individuals --Hawthorne, Melville, and Rockwell stand out as perhaps the most recognizable --have called The Berkshires home. For Gregory Crewdson, a prominent name in contemporary art, this is the area of North America where he produced some of his most iconic images.

Gregory Crewdson’s cinematic, tableaux photographs often depict an anonymous, banal, and tension-filled life in suburban and rural communities. Working as a self-described American realist⁴ and strongly influenced by a tradition of American vernacular artists, including work by Arbus, Eggleson, Friedlander, and Hopper,⁵ Crewdson actively seeks to construct or highlight points of tension between landscapes, people, and their communities in the photographs he produces. Garrison and Krejcarek highlight the cinematic influence on Crewdson’s images in their analysis of Crewdson’s depiction of displaced, or an excluded eroticism that exists in small towns which pushes inhabitants to escape for life in an urban realm.⁶ Similarly, Howell connects Crewdson’s work to the American Gothic tradition of artistry by suggesting that Crewdson’s representation of small town American life blurs lines between “the real and the fabricated, the documented and the imagined.”⁷ In his Beneath the Roses project,⁸ Crewdson’s application of a

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⁸ I use the term “project” as a way of capturing the artistic production and exhibition of the images in this series of photographs produced between 2003 and 2008. These photographs have appeared in books, gallery exhibitions, documentary films, as well as images which are readily available from various sources on the internet.
multitude of artistic influences informs his production of visual culture; one that is at once pleasing in the way he uses color and light to convey the richness of the every day and provocative in the questions he poses viewers about the quotidian nature of contemporary human life outside of the cityscape. Underpinning these depictions of simply-lived human experiences, Crewdson constructs narratives and sustains assumptions about the very foundation of contemporary American life; namely an uninterruptable and perpetual access to energy. While Crewdson eschews deeper political meanings and critiques\(^9\) of late capitalist culture in *Beneath the Roses*, his world building --from production processes to thematic representations --rests upon a consumption of and availability to energy that is directly at odds with the very people and places which are the subject of his artistry.

What follows is a reading of Gregory Crewdson’s *Beneath the Roses*. I am interested in exploring how the viewer perceives the representation of energy in Crewdson’s photographs, as well as the underlying production of Crewdson’s work. The heart of my argument rests on the premise that Crewson's production of photographs in *Beneath the Roses* contributes to the unsustainable use of resources which underpin the very psychological, social, and material tensions he is seeking to portray. My focus on energy usage, and more broadly environmental concerns, are consistent with the scholarship and tradition of environmental humanities and ecocriticism. This analysis is grounded in a materialist ontology which problematizes, unpacks, or otherwise criticises constructed binaries and boundaries between humans and non-human aspects of the world, but also as an epistemology which sees the act of reading as an affective

\(^9\) “These pictures capture a sense of despair, of poverty, but they are not political.” Gregory Crewdson speaking in *Gregory Crewdson: Brief Encounters*. Directed by Ben Shapiro. Zeitgeist Films 2012, DVD.
and analytical means of assessing cultural production.\textsuperscript{10} This mode of reading not only opens up avenues for critically appraising aesthetic and material representations in art, but also points towards ways to engage in advocacy and activism surrounding the consequence of such analysis. As Braddock and Irmscher contend, art history scholars can respond to the real and present danger of environmental crises by orienting their scholarship which fosters cultural solutions to ecological emergencies through, “a transformation of environmental perception and historical understanding,” and participates in the ongoing environmental turn in the humanities.\textsuperscript{11} This response to present environmental conditions comes in the form of reading humanities work by grasping “the full intricacies of our imbrication with energy systems (and with fossil fuels in particular)” so that we can “map out other ways of being, behaving, and belonging in relation to both old and new forms of energy.”\textsuperscript{12} In other words, humanities scholars interested in unpacking and rethinking how culture, economies, and human life itself is energy- and petro-dependent can start by exploring how forms of energy are represented in, and facilitate the production of, contemporary artistry and thus to think about sustainable modes of production and expression. In the same way that the critic can read both an overtly-represented sexism and an underlying misogyny of artistic production in the work of Allen Jones’ \textit{Halstand, Table and Chair}, so too can we see and assess the revealed and hidden expressions surrounding the normalcy of

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energy extraction and unsustainable resource consumption in the work of Crewdson’s *Beneath the Roses*. My analysis reads Crewdson's art as resting on a reliable and limitless access to energy, one that has profound consequences for the community he utilizes for his work but is never interrogated by the photographs he produces. By unpacking the broader aspects of Crewdson’s work, I seek to highlight the deleterious effects of Crewdson’s photographs in both ignoring real environmental issues that are impacting the very subjects he is photographing, as well as pointing a way towards rethinking about assessing artistry from the perspectives of art history and curatorial activism.

One of the interesting aspects of conducting contemporary artistic critique is the ready-made access the ubiquitous commentary and interviews available from artists, where biographies as well as statements of intentionality, practice, and craft dominate the cultural bandwidth and popular discourse in more voluminous and accessible ways that previous generations of artistic consumers could not imagine. Rare is the Thomas Pynchon or similarly-private artists in an age of self-promotion and market-based artistry; for the consuming public and hungry museums feed on the very faire artists serve through their production, interviews, speaking engagements, and other connections with their audiences. To this end, it rather easy to locate the photographer Gregory Crewdson’s approach to his artistic craft. The son of a psychoanalyst father, Gregory Crewdson was born in 1962 and grew up in an urban, bourgeois setting in Brooklyn New York, replete with siblings, a progressive school education, and regular family vacations to the woods of western Massachusetts; sites of much of his later artistry including *Beneath the Roses*. Crewdson’s formal training in photography came in undergraduate work at SUNY Purchase and a Master of Fine Arts from the Yale School of Art,
where Crewdson currently serves as the graduate director of photography. Crewdson’s *curriculum vitae* reads like a laundry list of leading galleries and exhibition sites: from well-established venues such as the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Whitney Museum, to more eclectic, but still leading edge galleries such as the Houston Center for Photography, London’s White Cube, and various Gagosian galleries around the world. All this is to say that Gregory Crewdson has both the pedigree and practice which locate him at the very heart of contemporary photographic art in the 21st century, a position which comes with the expectation of critique of both the themes he conveys in his art as well as the underlying political economy of his work.

Crewdson’s approach to photography and artistry rests on his interests in exploring psychological dilemmas, paradoxes, and unanswerable questions. Such production is very personal to Crewdson, “Everything in the photographs: the birds, the iconography, the images, and probably most directly, the actual casts of my body parts, deal with my own psychology. They are used as tropes to investigate my interior life. I want to take familiar tropes like the suburban home or aspects of the landscape and project onto them some kind of personal meaning.” Crewdson’s artistic practice rests on an elliptical understanding of creativity and production; "I believe very strongly that every artist has a central story to tell. The struggle is to tell that story over and over again in visual form. It's like the defining story of who you are."

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14 Morrow, “Gregory Crewdson”
15 *Gregory Crewdson: Brief Encounters.*
For Crewdson, this story is about understanding how to make sense of his own life in the
ordinary cleavages and settings of small-town life, outside of the urban, elite existence where he
makes his work and home. Interestingly, there is an othering quality to the work that Crewdson
does in these small Massachusetts towns; where Crewdson is a “city boy totally uninterested in
the city as artistic subject” who comes to document a constructed quotidian community in
manufactured still lifes.¹⁶

Whereas much of the commentary, critique, and Crewdson's explication of Beneath the
Roses addresses the psychological and artisanal aspect of these photographs, there is little to no
treatment of his work from an environmental standpoint. Crewdson’s perspective and practice
about the environs that are the subject and stage for his work in Beneath the Roses is sparse, if
not contradictory. An avid swimmer, Crewdson regularly plunges through the lakes in and
around Pittsfield for hours at a time, yet his commentary reveals a view of the natural world as a
utilitarian means understanding the human experience: “I’m interested in using the iconography
of nature and the American landscape as surrogates or metaphors for psychological anxiety, fear,
or desire.”¹⁷ While Crewdson is interested in exploring, or perhaps exploiting, “the relationship
between nature and domesticity, particularly some kind of disturbance of the landscape and
disturbance of normality,”¹⁸ Crewdson’s inspiration and pre-shoot work comes in the form of
“driving around and around familiar old Pittsfield”¹⁹ and related towns to find abandoned
buildings, unfettered light, or a sense of space aligned to the narrative he wishes to express.
Crewdson is enthusiastic to reflect upon his childhood and his craft during interviews but is

¹⁶ Larocca, “Loneliness and Multitudes.”
¹⁷ Morrow, “Gregory Crewdson”
¹⁸ Ibid.
¹⁹ Larocca, “Loneliness and Multitudes.” Crewdson also discusses this process as he drives throughout scenes in
Gregory Crewdson: Brief Encounters.
cagey about discussing the ways in which the production of his tableaus may be impacting the communities he considers, even declining to directly address questions about his funding sources for making *Beneath the Roses.* While Crewdson gains some measure of familiarity with the subjects who appear in his photographs and may bring cachet or even increased economic activity to towns he works in, Crewdson and and his crew of approximately forty cinematographers, light riggers, set designers, production assistants, and more are rightly interlopers in these small towns, consuming resources, clogging roads, and temporarily reorienting community relations in the pursuit of a single shot. One wonders the extent to which Crewdson and company consider the impact of their artistic interventions into the Berkshire communities, or if he even considers more sustainable ways in which to produce his work.

In “Untitled” (Figure 1)—hereafter colloquially referred to as “The Madison”—a solitary white woman sits on the curb outside of The Madison bar. Her gaze is off to the distance, perpendicular to the smoke-laced vanishing point of the photograph. The woman’s look, to the extent to the viewer can perceive it, is one of contemplation. Dressed in jeans, a tank top, and boots, hallmarks of working-class dress in small-town Massachusetts staged in this photograph, the woman dually represents the exhaustion of the workday or an evening spent inside the bar. The open door of The Madison bar suggests twin possibilities for the woman; she is contemplating entering the building or reflecting on her time inside. The photograph is staged at dusk, what Russell Banks describes of Crewdson’s work as the changeover time of day, where people perhaps reveal their secrets in these liminal moments. Dusk also serves an analogue for

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20 Larocca, “Loneliness and Multitudes.”
21 See Figure 1 in the Appendix. Gregory Crewdson, “Untitled.” *Beneath the Roses,* 2007, [http://gregorycrewdson.tumblr.com/](http://gregorycrewdson.tumblr.com/)
22 *Gregory Crewdson: Brief Encounters.*
daybreak, again, suggesting the range of possible futures and past for the woman who sits on the curb outside the establishment. The only other concrete human action in the scene is a car receding from the viewer’s perspective. The driver heads into the background with headlights on, suggesting an indeterminacy of the time of day represented in the frame. The remainder of the landscape reinforces the small-town aesthetic of the location; clapboard houses, two-lane streets without traffic lights, and empty sidewalks consistent with a sparsely-populated locale. Thus, the viewer is left to ponder and consider possibilities for the people and the places depicted in “The Madison.”

Moving beyond a formal reading of “The Madison” towards exploring the production process of *Beneath the Roses* opens up critical ways of seeing how Crewdson’s images are manifestations on modern energy infrastructures, and not an authentic depiction of the environs. In this way, Crewdson’s photographs are an example of what John Berger describes as cultural mystification, where the the staged remoteness and liminality of the photographs masks, or even erases the material and bodily realities of the objects in the photograph.\(^{23}\) The haze in the background of the image suggests a driver heading into the unknown; the prospects of a new dawn or the myriad of nighttime possibilities. The aesthetic effect of the haze is intriguing until one comes to learn that the mist is not naturally occurring, but the output of smoke machines fitted on the back of trucks which traversed the street just before Crewdson's camera completed its shot.\(^{24}\) The viewer sees standing water and the lingering effects of what was perhaps rain or even the watering of laws. Puddles forms at the edges of driveways in the middle ground and trace intriguing lines in the foreground, drawing the viewer to see a uniquely carved out space

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\(^{24}\) Gregory Crewdson: *Brief Encounters*. 
for the woman straddling the sidewalk and the street. At first glance, the viewer may marvel
upon the fortuitous events which aligned such creatively-dispersed condensation at the very dusk
which Crewdson and company chose to take this photograph. In reality, Crewdson used
thousands of gallons of water dispensed from fire trucks and hoses to water down at least two
blocks of the street just prior to taking the photographs used in ‘The Madison.’²⁵ It’s also worth
noting that Crewdson and his production crew regularly disable the streetlights, traffic lights, or
other public utilities when staging their photographs outside, away from a soundstage.²⁶ In their
place, Crewdson illuminates his photographs with high-intensity, cinematic lights positioned on
cranes, scaffolding, and other types of rigging, all of which draw a tremendous amount of power
from the local grid. Crewdson’s pursuit of capturing and representing the ideal light of dusk to
enlighten the personal and social tensions is actually a facade, built on the very capacity to
manipulate and amplify unnatural and unsustainable forms of power and illumination. The
consequence of Crewdson’s mystification is profound as the viewer only sees what Crewdson’s
outsider perspective wishes to make visible, and not the underlying material impact on cultural
production and representation.

Perhaps with all of Crewdson’s photographs, the work done to construct these images he
wishes to convey his narrative runs counter to the material and social facts of life in The
Berkshires. These communities are home to vibrant people, working in various trades against
and through some of contemporary capitalism’s most punishing effects on non-urban America.
Such towns are not spaces of desolation, of never ending liminality, or simply a narrow

²⁵ Ibid.
²⁶ This process is explained and shown several times throughout the documentary, Gregory Crewdson: Brief
Encounters.
reflection of a singular artistic perspective as Crewdson and many of his commentators attest. Crewdson’s otherly portrayal of small-town life wholly masks the unsustainable organization and consumption of public resources, especially electrical energy; a consumption that is at once unavailable to the people which he photographs and simultaneously negatively affecting these communities’ carbon footprint and petro-electrical dependency once Crewdson and company leave town.

Electricity powers all of the buildings, streetlights, and vehicles depicted in both of these photographs, serving as a constant foundation and enabler of the people and spaces *Beneath the Roses*; these scenes would not exist without a reliable supply of this source of energy. Understanding the fiction of Crewdson’s staged photographs should be contrasted against the exact nature of energy consumption in the region. The state of Massachusetts consumes thousands upon trillions of British Thermal Units (BTUs) of energy each year, the majority coming from fossil fuels or other unsustainable sources. There are four power plants local to the Pittsfield area, two solar, one natural gas, and one based on petroleum liquids, which serve the communities where Crewdson works. Of the roughly 200 megawatt capacity of all four power plants, 98% of this energy comes from petroleum-based sources. Thus, each intervention Crewdson makes in erecting lighting rigs and powering his production process both relies on and sustains the very materiality of a petro-dependent energy grid, to say nothing of the environmental impact of trucks transporting crews and equipment, scouting locations by car, and


\[29\] Ibid.
similar petro-centric activities. While Crewdson’s intention is to draw the viewer’s attention to the tensions and uncertainties for the woman seated on the curb, he ignores the ways in which both the representation of key elements of modern society facilitate the very existence of the image he is constructing as well the enabling of his production process in the first place. Moreover, reading Crewdson’s photographs and underlying production from an ecocritical perspective reveals that he sees public utilities and nonrenewable resources as means to his creative ends; paid for one hopes by Crewdson and his patrons, but still a condition where artistic production is not simply a function of an artist’s craft but derives from the extraction of public goods and resources.

The consistent and reliable presence of the electrical grid is essential to Crewdson’s work, even though his focus is on the psychological and the ephemeral. The electrical infrastructure used by Crewdson to produce Beneath the Roses rests in large part on work General Electric (GE) did during the 20th century, enabling the people who live in the Berkshires, as well as their homes homes and businesses, to function and maintain themselves. This electrical infrastructure and partnership with GE came at a price for people in Pittsfield and the surrounding communities, as GE’s use of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB’s) to build electrical transformers at their Pittsfield manufacturing plant left a trail of sustained contamination throughout western Massachusetts.30 This contamination and ongoing cleanup of more than 600,000 pounds of spilled PCBs just in the Pittsfield area alone occurred before, during, and after Crewdson’s time making Beneath the Roses; it is highly unlikely that Crewdson

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was unaware of this issue or the profound impact it has had on the communities he chose to photograph.

Crewdson’s interloping visits to these small towns and commitment to presenting the tensions and trials of suburban and rural life fail to adequately acknowledge or address a key material and social issue of Pittsfield and the surrounding area; that of a community dependent on an energy system that has poisoned rivers and redirected jobs away in pursuit of profitable and unsustainable energy production. For example, PCB’s present in the waterways and surrounding landscape are human carcinogens, linked to increased cancer rates, immunodeficiencies, and negatively impact the fertility and neurological capacities of the people in The Berkshires.31 This pollution’s impact on the bodies of the people that Crewdson photographs are ignored in favor of attempts to represent the solitary and tension-filled life of these suburban and rural communities. If Crewdson’s work is to understand why people leave these spaces, as Garrison and Krejcarek suggest, then he is missing a clear manifestation of what Rob Nixon calls “slow violence”; the unseen brutality of environmental degradation on poor people around the world.32

All of this is not to imply that grand scale artistic production, replete with crews of production assistants and workers, cannot or should not be produced. For example, as one reads Kara Walker’s A Subtlety, the viewer is directly confronted with the environmental themes of both the historical, social and material themes she is working through, as well as the manufacturing of this gargantuan production. Crewdson’s work could very well lend itself to a

commitment to laboring in sustainable ways, even if his oeuvre and thematic considerations remain the same; he simply chooses not to. Such recommendations for a more sustainable artistic production process are not hypothetical. Crewdson produced several photos in *Beneath the Roses* on sound stages, where motels were built as scenery, artificial snow used in smaller volumes, and even different subjects in the same, final photograph are a bricolage of different still photographs produced through photo-editing software.\(^{33}\) If Crewdson’s photographic practice includes the employment of digital and cinematic techniques, is there really any need to consume large amounts of petro-sourced electricity in the field while also disrupting public signs and utilities which require laborious resetting after the fact? Is it necessary to drain water from aquifers and storage facilities to portray a rain-soaked street when a soundstage can equally host such thematic representations and effects, or better yet digitally? Crewdson’s flexibility, or perhaps more generously, sophistication in the construction of his photographs could point the way to a more sustainable and less environmentally impactful artistic practice. However, it is clear that Crewdson’s artistic choices reflect little to no consideration of the environmental implications of his craft, leaving the viewer to raise serious and persistent ethical questions about Crewdson’s portfolio, practice, and perhaps the pedagogy he employs in training new generations of photographic artists. For Crewdson, such ethics and responsibility begins and ends with his vision and artistic production, designed to explore his personal psychological tropes and travails. Crewdson opines, “I am only concerned with the moment of the picture...it is a privilege to not have to think about story line, plot, character development (and to) only focus on how to make

\(^{33}\) An excellent example of this can be seen in the scenes from *Gregory Crewdson: Brief Encounters* surrounding the “Untitled” (Birth) photograph which involves a mother and newborn child. Crewdson and company use different exposures of all aspects of the photograph to construct the photograph using photo editing software and techniques which gives the viewer the impression that the image was taken in a single shot.
that image as mysterious as possible." However, Crewdson is not simply taking pictures of street scenes or staging individuals in photographs; he is constructing cinematic representations of an inner monologue with little regard for his consumption of nonrenewable energy and other resources involved in *Beneath the Roses*. Crewdson’s self-articulated privilege to work at liminal moments blinds both himself and the viewer to more significant environmental material and social concerns for the community he objectifies in his photographs.

The principal consequence of this analysis is, in a return to Braddock and Irmsher, to think about the ways in which humanities scholars and art historians can reorient their research towards considering environmental perspectives. Our Anthropocene necessitates that we investigate and communicate not only the constructed social representations and manifestations of exploitations, but also the material assemblages of human and non-human forces in our world, including the accessibility and sustainability of energy. Such amplification of ecologically-based art can be found, for example, in recent work by Hartney or Alfrey, Daniels, and Sleeman; more of these conversations are necessary. A second avenue for facilitating this change could certainly be found in expanding the history and practice of institutional critique and curatorial activism. By way of example, both Lorraine O’Grady and the Guerrilla Girls collective have employed direct action and exhibition to expose and combat sexism in artistic representation, production, and exhibition since the 1970s. More recently, Reilly suggests that

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34 Ibid.
35 For example, see Jane Bennett’s argument about how material, non-human forces inform our understanding of complex social phenomena in *Vibrant Matter: The Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
curatorial activism works to counter hegemonic representations of identity and the body; yet this work is done largely in absence of a focus on the environmental crises which are palpable threats to human life. Their critical work has, along with countless other activists, serves to open up conversations about gender and sex-based discrimination in artistic production and consumption. Adopting such praxis in consciousness-raising could certainly be done with a deep and committed concern for incorporating sustainable ecological practices in museum spaces. Such scholarship and practice is critical to sustaining both academic labor in the humanities, but more importantly, a world which we can inhabit in the future.

“Untitled” (The Madison)
Bibliography


