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By Angela Connor

Thomas Demand at Sprüth Magers Berlin

Thomas Demand – “Kontrollraum / Control Room” (2011), Chromogenic print on photographic paper and Diasec, 200 x 300 cm ; © Thomas Demand, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Courtesy Sprüth Magers Berlin London

German artist Thomas Demand (b. 1964) is well known for his large-format photographs of life-sized three-dimensional sculptures made from cardboard and paper. Trained as a sculptor at the prestigious Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, Demand was encouraged by Industrial documentarian Bernd Becher to photograph his fragile objects, a technique he has been mastering since the 1990’s. These ephemeral models, often reconstructing interior spaces of newsworthy events, are then destroyed, leaving only the photograph as the residue of the sculptural forms.

Demand’s solo exhibition at Sprüth Magers in Berlin features three recent photographic works and a film and sound installation. Weighted with cultural and historical significance, these works depict sites of chaos, scandal, trauma and disaster. The centre piece of the exhibition is Pacific Sun (2012), a two-minute film and sound installation which is based on a YouTube video clip of the Internal CCTV footage of the dining room in a Pacific Sun Cruise Liner during turbulent weather conditions. The original footage, shot off the coast of New Zealand in the Tasman Sea, documents the effects of the tumultuous storm as passengers, staff and furniture are battered and pulled across the dining room floor. Watched by over 350,000 people via YouTube, the short clip is a highly emotive scene of turmoil and anarchy.

Relying on our collective knowledge of events mediated to us through the mass media to construct his narratives, Demand uses images that are already embedded in the mind of the viewer. His works are a reflection of our society, and examine how events become entrenched in our personal experiences, despite never bearing witness to the account first hand. Demand’s 2,944-image animation, which took two years to complete and a team of twelve animators, is a sterile recreation of the event, depicting moving furniture but devoid of the emotion of the human presence. The absence of people in Demand’s recreation, turn the tragedy into a banal encounter, evoking a feeling of alienation and disengagement, a desensitized reproduction of reality.

Informed by the media release accompanying the show, each of the works is leant it's actual context outside of Demand's construction of his show. The brandless bottles and packages casually adorning the sanitized white shelves in Filiale reveal themselves to be scraps from bankrupted German retailer Schlecker. The source for the work could have been taken from print coverage specific to the company's failure, though Demand's iteration of the situation – devoid of any particular subjectivity – becomes a potential vehicle for normative claims about the recent global financial crisis.

The anonymous storeroom of Vault, with its many pictures turned away from prying eyes, is morphed from art-dealer-turned-thief Guy Wilderstein's storeroom where French police seized 30 stolen or missing artworks in early 2011. Kontrollraum/Control Room depicts the nerve centre of the now infamous Fukushima nuclear reactor in Japan. Both these works, in addition to being able to absorb added narrative are displayed in a manner that consumes the audience into these semi-fictional spaces. Presented unframed and face-mounted to acrylic glass, the large luminescent photographs give the illusion that the viewer is staring through a window; the lack of detail in the works making it easy for the viewer to transport a situation into their own imagination.

Thomas Demand – "Vault" (2012), Chromogenic print on photographic paper and Diasec, 220 x 277cm; © Thomas Demand, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Courtesy Sprüth Magers Berlin London