



## 'Total commitment to artificiality is fascinating'

From Saddam Hussein's hiding place to the ransacked Stasi HQ, Thomas Demand creates meticulous models of scenes - then photographs them. He tells **Sean O'Hagan** why he has moved on to nature

**L**ast year, Thomas Demand made two large-scale photographs, *Pond* and *Nursery*, that at first seem to suggest two conflicting ideas of nature: the sublime and the scientific. The former, a nod to Monet, shows a constellation of yellow, circular water lilies on an expanse of blue water. The second is an ominous, pink-lit interior in which small plants sit in identical boxes neatly arranged on long tables, their growth controlled by a network of pipes, cables and overhanging lights.

As with most photographs by Demand, though, nothing is quite what it seems. His signature process begins with the meticulous construction, in paper and card, of life-size models of actual locations. When completed, these are artfully photographed before being destroyed. Having made his name by creating oddly blank environments that nevertheless resonate with meaning, seeming to have a past as well as a present, he has now turned his attention to what he calls "constructed nature".

To this end, *Pond* is inspired not by one of Monet's water lily paintings, nor by the garden that inspired the French artist, but by a recreation of that garden in an art complex on Naoshima island in Japan. In dramatic contrast, *Nursery* is a recreation of a hydroponic laboratory situated on the science campus of Niagara College in Ontario, which offers what may be the world's first degree in commercial cannabis production.

"The Monet garden is both natural and completely artificial," says Demand, whose recent work is now on show at Sprüth Magers in London, in an exhibition that can be seen online. "It is that total commitment to artificiality that always struck me as fascinating." With the cannabis lab, he says, "the fact that it is almost entirely automated shows that there is a complete lack of sentimentality about the project. I find that wonderful somehow." By exhibiting the two constructed photographs together, he says, he is tentatively suggesting "a different idea of the sublime".

Demand's work has always been strangely seductive and often

possesses a quietly mischievous, almost playful undertow. Having initially studied interior design in Munich in the 1980s, he began making small paper models as an art student in Düsseldorf the following decade, as a way of tentatively exploring sculpture. "As a student," he says, "you find your own medium. So I began making these very banal, minimal sculptures: an ashtray, a cup, a cigarette." When he placed one of these objects next to another, something unexpected happened. "Suddenly, I had a narrative. As soon as you place an ashtray next to a cup, you have someone smoking and drinking a cup of coffee."

It was one of Demand's tutors who advised him to photograph his creations, to provide a visual record of his progress, before throwing them away. "Practically, I just didn't have any space to keep them in my small studio," he says. "Plus, if you have to part with the things you make, it has a charming side-effect:

you realise that everything is an idea. You can redo it."

The minimalist, not quite realistic, photographs that resulted have grown in scale and concept since, their flat, uniform surfaces, muted colours and absence of details occupying a liminal space between truth and fiction. Despite - or maybe because of - their apparent banality and their absence of human figures, they are often loaded with dark historical import, both personal and cultural. *Diving Board*, from 1994, nods to Olympia, the visual ode to the Aryan aesthetics of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games by the Nazi propagandist film-maker Leni Riefenstahl. Intriguingly, though, it is also based on the memory of an actual diving board that Demand used as a young boy, making it appear both sinister and ordinary.

In 1995, Demand made a work called *Office* (his titles are always nondescript) which is based on a 1990 press photo of the ransacked



interior of the headquarters of the Stasi, the secret police, in newly liberated East Berlin. In January this year, after the storming of the Capitol building in Washington, he had “the strangely beautiful experience of seeing press photos that were visually so close to that image that I begin to think that my pictures may have their own strange afterlife”.

Over the last decade, Demand’s vision has shifted from exorcising the ghosts of recent German history to exploring, in his oblique way, the turbulent upheavals of modern global politics. For 2004’s Kitchen, he replicated the grimy space where Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi president in hiding, cooked his last meal before being captured in 2003.

At Sprüth Magers, though, he has also chosen to exhibit two altogether more quotidian images that each possess a subtle contemporary resonance. The first is a small photograph of a discarded green tissue on a toilet floor. Although it’s



**The lab is at Niagara college, Ontario, which offers the world’s first degree in cannabis production**

PHOTOGRAPHS: THOMAS DEMAND/VC BILD-KUNST BONN, 2021, COURTESY SPRÜTH THE MAGERS; BRIGITTE LACOMBE

from 1996, he says it “references the thrown-away Covid masks” that are such an incidental feature of our lockdown lives. Likewise, 2020’s Canopy depicts a column of identical white balconies in a sky-blue residential apartment block, one of which is concealed by an extended yellow canopy. “It is,” says Demand, “about an individual trying to shelter from everyone else around him - a kind of lighter take on the isolation of Covid.”

Other than the drawn-down canopy, there is little evidence of any human presence. Does it concern him that the meaning of his constructed images often lies in the associations that the viewer is forced to make when confronted by these wilfully neutral images? “No. Not at all. I am more trusting of the fact that people will recognise something in them. And maybe, if they cannot, it will make them even more curious to find out. Also, I realised early on that a person does not usually just stumble into an exhibition by



accident. We know that a gallery is a complex space that depends on us being alert and curious. People want to know more when they leave than when they come in. That is the promise of an exhibition, and of an art work.”

Upstairs at Sprüth Magers, the exhibition takes a surprising turn with Demand’s photographs of patterns made by Azzedine Alaïa, the late fashion designer. Here, it is the creations of another artisan that are the subject, and Demand photographed them as he found them, hanging in colour-coordinated rows, their shapes creating a collage effect. “There was something completely coincidental about that and the wonderful randomness of the colour scheme,” he says. “It was that almost accidental beauty that I was drawn to.”

What was it about the idea of constructing models that first fascinated him? “The model is one of the central ideas we have created to navigate ourselves through the world,” he replies. “Think of computer-generated images or video games, but also the weather forecast and our pension plans. The model is essential, yet there is very little theory written about it. It is a completely overlooked cultural technique. We know it is important somehow, but if we think of models at all, it is usually in a very limited way - architecture, maybe, or children’s toys.”

He pauses. “I think the reason we take models for granted is because we don’t realise that the world would just be too complex without them.”

*Thomas Demand is at Sprüth Magers, London, online now; the public can attend in person 13 April-15 May.*