SESSION 22 · UNIT 3 — LIGHT & BRIEF · Mar 2, 2027

Gregory Crewdson & Annie Leibovitz

Crewdson b. 1962 · American — Leibovitz b. 1949 · American

Large-crew, art-directed, narrative photography — the brief unpacked



Untitled (Ophelia), from Twilight · Gregory Crewdson, 2001

KEY WORKS

- Untitled (Ophelia), from Twilight, 2001 — a suburban interior staged and lit like a film set (Crewdson)
- Beneath the Roses, 2003–2008 — entire nighttime streets built, lit, and populated like movie productions (Crewdson)
- Demi Moore, Vanity Fair cover, 1991 — a single portrait that became a cultural landmark (Leibovitz)
- John Lennon and Yoko Ono, Rolling Stone cover, 1980 — shot hours before Lennon's death, later named the best magazine cover of the past 40 years by the American Society of Magazine Editors (Leibovitz)

CONTEXT

Crewdson and Leibovitz are the two clearest examples working today of photography made the way a film is made: a script or concept first, then a location scouted or a set built, then a crew — gaffers, art directors, stylists, sometimes a hundred people or more — assembled to realize a single planned image. Crewdson builds entire suburban streets and flooded living rooms on soundstages and shoots them like a director shoots a scene, one meticulously lit frame at a time. Leibovitz does the same for a single sitting — a set, a costume, a concept, built around one person for one magazine cover. Neither is photographing something that was already there and waiting to be found; both are building the thing, then photographing it. That is exactly the mode Unit 3's brief work asks students to shift into.

WHY THIS PHOTOGRAPHER

Unit 3 opens — the brief unpacked: both photographers are the clearest examples of large-crew, highly art-directed, narrative-driven photography, which makes this the most natural pairing for the week the brief and campaign work begins. Crewdson and Leibovitz work essentially as art directors and cinematographers as much as photographers — planning a shot before anyone picks up a camera — which is exactly the mode students shift into starting with this year's Estée Lauder brief.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Crewdson sometimes uses a full film crew — gaffers, art directors, over a hundred people — to build a single still photograph. Leibovitz does something similar for a magazine cover. When you start the Estée Lauder brief, your crew will be, at most, a few classmates. What can you still borrow from how they plan a shot before anyone picks up a camera?
2. Neither of these photographers is documenting something that was already there — they're building the thing, then photographing it. Where's the line between directing a photograph and faking it? Does the brief you're about to shoot ask you to find something true, or to build something and make it look true?

MORE IMAGES



From the Cathedral of the Pines series · Gregory Crewdson, 2013–14



From the Beneath the Roses series · Gregory Crewdson, 2003–08



From the Disney Dream Portraits series · Annie Leibovitz