Panel show

Enigmatic new artworks by Thomas Demand are an exclusive teaser for BMW’s soon-to-be-unveiled Vision M Next concept car

Writer Tony Chambers
Highlighting different surfaces and planes, Demand has 'made the details larger than life', says BMW Group's head of design Adrian van Hooydonk
Thomas Demand likes cars. And he really likes car designers. The German artist has an acute appreciation of the unique challenges they face and the role they play in shaping the future of our society. ‘If you are a car designer, you have to predict the future,’ explains Demand, who has been living in LA for the last nine years, a city built around auto-dependency. ‘This is an amazing task when you realise they are designing at least three years ahead of any official launch; then that car has to be around and relevant for at least another ten years. So they are thinking up to 13 years ahead. Considering how fast things change today, I find this mesmerising.’

Demand’s insight is informed by a ten-year friendship with BMW Group’s head of design, Adrian van Hooydonk. The pair first met in 2005 at the artist’s Berlin studio; then, in 2009, Demand invited van Hooydonk to lecture during his show at the Neue Nationalgalerie. ‘Adrian spoke about how cities will change in relation to the introduction of electric cars. In fact, he talked about the future in general and how he sees it, but not as a corporate person. We hardly ever talk about corporate issues.’

Van Hooydonk makes sure he is plugged into the larger creative engine. ‘During my time at BMW, I’ve tried to stay in touch with other fields of creativity, to discuss ideas, and I now have a very interesting network of creative individuals such as Olafur Eliasson, Rem Koolhaas, Patricia Urquiola and, of course, Thomas, who are all pushing hard in their respective fields,’ he says. ‘Every time we meet, we talk about art, culture and society as a whole. They are interested in everything going on in society and very interested in cars, which are still one of the most important parts of modern culture. I’ve always felt that we can benefit from this. It helps me judge whether what we are doing is relevant or going to be relevant in the future and, every now and then, doing a project together firms up those ties.’

‘Thomas and I always thought that one day we’d do something together, and when I started this new project—quite a radical concept vehicle we are calling the Vision M Next—I thought, well, this could be the one. So I asked him.’ A collaboration with BMW had been on Demand’s mind too, but he told van Hooydonk it would depend on the car. ‘I suggested he just go to our California studio so we could show him on our screens what we are working on,’ says van Hooydonk. ‘There was no physical car to walk around or colour schemes chosen, but Demand liked what he saw. ‘Thomas is very quick—he’ll tell you immediately yes or no. There’s no in between.’

‘The technology for visualisation in the car industry is astonishing,’ Demand enthuses. ‘They use the best 3D projections and virtual reality, so I was interested to check that out.’ He spent hours just inspecting details. ‘I selected the really enigmatic parts of the car—the least branded and most interesting in how the different surfaces and planes get intertwined.’ From there, he constructed his customary life-size cardboard sculptures, which are then photographed to produce the final artworks. ‘I’ve always had in mind that my work could make good teaser images—rather than those classic teasers that use a little torch to highlight the silhouette. Everyone does those now. They can be really tedious,’ Demand continues. ‘Unlike traditional photography, which tends to look at existing, real things, most of my work documents non-existing things. So when this opportunity arose I thought, “Oh this is cool. I can be part of the visual vocabulary of the future and it could be rather beautiful.”’

Images of the ‘real’ BMW Vision M Next won’t be revealed until 23 June. So these pages truly are a poetic teaser. ‘When you see the car, you think you’ll totally recognise the idea,’ Demand assures me. ‘My images are abstracted but they show the idea and the characteristics of the design, how the shapes intertwine. The idea is still visibly “I’m a car”. My images are a little more fetishistic perhaps—but isn’t that what a car will become?’

Van Hooydonk agrees. ‘Artists see what’s going on in the world around them and then make people stop in their tracks to focus on one single thing for a moment, to make them think. That’s exactly what Thomas has done,’ he says. ‘He’s made these details larger than life somehow. When you see the car, you will immediately recognise all the things you have seen in Thomas’ images. I love the fact that, until you have seen the car, these are completely abstract art. I know every corner of this car, so it means more to me, but perhaps it’s more interesting for you to see this artwork before seeing the car’.

The new concept is far more than an abstraction for van Hooydonk and BMW. ‘Mobility is going through dramatic changes that I feel are irreversible,’ he says. ‘Cars are becoming more intelligent, which will lead to them being able to successfully drive autonomously.’ Last year, BMW presented another concept vehicle, the Vision Next, essentially an autonomously driven—when in “Ease” mode—living space. That car did allow the driver to take back control using “Boost” mode. And the new car celebrates the hands-on pleasures of actually driving. ‘With the Vision M Next, we want to show how more intelligence and smart technology will actually help you enjoy the driving experience even more,’ van Hooydonk says. ‘Of course the whole industry is talking about how the vehicle will drive itself—and we did that last year with Vision Next—but the BMW brand is built on the opposite: on a good and involved driving experience. We want to modernise that—to boost and intensify that experience. We are portraying a vision of how this visceral emotion, that a lot of people associate with mobility, won’t get lost. This concept is something that Thomas also finds interesting.’

‘We have never done anything like this image project before, so I’m very excited. We’re introducing a vehicle that will be revealed two weeks after these images appear in Wallpaper’. I think they are intriguing and beautiful and are art, of course—I would hang them on the wall immediately.’

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