

Thomas Demand, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 4 March - 30 May, 2005

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Thomas Demand

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

4 March – 30 May, 2005

Looking at one of Thomas Demand's photographs of a carefully replicated environment provokes a strange sensation of simultaneous recognition and disavowal. The composition contains familiar objects, and it seems familiar because it stems from seeing a similar image in another context, as if one is coming across an iconic photograph from an altogether new perspective. Thus Demand's images look and feel *real*, while all the while they are obviously not real places that appear unreal by virtue of being photographed. Confused? Don't be; it's all part of the experience.

Consisting of twenty-five large-scale chromogenic colour photographs created between 1993 and 2005, as well as the American premiere of his film *Trick* (2004), the current exhibition at MoMA is the first comprehensive examination of Demand's work in the United States. Demand began his career as a sculptor, making scale models out of paper. Recognizing the inherent fragility of this choice of medium, Demand employed photography as a means to document his compositions. By 1993, his working method was completely transposed, and he was building paper objects for the sole purpose of photographing them.

Demand replicates the contents of media images in current – or, at least, recent – circulation, life-size in coloured paper and cardboard. Revelation of this working method is integral to the experience of the work, and Demand imposes a deliberate artificiality on his composed settings. Thus, there is a forced imprecision to his precise copy, as he deliberately leaves evidence of his handiwork – such as telephones without numbered keypads and blank ballot sheets on the desks in images such as *Poll* (2001), Demand's homage to election chaos in the U.S. in 2000, and bathwater simulated with crinkled translucent paper, as in his photograph *Bathroom* (1997), the source of which is an image of the hotel bathroom in Geneva in which Uwe Barschel was found dead.

Demand likens his paper sculptures to the first layer of his work, an impermanent stratum no longer required once the photograph has been created. So strong is his conviction that Demand destroys the objects once the process is complete. This obliteration is the ultimate act of possession and replication, of choosing fiction over fact, as it enables Demand to make over a copy of a natural or artificial space completely for his own purposes; he then photographs the evidence of his handiwork and does away with the trace. What remains for the viewer to contemplate is a copy of a copy of a copy, rendered completely unique.

Demand's photographed environments are devoid of any traces of their natural counterparts, and yet this conscious omission only serves to underscore the veracity of the photographic image. The viewer is clearly being asked to consider the photograph as a photograph, and not being prompted to feel something, through the visual experience, about a secondary, more real space. In Demand's world, the real has been completely swallowed by its verisimilitude.

Demand illuminates his copied environments to approximate the lighting in the source photographs, but in his versions there is always a sense of looking at a stage set or diorama. Such overt theatricality heightens the power of possibility in the images, as the viewer is confronted by spaces of "in between" or even complete banality, in which no real action transpires. The images are always caught in the state of "before" or "after" the action, but they clearly hold all of the tension of expectation or aftermath. Occasionally, Demand records movement in his work, as he does in *Ghost* (2003), which is his closest approximation to including a person in one of his photographs. In this composition, objects hang suspended in mid-air as though the person holding them had dissolved in front of the camera. It is an enchanting reference to a common phenomenon in photography of the early nineteenth century, when the camera was capable of recording inanimate surroundings in exact detail, but could not capture inhabitants unless they stood equally and deliberately still.

The source for Demand's work *Kitchen* (2004) was a media photograph of somewhat insignificant domesticity – dirty dishes and refuse

piled into a small, cramped sink. It is revealed that the locale for the original image was an undisclosed dwelling in Tikrit, in which Saddam Hussein was found and captured following the U.S. invasion of Iraq. With this added layer of critical information, evidence of the detritus of everyday life becomes cloaked with all the importance ascribed to objects in forensic photographs; each item becomes worthy of careful scrutiny for clues about its owner. Thus while Hussein himself is clearly not present in the photograph, the objects all but assume his aura. The relationship between objects that function simultaneously as signifier and signified is a continuing thread throughout Demand's body of work.

The photograph *Clearing* (2003) is one of Demand's few re-creations of a traditional landscape view. Conceived for his participation in the Venice Biennale, the image contains 270,000 meticulously fabricated leaves made from various shades of green paper, created to simulate a view of a section of the city's public garden, the Giardini. Photography has long been praised for its ability to clearly show every leaf on a tree, but knowing exactly how many leaves there are in his image is unsettling – almost too much information to contemplate. In this way, *Clearing* acts as a still life shrouded in the garb of a landscape, with all of its desire to evoke the sublime clearly on display. The experience is transformed into one of pure pleasure – the acknowledgment of the joy of looking at something consciously and determinedly.

While the starting point for many of his photographs is images produced for circulation by the mass media, some of Demand's more recent re-creations are entirely based on memory, prompting deeper questioning about the relationship between photography, truth, and representation, and ultimately about whether or not any connection to reality even matters, because Demand's constructed spaces so completely dominate the field of vision. Demand's work has an affinity to that of photographers such as Lynne Cohen, Ed Burtynsky, and Colwyn Griffith, who also address the aura and seeming artificiality of empty landscape and interiors. This double vision of the real and unreal seen through the same lens is critical to Demand's methodical investigations of the natural and built world that surrounds us. He is interested in providing a perspective on shared experiences in participatory perception, daring the viewer to consider places and spaces that are instantly recognizable but require the same focused attention of happenstance.

Johanna Mizgala



Kitchen (Küche) chromogenic colour print, 133 x 165 cm, 2004
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