

Since photography's recent re-emergence as a rapidly advancing cutting-edge fine art medium, photography and contemporary art have become at times almost indistinguishable. The breadth, depth and variety of the virtual renaissance that photography currently enjoys is difficult to comprehend without reference to the books within which it takes centre stage, especially as the medium has a privileged relationship with the printed page.

Two new volumes have just appeared featuring the work of very different contemporary photographers: Gregory Crewdson (b. 1962) and Edgar Martins (b. 1977). The first is American, the second European; one is at the peak of his career, the other gaining increasing recognition.

*Beneath the Roses* marks the completion of the latest sequence of photographs

elaborately produced and crafted over an extended period by the American master of the photo-narrative, Gregory Crewdson. *Topologies*, Martins's third book, is a new anthology of the Portuguese-born, Macau (China)-raised, London-based, emergent photographer's last five series and his first monograph. It represents a younger artist's breakthrough onto the global stage. But what separates these two photographers' work, as instanced in their respective books, is not their age, nationality or relative status in the art world. Rather, it is a question of how each individual approaches their subject matter. Whereas Crewdson is an accomplished storyteller who can and does bring massive resources to the elaboration of sequences of single, haunting images, Martins seeks fresh horizons

to develop a philosophical, quasi-scientific investigation, carried forward on several different fronts. While Martins roams continental Europe, from Portugal to Iceland, ranging through various concepts about the nature of contemporary art and life, Crewdson artfully focuses on the specifics, picturing the inner, domestic life of average Americans, like himself.

Often likened to the great left-field film director David Lynch, Crewdson constructs precisely pre-conceived, film-like scenarios that bring to life brief but telling psychological episodes. *Beneath the Roses* is an extended series of moments from the emotional life of middle-class, small-town Americans that hints at the largely hidden depths of anxiety and self-doubt buried beneath the notional national psyche. Crewdson explores his

signature terrain of small-town disquiet, but now in a less obviously dramatic, more contemplative vein, pulling his focus back from the unlikely detail of the Freudian "Uncanny" seen in previous series, such as *Twilight*, 1998-2002, to make a broader picture. The mature Crewdson has taken up a more realistic standpoint where the broader elements predominate: the small-town environment; distilling a tangible atmosphere in certain specific settings with precisely orchestrated lighting. This new work attracts the viewer with quieter scenes where isolated or strangely displaced figures are caught in moments of borderline anticipation. His more recent interiors use windows, doorways and mirrors as framing devices to place several degrees of separation between angled views of characters immersed in self-reflection; in his exterior scenes, reduced figures, lost in thought, prolong the spellbound stillness of the view. The pictures were made in seven alternating, winter or summer, production cycles with a full crew of location scouts, set-builders, prop- and wardrobe-masters, make-up artists, actors, lighting and special effects technicians and camera-assistants, under his direction, between 2004 and 2007. The humdrum nature of Crewdson's chosen locations: street corners, front and back yards, country bridges, rivers and roads and forest clearings—not to mention desolate shopping precincts or the dated furnishing of his many interiors—contrive to show the disillusionment at the heart of his view of provincial American life. These images

Edgar Martins, *Untitled*, 2005

bear formal comparison with their precursors: the paintings of Edward Hopper and photographs of Walker Evans (both in style and spirit) while invoking the saturated palette of American luminists, Thomas Cole and Albert Bierstadt. *Beneath the Roses* is introduced by the thoughtful and informative ruminations of novelist and fellow New York resident, Russell Banks.

Coming after his award-winning *Black Holes and Other Inconsistencies* (2003) and *The Diminishing Present*, (2006), both published by UK Arts organisation, the Moth House, Edgar Martins's new monograph, *Topologies* (2008), is part of Aperture Foundation's First Book Initiative to publish new work by emerging artists. It opens with an illustrated essay by the Washington-based writer and curator, John Beardsley, teacher of History of Landscape Architecture at Harvard School of Design, and contains selections from five of Martins's most recent series. It closes with the transcript of a conversation with David Company, reader in History and Theory of Photography at the University of Westminster, London.

The plates begin with 18 untitled images from the series "The Accidental Theorist", 2005-07, Martins's remarkable minimalist beach scenes by night. Having stated that he enjoys the challenge of making photographs with his large-format view camera under difficult lighting conditions, the young artist makes a virtue of necessity, reducing the real, totally un-reconstructed subject matter to the barest necessities. His prolonged exposures render the seaside sky completely black, contrasting

Gregory Crewdson, *Untitled*, 2006 (detail)

with the reflected brightness of the sand to create stark horizontal landscapes enlivened by beach furniture, equipment and vegetation.

These are followed by 21 gloriously expansive Icelandic landscapes recording the topology of the area in all its variety in a neo-traditional style: straight colour photographs of actual views, some with featureless, evenly clouded skies emphasised by means of pre-exposing the film to condense the tonal colouration. Next come seven examples of Martins's images of Portuguese forests ravaged by fire, from the series "The Rehearsal of Space", 2005. These are followed by a further ten compositions, mostly by night, of ultra-modernist views of airport runways, also from Portugal. Finally, the last four plates, from his series, "Hidden", 2005, create extraordinarily spare, abstract colour compositions that both confuse and delight the eye, out of the colourful roadway barriers to be found alongside recently rebuilt road systems in the rapidly emerging country of his birth. Whereas Gregory Crewdson's book puts enormous effort into disguising the artificiality of what are in essence almost operatic productions, Martins's sensibility just keeps it simple: the overall concept being photography for photography's sake.

Richard Pinsent

□ Gregory Crewdson, *Beneath the Roses* (Harry N. Abrams), 140 pp, £29.99 (hb) ISBN 9780810993808  
 □ Edgar Martins, *Topologies* (Aperture), 128 pp, £27.50 (hb) ISBN 9781597110570

