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Words Ruby Boddington
Photography Damien Maloney

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"My pictures give you an image of your future memory": Thomas Demand in conversation with *It's* Nice That

Welcome to the first of our brand new series, In Conversation, a new fortnightly interview with a leading light from the world of creativity. Every other Monday, we'll publish a new Q&A here on It's Nice That. Today, for the first instalment, we sent our writer Ruby Boddington to Paris to meet the Los Angeles-based German artist Thomas Demand.

"The Louvre, the Centre Pompidou, these galleries are all great but places like Palais de Tokyo are the most exciting. And it has a great bookshop." This was what Thomas Demand told me to do with my afternoon in Paris after our interview at the city's Hôtel Lutetia. "What about the Eiffel Tower?" I asked. He responded: "It looks the same as in the photos."

It's a particularly funny comment coming from Thomas Demand, a man whose work is concerned with exactly that: making things look, in photographs, exactly the same as they do in real life. A German-born sculptor and photographer who now splits his time between Berlin and Los Angeles, Thomas recreates famous scenes from current affairs, to scale and in breathtaking detail and accuracy – entirely out of paper. He then photographs them and finally, even after spending up to three years on a single piece, destroys them.

Born in 1964, his career began as a sculptor but in 1993 his practice flipped. No longer was he taking photographs of his sculptures in order to document them, but he was making sculptures purely to be photographed. Today, his practice is a fascinating investigation into what photography as a medium means and what the role of an image in contemporary society is. Through meticulous craftsmanship, his works employ illusion to trigger recognition in a viewer, whether it's a dilapidated kitchen (in which Sadam Hussein ate his final meal before capture) or the corner of a bathtub (in the bathroom where German politician Uwe Barschel was found dead).

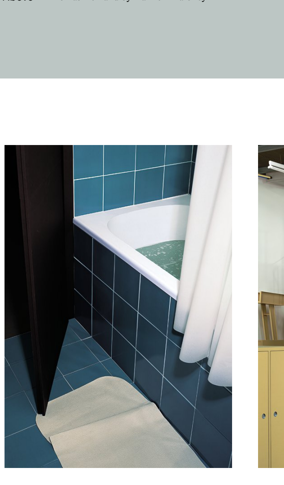
Thomas is not, however, an illusionist. There is no trick. Instead, he puts forward an idea of reality which is always changing, challenging the notion of objective truth. His works are simulations of the real world which are entirely subjective, acting as visualisations of how we reconstruct and rebuild our memories.

INT You're well known for your paper works now, but your technique was somewhat looked down upon by fellow students at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. How did you know you were on to something?

TD Well, you know, it wasn't an idea in one afternoon, which then unfolded or anything. It came out of the process of making sculptures. Because every sculptor has the same problem – you make a sculpture and then you have to store it somewhere. And then you make two sculptures, and suddenly you have two sculptures to store and then you just think, 'OK, do I really need a TV?'

INT So it began as mere practicality? Is that why you started photographing your sculptures?

TD Sort of. I didn't know whether it was worthwhile investing a lot of money in material, and paper is simple, you can get it anywhere, you don't need any help, you don't need a workshop. And then, as I said, I also didn't want to have to store them and with paper, I could make sculptures, get rid of them and redo them if I needed to. At some point, my professor at Kunstakademie Düsseldorf said, "You know, this is all very interesting. However, you should photograph them before you dump them to see whether your work is developing at all." And at some point, I had to decide what "the artwork" was, and realised I like the fact that a photograph is a fleeting document of one single moment. I thought that was very apt to what I was doing in my sculptures because a paper sculpture also fades away.



Above Thomas Demand by Damien Maloney

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Daily #30, 2017, Framed Dye Transfer Print, 67.2 × 54.8 cm (Kabel)

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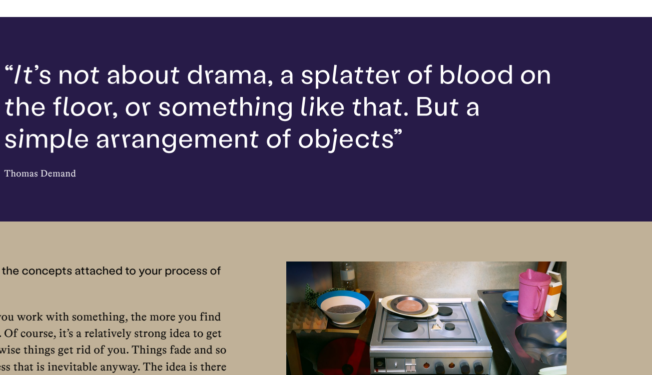


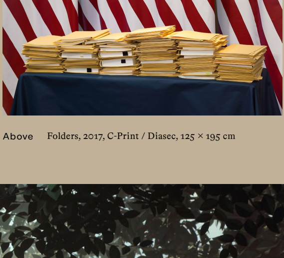
> "*It's not about drama, a splatter of blood on the floor, or something like that. But a simple arrangement of objects*"
>
> Thomas Demand

INT Do you now enjoy the concepts attached to your process of destroying your works?

TD Yeah – the longer you work with something, the more you find out about it philosophically. Of course, it's a relatively strong idea to get rid of things, because otherwise things get rid of you. Things fade and so I'm just speeding up a process that is inevitable anyway. The idea is there in everything but if you point it out, you make it poignant and underline the fact that you can never revisit a moment, that you're never going to be the same. It's a very old and simple argument, but I found that very intriguing and convincing.

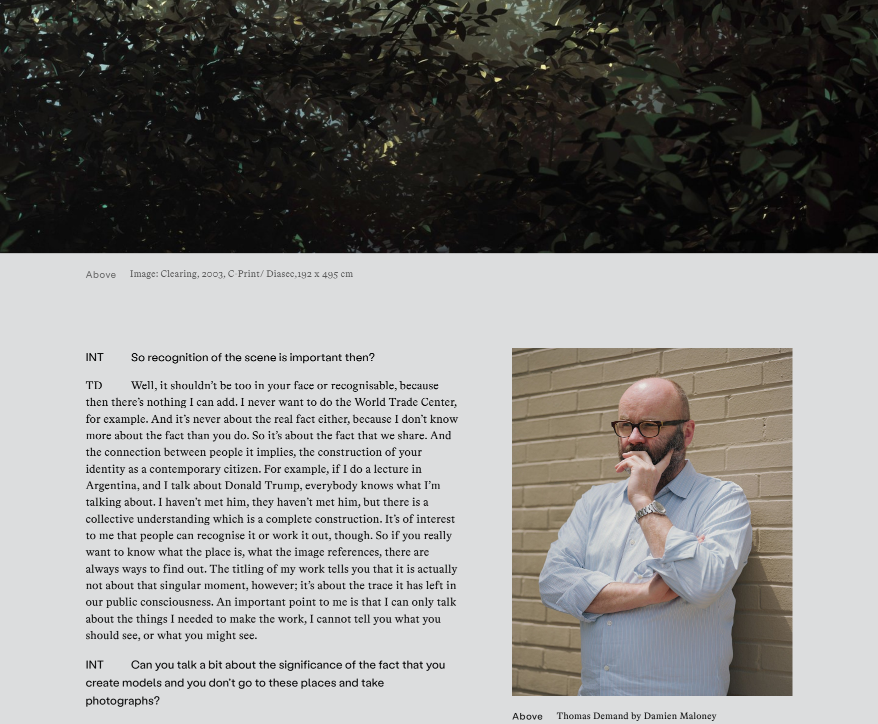
INT In your work, you choose to create scenes that are "around the corner from the horror" and not the horror itself. What makes a scene or idea resonate with you?

TD The potential of a narrative; the potential of a picture of giving you a narrative – a decisive narrative. Even if you don't know the narrative, you can feel that this is a place where either something just happened or something is about to happen. And it's not about drama, a splatter of blood on the floor, or something like that. But a simple arrangement of objects. We all have pretty much the same objects that we use every day. Saddam Hussein has the same type of stuff in his kitchen as I do. But the way that you frame a scene, or the way that you look at it, the way that you position these objects starts making a narrative. The more complex it gets, the more narrative you can create. The second thing is if it triggers the feeling that I've seen it before, but not in a nuisance way, like "I have seen this too often". It's more of a recurring thing, as if I can't place where it is but it makes me feel something.



Above Küche / Kitchen, 2004, C-Print/ Diasec, 133 × 165 cm
(All images © Thomas Demand, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn / DACS, London)

Above Folders, 2017, C-Print / Diasec, 125 × 195 cm



Above Image: Clearing, 2003, C-Print/ Diasec,192 x 495 cm

INT So recognition of the scene is important then?

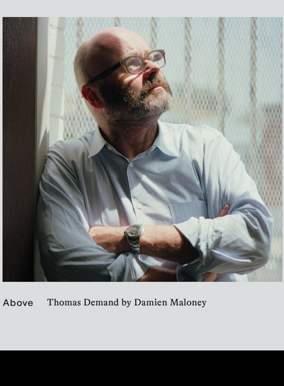
TD Well, it shouldn't be too in your face or recognisable, because then there's nothing I can add. I never want to do the World Trade Center, for example. And it's never about the real fact either, because I don't know more about the fact than you do. So it's about the fact that we share. And the connection between people it implies, the construction of your identity as a contemporary citizen. For example, if I do a lecture in Argentina, and I talk about Donald Trump, everybody knows what I'm talking about. I haven't met him, they haven't met him, but there is a collective understanding which is a complete construction. It's of interest to me that people can recognise it or work it out, though. So if you really want to know what the place is, what the image references, there are always ways to find out. The titling of my work tells you that it is actually not about that singular moment, however; it's about the trace it has left in our public consciousness. An important point to me is that I can only talk about the things I needed to make the work, I cannot tell you what you should see, or what you might see.

INT Can you talk a bit about the significance of the fact that you create models and you don't go to these places and take photographs?

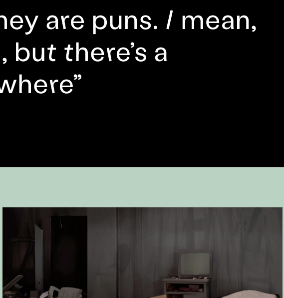
TD For me, photography is an agreement, mostly the technical kind. And, frankly, I can't give you any expertise on that, because I never got trained. Although I cannot say I'm an amateur anymore.

INT I'm sure you've learned a thing or two…

TD It's just not what I come from. There are a lot of implications between the camera, the focal point of the device, the maker and the thing which is looked at. I'm on both sides of that because I also produce the world which you see. The second thing is that a model is a cultural technique. Modelling is as important as making images, it's a filter of reality. And I'm not talking about architectural models or children's toys. Demography is a model, a weather forecast is based on a model, everything needs to be a reduced version of reality to understand it and then draw consequences from it in real life. If you think of a simulation, for instance. In space travel, you will not survive the reality if you haven't been trained for the emergency in a similar way before, because you don't even know what it looks like, or what it feels like, and then it's too late. So a lot of modelling is predicting our daily experience. It's a central cultural technique and that's why it interests me.



Above Thomas Demand by Damien Maloney



Above Thomas Demand by Damien Maloney

> "*I've come to realise that there's a lot of humour in the work. They are puns. I mean, it's not laugh-out-loud, but there's a conceptual pun somewhere*"
>
> Thomas Demand

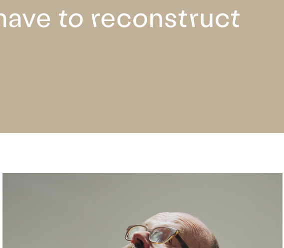
INT Is there an element in your work, then, of preempting things?

TD I would hope so, but I think what it actually does is shows you how you remember things. For example, if you take the notes from this conversation here, you have a totally different idea of what we talked about, and how long we talked about which subject than I do. Memory focuses on the most important things, and because you don't have a picture in your head, you just have to reconstruct the whole thing and so you add things – memory constantly adds things. What my pictures sometimes can do or what I hope they can do is give you an image of your future memory. It's the visualisation of an archival process.

INT What is the importance of scale in your work? Both the fact that you make things life-size, but also that you work so hard to make sure objects are believable?

TD I live in one-to-one and I don't really understand scaling down. But it's also because I'm trying to avoid very, very diligently any neatness. I'd rather have it a little bit aggressive or cold in order to escape the funniness of a model. I mean, if you look at architectural models, they always look great. But most of the buildings we have surrounded ourselves with are really horrible. So there's something happening there with scale, you don't look at the details. I will, for example, look at this table and think what's the diameter? How far away is this mug from this plate? The placement of these things is completely coincidental, but if you redo a coincidence it allows you to bring all the experience you have into every little detail. That makes a model of a particular place and not just some place.

Above Ruine / Ruin, 2017, C-Print / Diasec, 180 × 300 cm



Above Sign, 2015, C-Print/Diasec, 200 cm x 259.5 cm

> "*Memory focuses on the most important things, and because you don't have a picture in your head, you just have to reconstruct the whole thing*"
>
> Thomas Demand

INT Is that why you always build the back of a scene?

TD Yeah, I want to have an environment first.

INT And how far do you take that? How much of a scene will you make?

TD Mostly it's what you see but a little bit bigger. I mean, there's no point in, if you do this table, not doing the back side. The general idea is that you can walk in and, this has actually happened to many people, you sit on a chair, which turns out not to be real. Everything stands by itself, there is no wooden construction in the back or anything like that. I've come to realise that there's a lot of humour in the work. They are puns. I mean, it's not laugh-out-loud, but there's a conceptual pun somewhere. It's about the labour it takes to make these things, but then it's not about the labour at all, because anybody could do it with a little bit of patience.

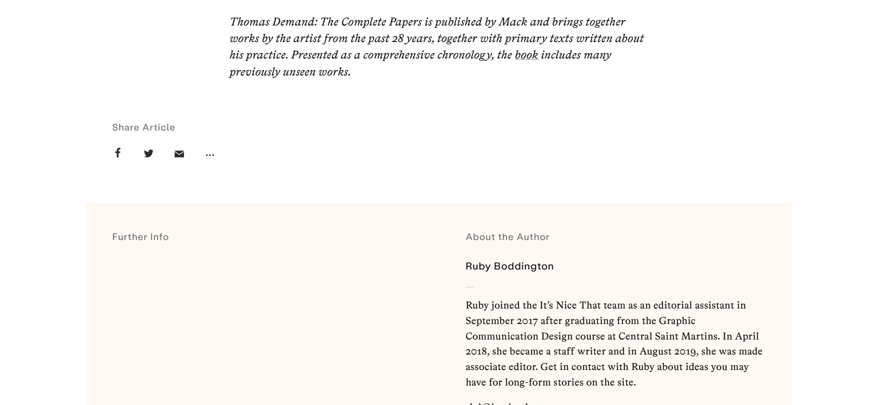
INT The spiral staircase in *Space Simulator* is one of my favourite examples of that.

TD Yeah, that was so beautiful to build.

INT It's interesting to think about whether your works, especially pieces as complicated as that one, are an object or a rendering of an object. What do you think they are?

TD I think mine are the echo of an object.

Above Thomas Demand by Damien Maloney



Thomas Demand: The Complete Papers is published by Mack and brings together works by the artist from the past 28 years, together with primary texts written about his practice. Presented as a comprehensive chronology, the book includes many previously unseen works.

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About the Author

Ruby Boddington

Ruby joined the It's Nice That team as an editorial assistant in September 2017 after graduating from the Graphic Communication Design course at Central Saint Martins. In April 2018, she became a staff writer and in August 2019, she was made associate editor. Get in contact with Ruby about ideas you may have for long-form stories on the site.

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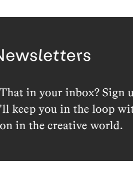

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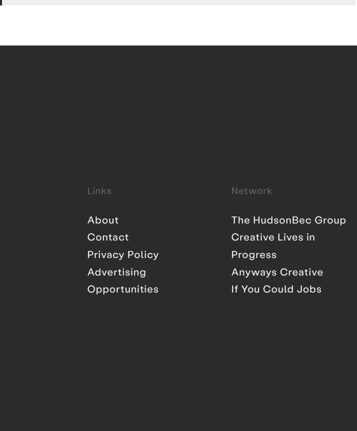

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