



Model studies III, Blocks I, 2018, Framed Pigment Print, 111 x 83 cm

German sculptor Thomas Demand lives and works between Berlin and Los Angeles. One of the most innovative artists of his generation, Demand has specialized in handcrafting facsimiles of architectural spaces and natural environments. Through his use of paper and cardboard, Demand meticulously reconstructs images and scenes, embedding those in society's collective memory with mural-scale photographs. The ephemeral and illusionistic characters of Demand's work have pushed the medium of photography further than ever before and are part of his investigation of the livelihood of images.

NR looks into Thomas Demand's development as an artist, from sculptor to photographer and how he found a balance between the two practices using excellent craftsmanship and imagination, blurring the line between reproduction and original whether it be in architecture or fashion.

Thomas Demand, it is such a pleasure to be interviewing you. How are you?

Very well, thank you.

You have had a fascinating career spanning across various fields such as sculpture, photography, art, film. As the theme of this issue is Growth, I thought it would be interesting to let you talk to us about how you found a balance between all those practices, using excellent craftsmanship and imagination.

You initially trained as a sculptor, how did you find yourself in the place where you are today and how did you initiate that merge between sculpture, photography and architecture?

I grew up in an environment which naturally connected these fields like family: my father and mother were painters, my uncle and grandfather architects, my grandmother a concert pianist (still working to find my way in that field) and my best friend at school was the son of one of the most important and visionary art collectors in Germany. So I have no Schwellenangst, even if I do have greatest respect for the disciplines and their differences.

You have studied in Düsseldorf, Munich, Amsterdam, Paris and London. You have been moving quite a lot. What are some of the places that have inspired you the most?

Japan, USA and northern Italy. But I also noted over the years that there are cities which are good for making art and some to look at art, but rarely is both the case.

Your starting point is often photography as a “constructed reality” and from there, you design life-size paper models with colored paper and cardboard. You create inventive images of life-size architectural paper models that look exactly like the final product. Your constructions are ephemeral as you always discard them once you’ve photographed them. Why is that?

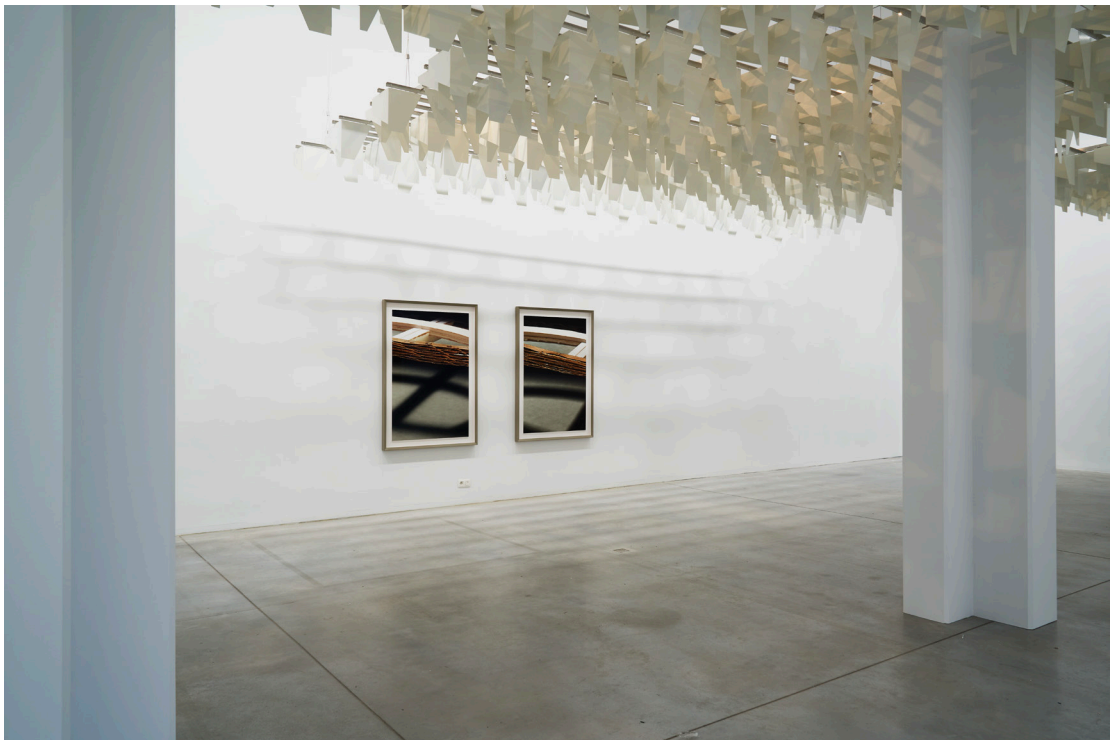
I don’t think it is exactly like the starting point, but even if, it would be a valid artistic concept, I believe. But my version is a version of reality which might have more relations to how we see the world, not how it might be. How we remember it, how we are manipulated, how our ideas influence what we recognize and so forth. Like a writer, he might write truthfully about the world, but it will not be taken as the reality itself. I consider this worth exploring in the medium of photography, where this distinction is easily obfuscated by the mechanistic understanding of documentation the apparatus delivers.

Your work often serves as testimonies for other artists’ thought processes and create a place in time for them. Where did that interest come from?

We all stand on someone else’s shoulders, and I find it an easy way not to isolate my vision in the ghetto of photography. Photography as a technique or discipline never interested me enough.

In an interview for the Louisiana Museum you say that “many things first become visible to us via the images we see of them.” and that we live in a world of models. Could you elaborate on that? Do you think you are creating a new version of reality or giving new perspectives or is this more about bridging the gap between what we see and what is represented and almost building a realm between fiction and reality?

I think the use of models is a highly influential and underexposed cultural technique, we can only absorb the complexity of the world around us by filtering and remodeling it. The ancient Greek philosophy was already fully aware of that and things didn’t get less complex since then. The weather forecast, retirement plans, demographics, elections, psychology ect, all is using models to find a direction through data. People often think of architects and children’s toys if they refer to models, but it is much more fundamental. It is amazing how little literature and research there is about that.



House of Card, Museum Leuven, Belgium
Photographs by Dirk Pauwels



House of Card, Museum Leuven, Belgium
Photographs by Dirk Pauwels



Model studies IV, thrush, 2020, Framed Pigment Print, 123,5 x 91 cm

Your major solo exhibition 'House of Card' is on view until April 2021 at M Leuven museum in Belgium. It coincides with the release of your book House of Card with Mack, which focuses on your relationship to architecture and the collaborations you have done with architects. Your series Model Studies which also serves as an introductory point in House of Card, was honoring through photographs taken during your visit at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, 13 unreleased projects and discarded structures made by well-known architect John Lautner. This was also the first time for you not to photograph models of your own.

HoC is the show and the book, which works as a standalone, but it is the book to the show.

Could you delve into your engagement with architecture over the last decade?

I noted over the years that architecture developed a specific interest and response towards my work, I heard of competitions which were won with my images as examples, architectural schools did seminars about it and architectural biennales invited me many times to contribute. I also worked since my first exhibitions with display features, exhibition architecture and embraced challenging spaces to show the work without compromising neither the architecture nor the pictures. All that established longterm collaborations with a number of architects. I think that prepared the situation in which I started thinking about architecture as a promising claim for my thinking and obviously there are a number of approaches imaginable for me: looking at it, using it and now also doing it myself. That's what the show is about, plus collaborative aspects which come along, as architecture is always a team effort.

How does your work resonate with architecture? In your opinion, how do abstraction and architecture correlate?

Architecture, not unlike photography are figurative. The process might be very abstract, but what is built is concrete. But there are stages in the design process which are open and not about doors, faucets and fire regulations, and those interest me, as they shadow a bit what I enjoy in my work, when ideas become form and forms become figures. I consider my Model Studies series as my most photographic work to date but also my most abstract. In the end the source is becoming irrelevant, you won't recognize a Lautner building nor a dress by Alaïa on my images.

You have spent time recently in Tokyo in the offices of the architects Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa, also known as SANAA. Your 2015 show Latent Forms at Sprüth Magers in London displayed the close-up images you took of their paper and cardboard architectural models during your visits at SANAA offices. Those images part of Model Studies II, became abstracts and fragments of ideas of buildings that may not come to realization. Why were you interested in working with SANAA?

Besides the fact that they are amongst the most astonishing and original firms in the field of architecture, I was approached by them to contribute to their Venice architecture biennale exhibition in 2010. I visited them in Tokyo and found the most amazing and confusing office they worked in, which just fascinated me. So, when I moved to L.A. I decided to fly every few months over there to see how that place changes. Their design process is highly influenced by the use of very low-key simple paper models, which they make in a minute to communicate ideas. Once such idea is used or abandoned for one project it might have an afterlife in another project because it just sits there amongst what looked like a 1 million other models. So, it felt familiar for me as a studio situation, but also it was used for completely different purposes.

Could you tell us about Model Studies IV and the inspiration you had from the late fashion designer Azzedine Alaïa's pieces?

I had the pleasure to have lunch with him once or twice in his atelier, and at the same time I had planned to work with the patterns which are used in clothes making for many years. Although I never found the right picture, I kept searching. It reminded me of the discarded leftovers on Matisse's floor in his studio in Nice, where he did the cut outs in colored paper. Again, it felt familiar but wasn't an artist's studio. Important in all cases is for me also that these people think with their hands, which is really important in a time when the digitalization is taking over any aspect of our life.

Last year you realized your first collaboration with a fashion brand, for Prada and you've decided to create anonymously a series of images titled Hanami (meaning cherry blossoms, a symbol of youth and love) created for each window of every Prada stores across the world. This was also a first for Prada to officially collaborate with an artist. You have had a close relationship with Miuccia Prada and Fondazione Prada for the last decade. How did that collaboration unfold? Why also the desire for anonymity? Could you tell us more about the narrative behind the series and what was the inspiration behind it?

Over the last 15 years I did nine different projects in all different shapes and ambitions with the Fondazione Prada. I saw it developing into an amazing organization, which never used the art for marketing reasons, very unlike most other efforts in that field. The trust in the artist and the generosity when it comes to making things possible is the connection to the core of the company and in the end their idea of luxury. So when MP asked me if I would consider to give permission to use my work in a seasonal campaign worldwide - it was spring 2020 - I considered the cooperation with company a chance to try out my work on a global audience without making it a marketing move on my part. I mean every Prada shop in the world, all of them in prime locations, and most of the windows were designed specifically. What a roll out!

It seems that artists and fashion brands are collaborating more and more. You have mentioned before that fashion is time and identity related and I think we can find those elements in your work too. What are some other fashion houses that you would want to collaborate with?

I find it a relatively confusing message to have a shop window with handbags and then having an artist name on top of that, possibly even with a social mission. I think the handbag should convince in itself and the shop window should do the best to create attention and context, full stop. But as I said, contemporary art is a niche and fashion is an industry, I think there can be very interesting combinations, as long as they respect the autonomy and maybe auratic character of an artwork. Also, the series 'Blossom' was existing, we aligned and composed it anew for the purpose, but it was not a commission in the sense of the word. But I really admire what Prada has built over the years, that's why I was open to the request, not because I wanted to combine my 'brand' with theirs or any other strategic consideration.

Coming back to architecture, your most recent project currently under construction, is very very exciting. It is a Pavilion at the Headquarters of design-innovation leader Kvadrat, a contemporary textiles and textile related products for architects and designers, company in Denmark. Could you tell us about this collaboration?

Again, that grew over the years into a long ongoing and trustful relation. Anders Byriel, the CEO, is very interested in contemporary Art and approached me decades ago when I had a show in the Museum Louisiana, and was just trying find his way around in the arts. It wasn't really about commercial interests on both sides. We became friends since, did a few projects which were all great fun and showed convincing results, and so when he decided to build some kind of meeting place next to the company headquarters, he asked me if I have ideas or if I want to do it. And I said yes, instantly. You need to understand, very rarely an artist has the chance to build an entire house or in this case three of them. And I am trying to make it in some kind of Gesamtkunstwerk, where I am doing everything you touch and consider everything in it's visual appearance and all follows the logic of paper. As it is my first, of course I needed help and asked CarusoStJohn to facilitate my ideas, I have also done a number of projects with them in the past, so it is a constructive and sensitive dialogue.

Are there other projects that you are working on at the moment?

I am working on a film about which I can't say much right now, we will open a show in London next week, I am developing a large show for Garage in Moscow, which will include a direct collaboration between me and SANAA, as well as a contribution by Alexander Kluge and a show at the Fundacion Botin in Santander, called Mundo del Papel, with a very ambitious exhibition architecture in their wonderful Renzo Piano Building. Let's hope the world is back on track by autumn, when it all will be realized.



Model Studies II, University 66, 2015, Framed Pigment Print, 165,3 x 129,4 cm

"Thomas Demand. House of Card" is on view at the Museum Leuven in Belgium through April 2021, an exhibition delving into the artist's engagement with architectural forms.