

*Abstract*

Have you ever had a dream that felt extremely real? The world around you seemed so familiar and certain. You felt safe and carefree, existing in that space as though you were awake in your very own room. Then the walls start to move or the shadows bend. The blankets on your bed seem to be pulling further away from you. The objects, once so familiar seem foreign and unusual. You look for a point of reference to tell you that everything is real, but instead everything continues to change to things that you have never before seen. You realize that the space around you is not as it seems. What was once certain has become uncertain and what was once real has become questionable.

This uncertainty is the moment of transition; a stone dropped in the water beginning the faint circles of doubt that radiate outward. There is a moment of realization that things are not as they seem and once this happens, we wake. This moment is almost always unsettling. It is an interruption in our world. It changes our mental course. It confuses us, terrifies us, and warps our perceptions. We are left questioning what we have experienced, where we were, and why it felt so real. All of our dreams share this common feeling of irrational reality.

My work explores these moments of transition between dream and reality. This shift often evokes feelings of unease and instability. It triggers the question of what is real and what is a construct of our subconscious. I create models of small imaginative worlds to be photographed and printed. It is this process - this exploration of a self-constructed 3-D space photographed with a camera - that creates the visual space that replicates the same

feelings that one encounters within a dream. This use of photography and the visual rhetoric it carries, allows me to define a space that is in constant flux – shifting focus, reversing foreground and background and directing the viewer via depth of field. The camera is capturing a three-dimensional constructed world, flattening it to two-dimensions in a photograph, directing the focus of the viewer, and ultimately – though the manipulations of the tools I employ - suggesting a three-dimensional space. Traditionally, photography is a form of representation and documentation. It has been understood as a means through which we represent truth. But in reality, it is a replacement, or a stand in, for the actual space that has been photographed. It is a representation of reality – a kind of truth. Through my photographs, I am representing a possible reality, but one that is skewed by impossibilities.

Through my process and the ultimate final product of my images, I am evoking from the viewer the same response that they have during a dream that stirs them awake. The unsettling content and angles as well as the controlled depth of field all lead to this similar feeling of uncertainty and anxiety, not different from the anxiety we feel when we wake from a dream. Printed large and mounted upon the wall, each of my photos is full of the unsettling and ominous imagery characteristic of the moment of transition between the dream world and the world of reality. Just as when we awake from a very realistic dream, my images ask the viewer to question, “what is real?”

### *Historical Influence: The Inception of Photography*

Photography as a medium has always been mimetic in its ability to capture exact replicas of the world around us. It has become the way that we understand many different parts of the

world. There are places we have seen only through image, and never through our own two eyes. One could say that each photograph is a portal to the existing space on the other side of the lens, taking us there even though we are standing in our own familiar surroundings. While the photograph can represent true to life images, it can also warp our perceptions of space, providing us with images that we never would be able to see with the naked eye. By studying the role of the photograph, forming links to the created worlds of the contemporary photographer Thomas Demand, I have created a body of work that uses the photograph to simulate reality and provide a feeling quite similar to that of a waking dream.

The technical start of photography was not as crystal clear as the high tech digital cameras that individuals today slip easily into their pockets. Louis Daguerre and Henry Talbot, two of the earliest photographers, learned that photography was a sort of painting that used light—instead of pencil or paint—to create the image. These first images that tested out the process of photography were hazy and blurred, capturing merely shadows of the objects and spaces in front of the camera. Still, the image was recorded by an individual existing in space, and thus the hazy and shadowy content must be representing a portion of the real and inhabitable environment. Eventually the process was refined using glass. “Instead of slightly hazy pictures with blurred details, the new process, which used glass instead of paper negatives, provided a crystal-clear window on the world.” (Hambourg, 1993)

It is no surprise that this medium that could so perfectly replicate the world around us became the choice art medium to be used for documentation purposes. Roger Fenton, is a well known 19<sup>th</sup> century English photographer who employed photography for these very reasons. He photographed landscapes, architecture, and people, all for the purpose of catching these things as they are, and thus for their representation of the present at that time.

(Hambourg, 1993) While it would seem that a photograph used for documenting inherently must be giving us an image of the truth, Stephen Shore rightly questions the process of photography. He asks us to consider, “How is the photograph different from the actual scene?” (Shore, 2010)

It is obvious that—though the photograph shows us an image of a place that we may or may not have seen with our own two eyes—there are many technical transitions between the audience and the actual photographed object, person, or place. The glass of the lens, the closing shutter, the width of the aperture, the camera’s reflecting mirrors, the impression of the image on the recording material—all of these technical facets form an image in a much different way than the human eye. Humans see the world through two eyes, or binocularly, which provides the opportunity for us to see depth and perceive distance in the space around us. We have peripheral vision through which we perceive movement and an even wider view of environment. The camera, on the other hand, sees the world through one lens, contained within the confines of the rectangular viewfinder. This framed monocular vision allows the photographer to compose images that could not be seen in the same way with the naked eye.

Through framing, flatness, timing, and focus, photographers can “transform the world in front of the camera”. (Shore, 2010) I find framing and focus to be the two most applicable physical controls in altering the illusionary perception of the photograph. Through the viewfinder, the photographer becomes an editor, deciding what to include within the frame of the image. This alone can change our understanding of relationships within the photograph as well as our understanding of what lies just outside the captured space. Shore uses Robert Adam’s image *Clear-cut along the Nehalem River, Tillamook County, Oregon* to describe the narrative nature of framing. In this image of a tree-covered landscape,

the bottom right hand corner of the image just barely includes the smallest portion of a railroad track. The inclusion of this small portion of the photograph provides the viewer with a path to the world that extends outside of the frame.

Just as the photographer is selecting what to include within the frame, he or she can also select what is in focus for the audience to clearly see. The depth of field provides an opportunity for the photographer to define spaces that recede back into the photograph. The shallow depth of field blurs the receding background, while simultaneously alluding to a deeper and more complex spatial construction in front of the lens. David Levinthal, a contemporary artist who photographs small toy figurines uses a shallow depth of field to obscure the environment surrounding the toys. (Levinthal & Trudeau, 1989) With these hazy and blurred surroundings, the toys appear to exist in a very realistic, war-like atmosphere. The use of focus creates the illusion that they are not toys at all, but rather real individuals in the environment of war.

It seems only logical that photography, technically used first as a “faithful” depiction of reality, is a fundamentally mimetic tool.” (“Can You Believe It”, 2009) The ability to not only represent framed fragments of the world, but also contort their physical focal appearance and present them as an illusionistic representation of the world around us is one of the many transformative qualities of photography and the camera as a tool.

### *Contemporary Influence: Thomas Demand*

Thomas Demand is an artist who constantly poses the question, “What is real?” Demand, born and still residing in Germany, takes inspiration from historical and cultural media sources, using images from crimes and other events to create intricately composed,

life-sized replications out of cardboard and paper. He photographs these models, presenting a three-times-removed view of a familiar and widespread setting. His final photographs address the issue of what happens when the detail necessary to distinguish a familiar place is removed, leaving a sterile and deconstructed space that barely represents the factually documented image with which the work began.

With the conceptual matters of his work, Demand is concerned with very similar motives as myself—to use models in a way that makes the viewer unsure of the reality in the final image. The images are quite large, their size alone urging the viewer to believe that they exist as real structures. Through his transition from 3D to 2D Demand “provides an opportunity [for us] to re-examine the fundamental capacity for deception that is intrinsic to photography.” (“Can You Believe It”, 2009) It is upon the closest inspection of these images that we begin to see that something is amiss. The viewer begins to sense the artificiality of the materials, the perfection and smoothness of the surfaces that embeds a doubt within their minds. The viewer may recognize the setting from exposure to the media, or from the original source, but without the finite details that give the space context, the image may become an ambiguous and banal space.

Through this deconstruction of the space of a well-known, often sinister scene, Demand is focusing on the major theme of breaking down the memory associated with the detail. Beginning with settings of crime scenes or infamous locations, he “systematically erases and replaces with his own fingerprints.” (Biberman, 2010) In many of his works, any trace of human presence or distinguishable references is removed, leaving artificial and clean surfaces. The spaces with which he is left become generic, though they are obviously specific in their subject matter. This is where his work begins to delve into the realm of the contradictory. He is representing a “factual documentation [of a space], yet also fictional

illusionism.” (Biberman, 2010) In *The Landing*, for instance, Demand depicts a scene of two vases that have been shattered upon a stairway. The entire photo has a “clinical, seemingly factual quality that we might associate with crime-scene photography. Demand is drawn to such images due to their attempt to faithfully represent reality.” (“Thomas Demand Landing”, 2006) Despite this “factuality”, the image is devoid of evidence of human activity. We know that this situation is fabricated; yet we can also see that it is a form of documentation of an event that has already transpired.

What I find most engaging about Thomas Demand is that he and I appear to be striving toward different ends of the same goal. Demand presents us with something that appears to be a photograph of an actual familiar space, but upon closer investigation it is wiped clean of anything that would make it identifiable. My images present the viewer with what appears to be an unusual and fabricated occurrence, but simultaneously skews scale and asks the viewer to question its reality and existence in space. Regardless of where we start on the spectrum between the real and the unreal, our major similarity lies in our desire to leave the audience lost in the area in between. Here they will continually question how the modeled artificial can blend with a truly sinister reality created by the camera and by the photographer’s intentions.

### *Movement or Idea: The Psychology of the Dream*

Throughout my SMP experience, I underwent a period of searching for the best way to utilize photography to represent the feeling of a waking dream. A waking dream can be defined as many things. Some use it as a term for a nightmare—a dream that physically stirs the individual into a waking state. Some use it to describe a dream that occurs while we are

awake. For my purposes, however, the waking dream constitutes the moment when we wake from a dream and are unsure about the reality of the feelings and dreams that have just occurred.

It took me almost all of SMP to discover how best to translate this concept into my work. Early in my research I was most concerned with using dreams to communicate a sort of child-like make-believe. I was looking closely at Joseph Cornell's boxes while I was constructing my own models. Cornell describes his boxes as these poetic constructions of his dreams that must be perceived by children, for only they are pure enough of heart to understand the works. (Ashton, 1989) I realized, however, that this was not my audience. Because my audience was mostly adults and my own peers, I needed to understand how adults perceive the waking dream.

While researching and pondering this thought, I came upon a comparison between a John Keats poem and photography. Keats "muses on the ambiguity of the imagery inspired by elusive beauty. 'Was it a vision,' he wonders, 'or a waking dream?'" (Hambourg, 1993) Hambourg was using this quote to elucidate the feelings of early photography that contained an image, yet the image was hazy and shadowlike due to the technical flaws of the process of paper negatives. At this point, the image came across as almost a blurred impression of what it was meant to represent. As I had been thinking about the dream a great deal, this quote provided me with another view of the dream and its relationship with our waking existence. I began thinking about my images in a more metaphorical sense. Perhaps what was important was providing the feelings of this dream-like confusion. Could I take photos of the models that I was creating, and use the formal qualities to create this metaphorical waking dream sensation?



From here, I began thinking much less scenically about the images I was creating and much more experientially. My photos used a sort of blurred and ambiguous depth of field with minimal focused content to convey a sense of the eyes moving through the image, yet unsure of what they were seeing or where they were. The scale of the content and these formal qualities asked the viewer to question their existence in space, as well as the reality of the spaces depicted. In this way, photography has been the means for me to completely skew my viewer's perception of the physical reality of the images and bring them into the same unsettling feeling of the waking dream.

Through my photographs, I am defining spaces that leave the viewer uncertain of the scale and space occupied by the objects depicted. Often the angles and part of the image that is in focus are vaguely recognizable objects, which leave the viewer believing that it is a real, inhabitable space. The uncertainty that follows from this recognition that it seems real but it "not quite right" instills in the viewer a similar feeling of unsettled anxiety that is found after a Waking dream. In the end, the photograph's mimetic simulation of reality and the lens's ability to structure and frame a world through monocular vision has allowed me to explore the realms of a medium that has traditionally been used to capture truth. By understanding that the camera is my tool, I have learned that I can warp even my own perceptions of the world contained within the confines of the photograph.