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THOMAS DEMAND

Peter Kilchmann

Zurich

At first glance, Thomas Demand's photographs have an odd flatness about them. One might think that it's because the scenes depicted are devoid of people. A deserted office teems with photocopiers. A yellow raincoat hangs on a dark wall beside a canteen table. A pyramid stands in the desert, without tourists, guides, or camels.

On closer inspection, one sees the trick of this German artist's work: everything pictured--from the salt shakers to the photo--copiers to the desert sand--is modeled from paper and cardboard. The details are stunningly well achieved. In the picture of the canteen, for example, Demand makes paper evoke the gleaming folds in a raincoat, the stiff roundness of a sponge set out to dry, the glow of the neon lights hung from the ceiling.

Here's conceit number two: Demand always bases his paper-maquette scenes on preexisting photographs--often a piece of pedestrian photojournalism (the canteen image is drawn from a photograph relating to an Austrian mining accident). Thus, Demand's large C-prints lie at three levels of remove from the scene someone else first photographed.

Still, Demand cannot perfectly replicate the real world with paper and trick lighting. Like even the best computer-aided design, the objects' surfaces lack grain and texture. This is a nonporous world, as ultimately unreal as an airbrushed Playboy model. No matter. The power of the work lies in its initial believability. Having been fooled, the viewer then ponders the nature of representation and reality. It takes only a moment's thought to realize that even the original photographs could themselves have been artful fabrications.

Marc Spiegler