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## ***BRIEF ENCOUNTERS***

**DOCUMENTARY CAPTURES THE CINEMATIC SENSIBILITY OF GREGORY CREWDSON**



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# Brief Encounters

"Untitled (Birth)" by Gregory Crewdson from the *Beneath the Roses* series

PHOTO BY GREGORY CREWDSON



## Capturing the Cinematic Sensibility of Gregory Crewdson

By Jennifer Wolfe

Shot over the past decade by director and cinematographer Ben Shapiro, *Gregory Crewdson: Brief Encounters* is a methodically rendered portrait of the acclaimed photographer's work and process. Known for his meticulously composed, large-scale images staged with crews that rival many feature film productions, Crewdson creates narratives of small-town American life inspired by the worlds of Alfred Hitchcock, David Lynch, Edward Hopper and Diane Arbus. Crewdson's commercial work, including promos for the TV series *Six Feet Under* and album art for indie group Yo La Tengo, has helped the artist establish an aesthetic that is immediately recognizable within the popular culture landscape.

Shapiro first encountered Crewdson in 2000 while producing a segment for *EGG*, a public television series about notable figures in the arts. Four years later Shapiro was tapped to shoot a cable arts channel profile on Crewdson, following which he began to plan a larger film based around the artist and his work. Given unprecedented access, Shapiro accompanied Crewdson from 2005 to 2009, focusing primarily on the creation of his celebrated *Beneath the Roses* series. The film made its premiere at Sundance in 2012, and won the Maysles Brothers Award for Best Documentary Film at the Denver Film Festival in 2012.

“From my point of view, the main thing that was fascinating about Crewdson was the sophistication of his process, the ambition and scale and attention to detail; the idea that you could take that amount of time and care, and the specificity of each individual component,” Shapiro says about what initially drew him to the project. “Imagine making a film where you have one setup—there’s no movement, no re-compositioning, just one actor in one position—and making that moment, that image, as perfect as possible. That was interesting to me as a filmmaker because, as a filmmaker, you never have a chance to do that.”

Working as a one-man-band, Shapiro shot most of the material for *Brief Encounters* himself, as well as handling all of the audio. “You can track the progress of small-format video across the cameras I was using,” he laughs. “First was the Sony PD150 camcorder, followed by the Panasonic DVX100, which holds up remarkably well for an SD camera. At a later point I switched to HD, shooting with the Sony EX1R. There was also material shot on HDV, 8mm home movies and, of course, the photographs themselves, which were also used in the film.”

For Shapiro, the main challenge became capturing the scale of Crewdson’s productions as they grew from the 10-12 people employed for the *Twilight* series to the 40-60 people used to complete *Beneath the Roses*.

“His picture-taking is so elaborate—from the months of inventing and prep to all the components of the final shoot—that it was a challenge to find a way to cover it all,” Shapiro says. “Shooting as a single person, however, can make it easier to maneuver more quickly and nimbly. I had a mic on Crewdson the entire time so he was ready to shoot at any moment, and that took care of the sound issue. I also developed a sense of rhythm for how the day would go and who to follow during different parts of the day.”



PHOTO BY COSI THEODOU-BRASCHI



Top: Setting up the shot for “Untitled (Birth)”

Bottom: Gregory Crewdson (at left)

Shapiro worked closely with post house Glue Edit to integrate the various formats for the film, editing in Avid Media Composer and on the Avid DS system at the facility. “The files for Crewdson’s photographs were enormous, in the 7, 8 and 9 GB range,” he relates. “His archivist downsized the files so we could handle them for editing, because

it would have been too unwieldy otherwise. 150 MB was as big as Media Composer could handle—it didn’t crash; the files just wouldn’t load. So we used smaller versions for the edit and then replaced them with the larger, final files at Glue.”

Noting that the SD footage shot in the early stages of the project would have to be resized to



Above: "Untitled (Ophelia)" by Gregory Crewdson from the *Twilight* series

Right: Gregory Crewdson at work (standing on ladder) on the set of "Untitled (Ophelia)" in a scene from *Gregory Crewdson: Brief Encounters*

match the HD footage, Shapiro tried to plan ahead. "I actually shot the SD footage knowing I would do that, so none of the composition was lost," he says. "I didn't shoot it masked, but I did shoot it composed for 15:9."

"Crewdson refers to that transitional moment when you go from seeing the video of people on the set to the final, finished photograph. It's an interesting moment, which reveals something about the power of image-making and the power of photography," Shapiro concludes. "It was very rewarding to be a close witness to his work and to be able to document it myself." **dv**

