

Thomas Demand

Reviewed at the Serpentine Gallery, London

Published in *HotShoe* no.143, August/September 2006, pp.72 - 73

I must confess to a strange habit: I love watching people (in galleries that is). I can't help my fascination with people's postures and gestures (which are remarkably universal), or stop trying to guess other viewer's impressions of what is in front of them. More interesting perhaps is the physical distance between viewer and work: Often people are inhibited by getting very close to a picture (perhaps this is some part of a code of gallery etiquette, not to obstruct other viewers?), and people tend to step back to enjoy work from a safe distance. This is especially the case with big pieces, such as Thomas Demand's very large photographic tableaux at the Serpentine Gallery. His images, however, force the viewer to question what they are seeing and encourage them to get closer to the picture and scan for clues that Demand's images are in fact of life-sized cardboard models. It is peculiar that images of such scale can draw the viewer close to them for an intimate experience.

This show could be mistaken for a quick survey or short retrospective. As well as two new pieces (*Grotto* and the *Tavern* series, both completed this year) it contains several of his seminal works made over the last ten years. However, Demand has managed to create a whole new installation by decorating the gallery with specially made William Morris-inspired wallpaper. The four rooms at the Serpentine have a different colour of the same ivy pattern taken from one of Demands images. As well as transcending the tradition of white gallery walls, this gives the exhibition a very distinctive identity. The use of wallpaper is also an effort by Demand to domesticate the space and draw attention to the original function of the gallery as a tearoom.

The centerpiece of the exhibition and the first work the viewer encounters is *Grotto*, a giant print (2.5m x 5.5m) based on a postcard of a popular tourist spot in Mallorca. Actually, the grotto is not a replica of a specific cave, but rather it is formed from Demand's impressions of what caves should look like. All of the stalactites, stalagmites, honeycombs and other mineral formations were made from

fifty tons of cardboard which has rendered an almost pixelated appearance. This work, although using his traditional paper and card materials, made use of several 3D imaging programs which Demand had commissioned to design the cave. Although this piece appears to be a little erroneous, given that all of the other images are of manmade interiors, Demand reminds us of the mythological nature of caves (from Odysseus to Batman) and that they were indeed Man's first dwellings.

Demand's work is typically discussed in relation to the discourse of architecture, as he usually recreates rooms and domestic spaces that are devoid of people thus drawing our attention to architectural details often overlooked or taken for granted. There is also a parallel between Demand's model environments and artificial room sets used in advertising photography, designed to idealize and sell the products within them. Although Demand's sets are deliberately lacking in traces of life (stains, marks, clutter) and room sets are designed specifically to sell a lifestyle, both are meticulously composed (room sets are made from cheap materials to imitate high quality ones) and every single element is considered. Also, it is not unheard of for thrifty clients wishing to save on delivery costs, to send the photographer paper cut outs of their products to be stuck onto cardboard.

Despite the often ordinary-looking spaces depicted, Demand's subjects are far from random. He chooses spaces from the public memory, typically that have been heavily covered by the mass media, such as *Kitchen* (2004), a mock-up of the kitchen used by Saddam Hussein during his time spent in hiding. Like all of Demand's micro-habitats, it is far too sterile and unspoiled to be authentic.

The most provocative work in this exhibition is the new *Tavern* series. These five photographs are based on a tavern in Burbach, Germany, where a boy was held by thirteen people, including his mother and stepsister, abused and murdered. When you see the image (*Tavern 2*) of a window of what could lead to a basement, surrounded by ivy, and then take note of the wallpaper, the blood chills somewhat. Whatever contemporary art's function is, it is not to comfort, but this is a rather cruel punch line to throw at the audience who is then – like the victim of this crime – suffocated by this poisoned ivy: A stark contrast to the “domestic quality” of the Serpentine Gallery that Demand wanted to exploit.

One very interesting point of this work is that the images Demand used for reference were actually of a police reconstruction made to test statements after the tavern had been razed. The images of the tavern became ingrained on the public psyche (like 25 Cromwell Street for example), despite the fact that they were not genuine. Demand's images are therefore a troubling simulation of a simulation.

What this exhibition desperately lacks is commentary and explanation. Without denying the quality of Demand's images (their silence for example, is disturbing), the palpability of this sort of work relies largely on the stories behind them. Without contextual information the *Tavern* series, as it is presented in the gallery, is wasted on a non-German audience. Every culture has its own real life horror stories that dominate the headlines, gripping a nation's attention and tormenting them, and so will be able to relate to the Burbach tragedy: The scene in *Bathroom* (1997) could be translated by a British audience as the place where Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman were killed.