

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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ARTSEEN

MARCH 5TH, 2018

## THOMAS DEMAND

by Louis Block

MATTHEW MARKS | FEBRUARY 17 – APRIL 7, 2018



Thomas Demand, *Tent*, 2016. C-print mounted on Diasec, 86 5/8 × 118 1/4 inches. Courtesy Matthew Marks.

There is a moment near the end of Peter Weir's 1998 *The Truman Show* where Truman, played by Jim Carrey, reaches the end of the built environment that has trapped him for his entire life—an infinite wall painted sky blue with airbrushed, puffy clouds. The wall's artificial nature is revealed slowly: its soft plaster texture, the shimmers of light bouncing off its base, the unconvincing patterning of its clouds. Reaching towards the surface, Truman's hand casts an angled shadow on the sky. With these details, our brains stutter—the illusion is revealed. It is this immeasurable space between visual belief and betrayal that Thomas Demand mines in his intricate photographs. For his new show at Matthew Marks, Demand combines stills, animations, and sound to consider the textures themselves of experience.

For the three works in the gallery's back room, Demand constructed life-like models out of colored paper, recreations of scenes from found photographs, then carefully lit and photographed the models; presented in the gallery as large scale

Block, Louis. "Thomas Demand." *The Brooklyn Rail*, March 5, 2018.

prints mounted to acrylic. The models are not exhibited, and are destroyed after documentation. This is a mode of working that Demand has been perfecting since the early '90s, one which yields images that are sometimes haunting through their dedication to exploring the interworkings of social and historical memory. These three pieces take their subject matter from disparate sources: a Bavarian violin-maker's studio, a bombed house, and a tent with bunk beds. In this grouping, Demand seems to test all the different directions in which these artificial realities can function—the scenes alternately elicit nostalgia, shock, and uncertainty: is this tent a memory of a childhood summer camp, or the current reality of a refugee?

It is a wind that blows through these pieces, revealing an inherent tension between their materials and their subjects, as it scatters leaves through the flap of the tent, reminding its inhabitants of the fragile nature of their dwelling. In *Ruin* (2017) it sifts through dust and rubble in the bombed-out living room, revealing a sandal, opening a cabinet. In *Workshop* (2017), the wind holds its breath, anticipating the harmonies that tens of violins will send vibrating through its air. Despite all clues of movement and weight, these objects don't really exist—every step in their meticulous recreation is an act of destruction. Every piece of carefully cut paper disintegrates what is being copied; in the end, what we are left with are merely suggestions of former objects. Reading the visual clues, we are equally confident that a certain object is supposed to be a violin, and that it can certainly never be a real violin. The surfaces are too uniform, the edges too clean.

In the gallery's front room, Demand presents a more challenging project. Smaller photographs from his *Dailies* series are on view, produced with the same paper model method, but with imagery sourced this time from Demand's cell phone camera. The scenes are banal: an office exit sign, a torn cushion, an open electrical box, and a ribbon tied to a fence. The colors on these dye-transfer prints are heavily saturated, almost beyond life-like. Compositions here are much more tightly cropped than the other photographs, and allow the eye more time to rest uneasily on their surfaces. Two animations play on suspended screens in the middle of the room, each frame a variation of another paper environment. Balloons attached to colored ribbons float just out of view as leaves scatter past in the background, a walk signal at an intersection blinks on and off, stops, blinks again. An audio track made in collaboration with composer Tyondai Braxton syncs up to the blinking, echoing through the installation like a sonar beep. Time is the uncanny element here—the movements of the balloons are not disjointed, but seem slightly too fast, then slightly too slow, to be believable.



Thomas Demand, *Werkstatt / Workshop*, 2017. C-print mounted on Diasec, 70 7/8 × 122 inches. Courtesy Matthew Marks.

Take nothing for granted in this installation—least of all the wallpaper. The entire room is covered in life-size lockers, again printed from photographs of models. There are hundreds of gray lockers, at first glance appearing to be a repeated pattern but which, on close inspection, each display unique characteristics of their own models. As I walked up and down the room, reveling in finding a small dent in one of the sides, or a slightly wider gap in one of the vents, the lockers became as jewel-like and enigmatic as the smaller prints. These containers of the personal and the intimate, in their most minute details—the imperfections that betray their institutional uniformity—begin to take on personalities of their own. In a way, there is more life in them than in the historical recreations.

Walking out of the gallery, I encountered a world enhanced by the unreality I had just experienced. I felt myself noticing details previously unrecorded—the way textures were flattened in shadow, the imperfections in the sidewalk. Demand's work is difficult to look at; it often causes more unease than visual pleasure, but it is the mark of powerful work to be able to alter the viewer's perception long after the works have been abandoned. We are encouraged not to hold the memories of the pieces and their construction in our minds, but rather to learn how memories are built, to question the surfaces of reality down to their thinnest, most fragile components.

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**CONTRIBUTOR**

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LOUIS BLOCK is a painter living in Brooklyn, NY. His work has been shown in Baltimore and Philadelphia, and his writing was recently featured in *Full Bleed*.

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