

Uncanny knack of confusing reality

EXHIBITION

Thomas Demand
Serpentine Gallery, W2

★★★★☆

Nick Hackworth

FREUD'S concept of the "uncanny" is often wheeled out by contemporary artists, usually to spice up dull paintings of domestic scenes or to justify the production of sculptures of oversized kitchen utensils.

At its core is the observation that it is the things with which we are most familiar that hold the greatest potential to frighten us, not the exotic and the unknown. We repress the essential strangeness of the places, people and objects that surround us, and when some change reveals their true nature, our whole world is thrown out of kilter.

German artist Thomas Demand is a master of the uncanny. Hung around the Serpentine Gallery are large, shiny photographs of uninhabited places — the interior of a kitchen or a bedroom, a garage, a corporate boardroom, a recording studio. A level of artificiality is evident: from first contact, the images look too clean, too perfect in places. But their precise nature is unclear until close inspection reveals them to be high-format



Underlying unease about the ordinary: Klause 4

images of models, though even then it's not obvious that these are photographs of life-size recreations made from coloured paper and cardboard. With impressive craftsmanship Demand, 42, creates his own version of a reality.

Deliberately confusing the issue of the real, Demand often takes as his subject scenes culled from the media. In the central gallery is presented a suite of images, Klause/Tavern: an ordinary German house, with ivy creeping around windows and streamers hanging from the lights of a well-ordered kitchen.

Even without the knowledge that the house, familiar to Germans from media coverage, was the location of a notorious crime, the works exemplify the uncanny. There's a lack of clear threat but there is still an underlying unease. The implications float around that our version of reality is always vulnerable, whether it be the world presented to us, or that shown to us by our senses.

● **Until 20 August. Information:** 020 7402 6075.

He is co-curating the summer exhibition, stars in a TV series about it

The Royal Academy Showman

FIONA MADDOCKS

DAVID Mach, sculptor and manipulator of coat hangers extraordinaire, was on his way back from a girlie peep-show in Soho when he first entered the portals of the Royal Academy of Arts, Burlington House, Piccadilly. "I was an art student. My studies were so dull we'd gone up west for some fun," he recalls.

"We'd exhausted the sex shops, all very dull. We'd been thrown out of Hamleys for ogling a girl with a Hula Hoop. I thought, why not go into the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition for a laugh? I'd heard about all the old fogies who took part in it with their pictures of bobbing boats and bowls of fruit. Looking down my great long nose I thought, 'Yes, we're the young, hip contemporaries and you're the boring old buggers!' Instead I was knocked out. Flabbergasted."

Soon after, fresh from the Royal College of Art, he had two of his own works accepted, and has never looked back. Now aged 50 and a fashionable artist, whose work varies from a submarine made out of tyres to a gigantic portrait of Richard Branson's smile, Mach is a willing insider; one of the 80 or so Royal Academicians who make up the academy's mem-

bership, elected by fellow artists or architects, who supposedly represent the "artistic establishment".

This gutsy miner's son from Fife is a reminder that those two words remain, as ever, mutually exclusive. "This is a place that's changing. It has to, to survive. I like knowing what's going on here. I'm nosy, like all artists. But I'm belligerent, too. I'm happy to stir things up. Sometimes I can see I'm a bit wild. My energy races up from the soles of the feet and bites me on my arse on the way up to my head."

This year, Mach is part of the small group of RAs who, unpaid and giving up weeks of their studio time, have co-ordinated the 238th summer exhibition. It will be an historic year: in addition to the show, four art-related "Cushion Concerts" will take place within the galleries. For the first time, too, cameras have been allowed into Burlington House to film the mysteries of the selection process — in which some 10,000 entries are whittled down to around 1,200 — for three one-hour fly-on-the-wall programmes presented by Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen for BBC2.

Crucial to the Royal Academy's annual salon, which has run without a break since 1768 and is now the only one of its kind in the world, is that it is a law unto itself, free from curatorial and commercial prejudice. "No other buggers would be mad enough to do a show like this," Mach observes. "Since the academy is autonomous — and it's a bloody good idea — the Government doesn't give us hand-outs. We can do what the f*** we like. It's the opposite of elitist. We're saying: 'Welcome, come in, as long as you've done a good piece of art.'"

Lampooned by critics as a home for artistic jumble, professional and amateur, the summer show has a powerful internal dynamism of its own. Major international artists such as Georg Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer and Ed Ruscha regularly contribute. Prominent British non-members are invited to show and, increasingly, most agree to. So a room curated by Ben Levene RA is overwhelmed by a monster swirl of steel by Richard Wentworth. The two newest academicians, Basil Beattie and David Remfry — elected only five days ago — are on show in rooms curated by veteran RAs Allen Jones and Ken Howard, whose own vast Homage to Jo Malone dominates his gallery.



Talking point: David Mach has created

In a final flourish, ex-Young British Artists whose names were made by the RA's Sensation show are reunited in the unlikely circumstances of the summer show in a room, curated by Tom Phillips RA: maquettes by Damien Hirst of his 30-ft Virgin Mother, Turner Prize-winner Martin Creed's Lamp Going On and Off plus works by Tracey Emin, Gavin Turk (a large ovoid made of a hare pelt), Grayson Perry and, notably, a shimmering painting by Marcus Harvey, whose Myra Hindley, called Toilet Roll, caused such egg-throwing shock.

"You only have to stop being lazy and open your eyes to see the variety and the quality," Mach instructs. "Every artist wants to show in a nice white cube. But the summer show is Star Wars, everyone's here and they all want space at the bar — the person with three eyes or four legs, the 'I come from Venus' or 'I'm from Mars' types. It's raunchy and sexy. Am I overselling it? Not at all."

For Mach, part of the revelation has been working with artists from different tradi-

Happy ever after is the

DON'T worry, A Midsummer Night's Dream will be along soon. But before that staple of the Regent's Park repertoire, there's a welcome chance to see one of Shakespeare's least-performed comedies. Shrew, with its looming shadow of misogyny, is customarily cited, if it is talked of at all, as a crude prototype for Much Ado. Refreshingly, director Rachel Kavanaugh has other ideas.

Before we grapple with

THEATRE

The Taming of the Shrew

Open Air Theatre, Regent's Park

★★★★☆

Fiona Mountford

the subjugation of women, however, we can't help but admire the beauty of Kit Surrey's set. We are in 1930s Italy, and Surrey presents us with Piazza Minola, which is authentic

right down to the faded, eggshell-coloured street signs. The design stands in perfect alignment with the text: this Padua is a place where men sit in the square, drink grappa and move the women around like chess pieces.

No wonder Katherina (Sirine Saba) has taken up shrewery as a hobby. In this phallogocentric society, she is used to her pretty, docile younger sister, Bianca (Sheridan Smith), getting all the attention. This makes the spirited

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