

THOMAS DEMAND

INTERVIEW
CHARLES SHAFIAIEH



PHOTOGRAPHY
THOMAS DEMAND

The Picture is the Messenger

German ARTIST Thomas Demand creates DISQUIETING photographs that seem at once real and artificial, leading viewers to the HAZY GAP between REALITY and FICTION.

Büro/Office (1995), C-Print/Diasec, 72.25 × 94.5 in.





Presidency I (2008), C-Print/Diasec, 122 × 17.8 in.

“The potentiality of the blank page is deeply optimistic.”

EVEN IF YOU’VE NEVER SEEN Thomas Demand’s photographs, in a way, you have. Achieving this uncanny sensation, more easily witnessed than described, is laborious for the Munich-born artist. He first takes a well-known photograph – of the room where Hitler’s assassination attempt occurred, for example, or the table with Whitney Houston’s last meal – and sculpts a one-to-one scale model of it with paper. Alterations occur: any element – people, in particular – that would ground the sculpture in a hyper-specific moment in time is removed. Following this process, which typically takes months, he photographs the model. Then he destroys the model. Excising those details imbues the image with an atemporal quality that makes it hover at the edge of fantasy. These large-scale images do not hide their construction, yet they appear almost more real than photographs in newspapers or on social media. Demand does not wish to create an illusion. Sensing the hazy gap between fact and fiction, construction and reality, truth and memory – “The Stutter of History,” to quote the title of his recent exhibition – is the point.

CHARLES SHAFAlEH *In Prisoner of Love, Jean Genet writes: “The white of the paper is an artifice that’s replaced the translucency of parchment and the ochre surface of clay tablets; but the ochre and the translucency and the whiteness may all possess more reality than the signs that mar them.” Does this reflect your own opinions about paper?*

THOMAS DEMAND At the core of Genet’s remark is the question: does it make any sense to write anything, or is the world better without commentary? The demonstrations in Shanghai during the pandemic immediately come to mind. The people – because they didn’t want to go to prison – couldn’t say what they wanted to, so they held up blank A4 sheets of paper. The protest

still worked because the message was so heavily entrenched in their going onto the street, and everybody knew what would be on that paper if they had written on it. That was very beautiful. It was about the reality of the blank page and its potential. Referring to my own work, *Atelier* [2014], with the paper cutout leftovers from Matisse’s studio: for me, the leftovers have a similar potential. They could be something, but the jury is still out on whether they will be discarded. The potentiality of the blank page is deeply optimistic.

C.S. *You care, too, about paper’s quotidian nature.*

T.D. Besides books, paper is a very temporary material. We write something on it and throw it away; we drink coffee from it; we wipe our nose with it. Then there is the playfulness – paper comes in different colors that reflect popular taste. In Japan, you have a broader range of pastels; Britain has darker colors; in France, there is a very bright palette. When I do something, I’m trying to achieve a normality, like a *déjà vu*. It feels familiar to you, and you can’t tell if the familiarity is because you’ve seen the image before, the material is so familiar, or you know the color scheme. It could be Saddam Hussein’s kitchen [*Kitchen*, 2004] or a staircase [*Staircase*, 1995], both of which still look familiar. I need to meet the viewer halfway, tell him a story, raise his curiosity and encourage him to think himself, to come with his own memories to what I’m doing. It’s very important that he trusts that I’m talking about something he understands. It’s not an aggressive move. To a certain degree, everything I do is something you can do yourself, if you have the patience. You need to trust the image as a viewer. Paper contributes a great deal toward that because we all know paper and have a feel for it.

C.S. *As memory functions in a way that always alters the past, do you consider your work as “realist” – as in, an honest representation of memory – or non-realist?*

“The picture is just the messenger, never the actual event. It’s a representative, not the real thing. It has its own life but also limited influence. That’s the appeal.”

T.D. “Figurative” is a more poignant term. I replace realism with another reality. I translate what I know about reality to a different reality, which is still something that was in front of the camera and has very strong ties to what you expect to see, but it’s not what you see. A writer can’t write fiction without having a life. So, it’s fictional but also true, in a sense. It’s the truthfulness of a fiction writer but not the factual truth of *The New York Times*.

C.S. *The writer Javier Marias said, “The only thing that can be fully told without rectification, without somebody saying ‘That’s not the way it was,’ is fiction.” Nobody can say Don Quixote didn’t die, for example.*

T.D. A friend of mine once called me “the Donald Judd of photography.” If you think about the notion of reality in my work, it has much to do with Judd’s uncompromising approach and not so much with documentary photography. It’s very square; in relation to what we know about reality, it’s harsher, more minimal, less detail-driven. I’m not telling you this because I think I’m a great artist; I’m saying it because there’s something in that comparison that I found interesting, to understand the ways we look at photography. We have many different expressions in sculpture – Donatello has nothing to do with Giacometti, other than that they made three-dimensional sculptures you can walk around – whereas photography appears to be somewhat more limited, a notion I want to expand.

C.S. *Has visual literacy improved in recent years?*

T.D. We’ve become much better at looking at pictures because, for one thing, we all make them all the time. It wasn’t very long ago that the Internet became fast enough to embed pictures on websites. That’s probably the marker for when people started understanding pictures much better – when you could search for them and circulate your own. What we learned most is who sent us a picture and why. Before that, *The New York Times* had a photo

on its front page, and we didn’t care who sent it – it was the objective truth of photography bringing us the world. Now, the official photographer competes with someone on social media. Take September 11: the photographs from the staircases, of people running and probably not making it, are the iconic images, not the fuming ruins. And now, with A.I., the question of who sends me a photo and why people want me to see it becomes more urgent than ever. Today, we have completely digested the fact that photography is manipulated: that once you point a camera at something, you don’t point it at other things, and that it’s already a manipulation to wait for the right moment. It’s beautiful that everyone knows this because it’s like sharing all the tools, and then it’s interesting if somebody can do something different, something that nobody else can do.

C.S. *Even if you make sure that your technique builds trust, no one else is doing the intense physical work your photographs require. Why is that labor vital?*

T.D. Very often, when I start a piece, I haven’t figured out how to do every aspect but know enough to start. Then, while I’m doing it, I have the calmness and concentration to come up with ideas to solve my problems. This is a reason why I need the labor. The grass in *Lawn* [1998] took me three months. It had to have a certain size; otherwise, it wouldn’t work. The Zen moment of putting in the blades and having hardly any identifiable growth was very humbling and beautiful. That’s why people make mandalas out of sand: doing the same thing opens your mind to think about other things or to think clearly about what you’re doing. But I mean it seriously that I try to keep it open enough so that everybody can do it. Only once did I use papier mâché, for the drapery in the Oval Office in *Presidency* [2008]. Even the eagle on the flagpoles – I made that out of silver wrapping. Talking about how I’m an amazing



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Schließfächer/Lockers (2018), C-Print/Diasec, 70.9×118.1 in.

craftsman gets in the way of the works’ key points. I want to talk about what’s in the picture, how we look at it, what we remember from it, how much memory is a construction, our use of models to understand the world.

C.S. *It’s a resistance to spectacle and amazement, through a kind of humble technique. Otherwise, no one would be able to look beyond that.*

T.D. Not being able to look beyond is a very apt description of what happens. Perfection, for me, is that you can actually see it’s a fabrication, but that it still does what it needs to do, as a picture. I leave the incongruities and mistakes so that the picture keeps a certain fragility, but it still needs to be very attractive and have a lightness and magnetism. The size is very important, too. You never see pictures like *Ruin* [2017] or *Control Room* [2011] that big. You can imagine yourself in that space. If I had a person standing in the photo, you would only see them in relation to the space. Not having people is not because of practical matters – it obliterates the anecdotal. Rather than somebody in a space at a given point in time, the depicted situation leads toward a more metaphorical reading, appealing to the viewer’s imagination. Regarding *Ruin*: if I tell you this is a house in Lebanon after the explosion, you’d say, “I see that.” But if I say it’s Tripoli after a terror attack, you’d say, “I see that.” Or Aleppo after the Russians bombarded. I could go on. There is a meta-picture of ruin pictures, with this rubble from 1960s concrete buildings. There is a meta-picture of memorials with flowers around a tree, too, after a shooting at a Walmart, a school, an intersection. The press reacts with ritual images, which all look the same even if the action is totally different. I’m not talking about Aleppo or Lebanon, though, because I don’t know more than you do. Everything I talk about is the thing we have both seen – the photo. What can we do with this? How are

these channels of communication working? What kind of pictures do they bring up? Is there repetition? Can we trust the pictures? How do we understand our world if these things are being shown to us? What is the role of the picture itself? The picture is just the messenger, never the actual event. It’s a representative, not the real thing. It has its own life but also limited influence. That’s the appeal.

C.S. *What results is less akin to history paintings than a photo of the process of making history – of how the past is constructed through memories of images, usually from where we’ve never been.*

T.D. I’m not portraying historical events; I’m portraying the record of those events. Most of what we know about history is because we have records of it, not because we see the battle, for example. Many of these records are artistic renderings, such as novels and paintings. People are getting bored with the real pictures. So, 10 to 15 years after the event, I get a request to use *Bathroom* [1997] to accompany a piece about what actually happened in retrospect; it’s a meta-story they want to tell, and so they need another kind of picture. The same happened with *Presidency*. It was supposed to come out in *The New York Times* a week before the 2008 election, to show how Dick Cheney and George W. Bush empowered the vice presidency outside the constitution. Because the election was about to happen, they needed an illustration. A drawing would be irrelevant, so they thought, “Don’t we have somebody who can make an actual picture of something that is nonexistent?” That’s me. I skimmed all the archival information from 1952 to now, and I took the flagpoles from the Ronald Reagan office, the carpet from Bill Clinton’s, the drapery from George W. Bush’s. I made an Oval Office that looks very believable because every party can recognize their own insignia in it. It is, in a way, a history painting: it does reflect reality, but it doesn’t show it. 📌