

THE VERY LIFELIKE CHAIR

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I was told by the friend who took me to the studio that the artist, Thomas Demand, animated cardboard sculptures.

That seemed interesting. This was Los Angeles, where the media scene is densely strewn with compelling oddities.

At an anonymous roadside studio, Demand and his many assistants were busy with a half-completed artwork. The video was *Pacific Sun*, included in this exhibit.

Pacific Sun is the most ambitious Demand effort to date. It's typical of his oeuvre, being made of everyday cardboard and paper. Yet it's so seamless, complex, and meticulous that it resembles virtual reality. It's a tour de force of volumetric, architectural paper sculpture. It's unheimlich in its superhuman attention to detail.

What we saw at the Demand studio, however, was the stageset where all this meticulous arrangement was going on in real time. The creative disorder within that studio was fantastic. The set was ominously perfect, of course. Yet every thing, person, device, and object outside the camera view, including the grizzled Angeleno special-effects workers in their cut-off jeans and Crocs shoes, was in a media debris field: extension cables, lighting, duct tape, and fast-food rubbish.

The attitude onset was tense and focused. Stop-motion animators were hard at their work: hours, days, weeks of caring effort, moving dozens of objects a few millimeters per shot. Serious-minded adult professionals were at this labor, on their hands and knees, using transparent plastic rulers for their measurements and yelling movie argot at each other.

A drenching storm had recently struck Los Angeles. The disaster scene had itself almost succumbed to disaster, as the

cardboard swelled with dampness.

Stunned by the extent of this feverish mess, I picked up a chair and sat on it. I'd been told that everything on set was made of cardboard, but I forgot myself. Reflexes got the better of me. It looked so very much like a real chair, you see.

Yes, dear reader, I personally sat on one of those tumbling, demon-haunted chairs within Thomas Demand's artwork *Pacific Sun*. What's more, this dummy replica held me up. Consisting entirely of cardboard, paper, and tape, it was so stoutly constructed that it refused to buckle under me.

It did, however, give spongily. Warning shouts came from the crew. Hours of cunning forgery had gone into the construction of that chair. Nobody but Demand could possibly build another one.

Later, we went out to eat with Demand and a few intimates. Despite the herculean labors mimicking grotesque disaster in his groaning studio, Demand was in a sunny, affirmative mood. The topics of his art are exceedingly grim, but his inner demons are sublimated by all this ultra-disciplined artwork. In person, Demand is quite good company and even rather a jolly guy. He's much given to acid black humor and dry comic understatement: "The reunification of Germany—perhaps you've heard of it?"

Demand hails from a small town outside Munich. Los Angeles, that least-European of cities, often has an effervescent effect on Europeans. *Pacific Sun* conveys a certain free and easy Angeleno air not often present in Demand's other videos.

It's a disaster, of course—almost all Demand works are disasters; just terrible, dreadful events. Obviously Demand's dark side is his creative side. When he's sacrificing months of his life slicing and taping ultra-detailed replicas, he's marinating himself in

dense, gothic situations; he's seeing them from the inside. A theft, a murder, a carcrash, an embezzlement—he's working his way through the mediated image of this noir act of darkness. He's slowing it down, hand-shaping it, privatizing it, making it art.

Pacific Sun, though, is a very Los Angeles style of disaster. It's glossy, democratic, crowded, and tangled. It resembles an earthquake's traffic jam.

There's a Keystone Kops Hollywood sentimentality on display here. Look at the tenderness with which those American fast-food utensils are handled: the flying paper plates, the napkins, the merrily rolling soft-drink straws. They're rubbish, yet they're the moral equals of the aristocratic billiards table and the plummeting bookcases.

With human beings subtracted from the scene (Demand never models people, perhaps because human flesh and hair look absurd in cardboard), you end up rooting for these liberated architectural and decor elements. They're spirited; they're funny.

In the literal footage of the real-life *Pacific Sun* incident (readily available on YouTube), one's eyes are drawn to the human participants: about a dozen passengers and crew of a stricken cruise ship. There's a certain cruel humor in the way these suffering people topple like bowling pins. What most impresses, though, is not the banana-peel comedy, but the stern professionalism of that ship crew. Clearly they are doing their best to guard their passengers under conditions that would have most of us curled up and screeching.

With humanity subtracted from the scene, and with every object replaced by a cardboard stand-in, one becomes aware of the abstract qualities of video itself. Drained of real-world

experience, video is flat, overlit, idealized, free of entropy and wear. The lightweight elements interact with the brisk abstract shininess of a Calder mobile. The humdrum tables, chairs, soda straws, and cash registers are liberated from their quotidian roles as our tools and possessions. They're cute and funny, yes—but also grand and eerie and distant, like the scattered sea-floor debris of the Titanic.

Demand never forces an emotional response. On the contrary, it's up to the viewer to figure out that this tedious kitchenette is the lair of Saddam Hussein. Or that this tavern was the scene of some dreadful murder. Or that this humble table was the site of a dead popstar's last meal. The macabre isn't yelled through a bullhorn. It's all been formally subtracted, so we have to bring it there from within our own dark little souls.

I still haven't figured out what's so awful about Demand's *Rain*, in which plummeting rain is beautifully animated with humble glass and candy wrappers. Most any artist who can sculpt rain—just imagine trying it—would be entirely content with the bravura skill of his technique. But not Thomas Demand. I can't doubt there's some grim, bleak, quirky narrative behind his choice of this particular patch of rain.

Since I'm a novelist, I'm determined not to find out what that story is. Forget the story, just for once. I'm content to let this artwork rest within its great formal beauty, without it creeping up on me with its bulging rucksack of black associations.

In summary, Thomas Demand is a conceptual artist with exceptional craft skills and a ferocious determination. He has won international fame and the respect of his peers and critics. I get it about all that, and I'm fine with that—but that's not why I

like his work.

I like it for two large reasons: First, I understand his worldview. This meticulous and creative world-building makes sense to me as an artist. I sympathize with his aims. I appreciate their speculative depth, that marination in artifice.

The second reason is a little odder, and it has to do with a prophecy by Italo Calvino. In the Italian writer's last work, left incomplete at his death in 1985, Calvino described a 21st-century sensibility. He speculated that this future culture would center on the six creative virtues of lightness, exactitude, visibility, quickness, multiplicity, and consistency.

Clearly, Demand personifies Calvino's prophecy. He's a 21st-century artist who works with videos of animated cardboard. They're indeed very *light*. Extremely *exact*. Exceedingly *visible*—their theme is mediation, photography, and viewership. They're *quick*, too, generally over in a couple of minutes. And *multiplicity* is an innate quality of video, which can be copied and broadcast.

I can't doubt that Demand's works also have *consistency*, although Calvino never enlightened us on that last virtue because he died before completing his essays—a grave and tragic loss. A clot struck the brain of the writer as he peaceably paged through a newspaper in the garden of his summer villa. Life is precious in that way—there's no help for it. It's a scene that rather cries out for a Thomas Demand re-creation.