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Daniel Gustav Cramer

Daniel Gustav Cramer is fascinated by dark places and it shows, especially in 'Woodland' the first series of photographs from 'Trilogy', depicting anonymous forests. The German photographer studied in both Germany and London, completing an MA, with distinction, at the Royal College. The large 'Woodland' series precedes 'Underwater' and 'Mountain'. The series consists of nearly 70 photographs, that is to say, so far it consists of nearly 70 photographs, as none of the series are finite, they will never be definitely finished, like the subjects they capture they are constantly evolving. Cramer's has repeatedly been compared to that of the German Romanticist Caspar David Friedrich, and when looking at his work and exploring the themes within it, it became clear to me exactly why.

Cramer's techniques mark him out in the world of contemporary photography. Cramer uses no artificial light in the photographs relying solely on natural light which sometimes he waits hours for, this combined with the lengthy exposures, in low lighting conditions, gives the photographs an ethereal feel. However the photographs are not merely the art of nature captured in one moment, Cramer's photographs are carefully and heavily manipulated in the darkroom. The rays of light and patches of dark are emphasised. Untitled (Woodland #44) is almost completely dark, the only lighting coming from a small break in the forest canopy at the top of the photograph, with a thin veil of light falling on the trees below. The image is steeped in darkness, emphasised by Cramer in the darkroom. This lighting adds to the sensuality of the photograph, something perhaps more visible in this work than others but still present in all Cramer's work. The moist foliage is only partially lit from above. The leaves themselves are partially in and out of focus, contrasting movement and stillness within the photograph as it is within the forest. The places depicted in Cramer's work simultaneously stay constant and are always the same they also are constantly evolving. The main theme evident throughout the whole of 'Trilogy' not only 'Woodland' is that of the dark and what it holds within each work. This is something not merely to do with Cramer's motivation as an artist but intrinsic to his whole medium. Photography, initially explored as a way to convey the definite truth of its subject, is now being explored in its ability to tell non-truths both in concealing what can be seen and showing what cannot. Unlike many of his contemporaries' use of digital alteration in their work, Cramer's heightening of the 'dark places' within his works is no falsehood; Cramer uses the techniques of his medium to show the viewer what could not be seen to the naked eye but this does not mean it is not there. Cramer's obsession with these 'dark places' is the basis of his work not just in the ideas of it but also in that the whole medium he works within is based upon the presence and absence of light.

The techniques used by Cramer are somewhat archaic, showing a return to the basics of photography and instilling a type of purity to the work. By means of these techniques Cramer creates something otherwise unseen, mysteries where otherwise there would be none. Cramer's technique and the length of time he spends working on these photographs in the darkroom is reflective to the subject of the work; this is a solitary act, mirrored by the solitary landscapes captured in his photographs. The time Cramer takes altering the images produced seems to be somewhat of a contradiction to the time he takes waiting for the ideal light. Yet this also shows Cramer's desire to achieve the perfect image: taking what he can from what nature provides but at the same time adding to it with his own skill. Cramer's delicate alteration of the photographs also draws comparisons with the art of story telling, the idea that fairytales would be perfected and changed as they were told, until they were eventually written down and cemented in the written word; Cramer's works are gradually perfected in the darkroom until this single, still image is produced. The fact of the length of time the perfec-

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ting of each work takes is also strange in conjunction with the idea that photography is capturing a single moment. However this view is also destroyed in the work by the fact that each moment as it were never really occurred, as it is a landscape created by the artist using the tools a darkroom, a lens, and nature provides.

The work reflects Cramer's interest not only in the 'anderswo', the 'elsewhere', as in the place one does not go but dreams of or would if they found it, similar to that expressed in German Romanticism, but anywhere, giving the works a universal feeling, this quality to the works is similar to that expressed in the work of Caspar David Friedrich. 'Woodland' captures scenes across the world, from ancient North American forests to patches of green on the edge of a motorway. Friedrich himself, instead of painting from one particular sketch or landscape, used several sketches from different places he had visited, drawing different details from each to form one completely unique landscape. Both artists show the beauty of the commonplace in their work: the landscapes portrayed by both are familiar to many but their works invest something new within them, bringing out their beauty. Friedrich himself said "one should seek out the divine in everything" this was a view he upheld in his work, as Cramer does today in capturing these 'Woodland' scenes found in lay-bys off a motorway. In Cramer's decision to leave the works unnamed also allows the viewer to attach different meanings to each one, many seem evocative of a memory or somewhere you have read about in a book, in particular images from fairytales, like those of the Brothers Grimm, Cramer's compatriots. The photographs share the ambiguities of such stories: simultaneously the subject is something beautiful, exotic and welcoming, drawing you into it but there is also an ominous aspect to them, the awful underlying meanings to traditional folk and fairy tales and the fear of the unknown and even death, within the images depicted in Woodland. Many of the photographs depict clearings or openings in the wood, what lurks behind the branches of the trees and in the shadows both intrigues the viewer, beckoning it forward and also frightens with the prospect of the what might be hidden there. The straight-on perspective of the photographs gives the viewer the feeling they are exploring these landscapes even if they physically move through it, instead of an aerial view which would give the viewer the ability to judge the landscape it makes you feel unsure of the surroundings.

Friedrich and Cramer also have their use of symmetry in common. Friedrich was known to use it throughout his work, for example in his masterpiece Cross in the Mountains, as does Cramer throughout Trilogy. This symmetry emphasises the perfection of the images depicted by the two artists, in doing so the presence of the sublime in the work is brought out. In Untitled (Woodland #45) two large trees, rich with deep green foliage, only marked by delicate white branches protruding through them, are separated in the centre of the image by a deep gash, the inside of which is pure, impenetrable darkness. The viewer can try to look in but it is impossible to see much of what is held within, and is left with only the ability to wonder what exactly it is looking at. This is a theme visible throughout Woodland, in which many of the individual images focus on partial openings in the scenery. This makes the landscapes resemble the human body in some sense, therefore it is present in some form throughout the work. Whilst Cramer omits actual figures from his photographs so that the viewer is the sole person present within the work, Friedrich often placed some figure within the work. Friedrich was found to be uncomfortable with solely figurative work through his time studying; yet he often incorporated figures into his work. Yet rather than making them the subject of the artwork, these figures are depicted as viewers of their surroundings, in awe of it. These figures are shown in conjunction with the viewer: experiencing the sublime. The sublime is one of the most important concepts behind the work of Friedrich and the movement of Romanticism. The idea surpassed beauty, that something was so overawing it would frighten anyone who expe-

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rienced it. The figures in Friedrich's work mirror the viewer, they are somewhat intimidated by what they see around them. This is exemplified in *Monk by the Sea* (1809), depicting a monk looking out over a blank horizon, a landscape decidedly split between three layers: the earth, the sea and the air, experiencing awe at the work of God, and the sublime in something so great it is incomprehensible to man except for that it is sublime. Cramer deals with the sublime in a subtler, modern manner. Whilst there are no religious connotations behind his work, amazement at the world, nature and what it is capable of and how much greater this is than any human achievement, is still a source of awe for people.

Cramer's works are not only evocative of the works of fairy-tales but many landscape paintings, such as those of Friedrich. Cramer's photographs have a painterly-like quality with their attention to detail, dramatic yet natural lighting and otherworldly-feel. Both Friedrich and Cramer's landscapes capture places bare of influences other than that of nature or, for Friedrich, God. However in the midst of these landscapes Friedrich puts symbols of what he views to be the most important things to do with both the world and humanity within it, for example religion in *Cross in the Mountains*. Both Friedrich and Cramer use the landscapes depicted in their work to explore themes in their work, yet neither artist impress them too heavily upon the viewer or control its response to the work: Cramer's photographs are merely given a number within their series and Friedrich refrained from giving his paintings overly-descriptive titles. Despite the fact 'Woodlands' series shows outdoor spaces, unlike many other landscape photographers or painters the work is very introspective with the viewer looking in, often on the outskirts of a forest or edge of a clearing, this is echoed by the idea of such solitary places being where one can be truly alone, places to be reflective. As in *Untitled (Woodland #41)*, in which a ray of light glows through to a clearing in a forest. The viewer himself has to peer through the layers of branches in the overgrowth, giving the feeling of discovering a secret scene. The small gap between these trees acts as a path, leading the viewer's eye up towards the centre of the photograph. At the centre stands a dead tree, tilting to the side, but the focal point of the photograph is instead the forest floor, lit ethereally by a strong ray of light, emphasised by Cramer in the darkroom. The viewer has to look past the trees, partially obscuring the view, looking into the centre of the scene. This makes any viewing of the work to seem voyeuristic in a sense: the viewer feels that somehow he is not meant to see this but at the same time wants more.

It seems somehow odd that in both Friedrich and Cramer's work, through their use of landscapes, something outdating humanity, they can both create something so personal, reflecting something about the artist but for which the viewer too can form a completely individual meaning. Through the exclusion of something human they allow themselves to explore the sublime in their art. Friedrich uses this to explore the divine and the world he sees it to have created, something sublime to him, whilst Cramer is more in awe of the untouched world just as it is and how it enables you to explore yourself as you would the forest depicted in the photographs, if you only could.

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