

The 6th Floor

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A Sneak Peek at Thomas Demand's Storm-Tossed Imagination

By *KATHY RYAN*

Three years ago, the German conceptual artist Thomas Demand saw a startling video on YouTube that captured the chaotic scene inside a cruise ship being tossed about by a storm in the South Pacific. Everything not bolted down — chairs, tables, bottles, cartons, people — could be seen sliding back and forth across the floor as the ship rocked violently. But where most viewers might have forwarded the link to their friends, Demand decided to recreate the scene, minus the people, entirely out of paper and cardboard, then film it.

Here, an exclusive clip from Demand's film:

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Demand has long been known for building and photographing realistic, life-size models of actual environments. The resulting pictures are the final works of art — so realistic that people often don't realize they're looking at paper constructions — while the sculptural models themselves are destroyed and never exhibited.

The "Pacific Sun" video (named after the cruise ship) consists of 2,400 still images all together. The animators took three and a half months to meticulously re-create every object's path across the room. The resulting video — that's a sneak peek above — can be seen starting this evening at the [Matthew Marks Gallery](#) at 523 West 24th Street in New York, with other new works by Demand.

This week, I spoke to Demand about how he works. Here are some edited highlights from our conversation:

Why are there no people in your images?

I think the imagination works better if you don't have people, because if there are people, you look at it as an anecdote. If you have an empty space that in this case is animated and has lots of signs of life, it is actually like reading a novel or something. You basically create in your own mind what is happening or what the space represents, and for me, that is much more interesting.

A remarkable thing I have to say is when I started doing this, it was a slapstick-movie thing, and it was interesting and peculiar, and I thought it's just absurd but also it has a certain beauty. Then the tsunami happened in Japan, and then the cruise ship hit the rock off the coast of northern Italy. It was no longer slapstick. The context in which the image would be seen changed throughout the making of the film.

Thomas Demand

Those disasters happened after you had begun?

I was in the middle of it when the tsunami happened. I hired people. I rented a studio in California. I had a whole workshop set up, building all these chairs and whatever else we needed. There were between 8 to 12 animators on set working 12-hour days for three and a half months. There were 55 chairs. The people we were working with on the project were unbelievable — fantastically dedicated. I was told there are only about 35 animators in L.A. We basically had 12 of those animators for three and a half months.

Thomas Demand

The animators do what, exactly?

In recent years, stop-motion animation has become very popular. “Fantastic Mr. Fox” is an example of this. People like the handcrafted quality of it. You can't really fake it with C.G.I. I initially thought about doing it digitally, but in the end decided to do it with stop-motion animation because it is so beautiful. Everything was made of paper. They were really fragile objects. The fragility of the objects gives the scene its beauty. Plus, all the C.G.I. people I spoke to just said it would be too complicated to do virtually, and it will never look like the real thing, so we should really try to do it in animation.

Thomas Demand

One of the reasons why I moved to L.A. was because I thought it was kind of a stable climate, sunshine every day. It's sunny, but what I didn't have on my list of things — what I didn't consider — were the earthquakes, the tiny little shakes of the earth every day. When we would start in the morning, we would always see a little change in the placement of the objects from the night before.

Thomas Demand

I didn't realize there were so many tiny movements every day.

Every day something is moving. Like 1.2 on the Richter scale or something.

Thomas Demand

Is that something filmmakers there are always dealing with?

I don't know. Nobody seems to talk about it. If I say earthquake, everybody in L.A. rolls their eyes and says, Thank God it wasn't the big one yet. For animation, it's terrible because these objects are all moving a little fraction. It was really a disaster. It was funny as hell. That's why we needed a lot of people — because we had to adjust all this. It's so minimal you can't really do anything about it, but that's also quite charming in the end because everything is kind of vibrating.

Thomas Demand

Any movement, like a ketchup bottle falling off a table, the animators would have to imagine that over a stretch of a week or something, but it's going to be only three seconds in the film, and it takes them a week to make it. You need imagination to know how it actually falls down and how all this is fitting together. We had scripts for every object, but that's another very long story.

Thomas Demand

Back in 1997, the magazine commissioned Demand to re-create a massage parlor for a special photo issue devoted to Times Square; more recently, to accompany a cover story in Nov. 2008 on executive power, he constructed a life-size version of the Oval Office.

Thomas Demand for The New York Times Demand's re-creation of a massage parlor from our Times Square issue from 1997.

Thomas Demand for The New York Times Demand's diorama of the Oval Office on the Nov. 9, 2008, cover.