



## MARTIN DENKER

**“Out of this World” (*Der Absolute Wahnsinn. Crazy!*)**  
**Helga-Meister Interview, 2007**  
*translated from German*

Martin Denker (b. Hamburg, 1976) studied English and Fine Art at Greifswald University from 1996 to 2000, during which time the former painter and classical black-and-white photographer, Ron Binks, turned up there from Texas University in San Antonio. Binks wanted to find out what Caspar David Friedrich would have made pictures of today and so spent six weeks travelling through Eastern Germany with a 35-mm camera. It was through his auspices that Denker found his way to a stint in Texas from 2000 to 2001, painting abstract pictures. At the same time, he became Binks’s assistant, the latter familiarising him with baryta-coated papers, toners, platinum prints and the twenty-one tones of grey of the zone system. Developing, making the print and composition were at the forefront. At San Antonio, the young man from Germany also took on an assistantship with the commercial photographer, Swain Edens, who introduced him to the secrets of light and of large-scale photography. Denker was fascinated by the staged scene. With huge debts, but highly motivated, he came to Düsseldorf, worked for Tita Giese, where he became acquainted with her panorama camera, and with five years of studies behind him, landed back in the Foundation Course in 2001 because his previous studies were not recognised. In 2002 he became Andreas Gursky’s assistant and a student in Thomas Ruff’s class.

He made his debut in 2003 with a digital landscape based on a 35-mm photograph of his own that he had taken of the Swamp Highway in Louisiana. Now the sky is greenish swampy like the scene of origin. The highway on its stilts and the mangrove trees are pixelised, the picture elements themselves seemingly faulty and blurred in the reproduction. Today, one would speak of the process of interlacing as generating the subjective impression of flickering. Denker recalls the sunny day when, at two in the afternoon, under a blue sky, he found that only to reproduce a scene was not enough. ‘I wanted to give the images a charge, to get more out of them than is there. I wanted to have the sense of something I had not seen before, ever, as in a science-fiction film. The source picture didn’t exactly match what was going on in my head.’

He was thinking of action, horror and sci-fi films such as *Terminator* (1984) with Arnold Schwarzenegger as a cyborg, ‘terminating’ people on command; he had *Predator* (1987) before his mind’s eye, an intergalactic trophy hunter who saw the world through the eyes of a thermal imaging camera and therefore had the advantage over people in the jungle. Alienation by means of colour, the filters, the poor resolution, the process of reduction to accelerate the

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picture feed, the zooming out of pictorial details, all began with that digital landscape. It was the transition from staged photography to work on the computer.

He photographed the owner of Hotel Ufer in Düsseldorf, René Tilgier (*Chodorkowski*, 2005), converted the motif for four-colour printing and created interference patterns in superimposing dot systems that played havoc with the picture's sharpness. It was a method he had known since 2004, when he downloaded footballer David Beckham as a pop icon onto his computer. *BeckhamBubbles*, 2004, incorporates a house front at Martinstrasse in Düsseldorf, parts of a laser show with soap bubbles, a curtain, and so on – but almost defies the beholder's perception in doing so. The picture is a digital collage becoming a visual riddle. Beckham as a phenomenon is presented as a silhouette with a skull for a head. In this context, Denker likes to quote a statement attributed to Gerhard Richter, according to which he would like to paint a picture that is better than he could imagine it himself. Denker's tools to that end are Photoshop and other image processing applications.

Again in 2004, he showed *Nintendonacht* (Nintendo Night) at the Malkasten Artists' Association in Düsseldorf. The work is based on a photograph of an extensively fenestrated façade, a wall and rhododendrons that he took in Houston. "It was an absolutely normal, pretty picture, a good composition. You'd say it was evocative with a touch of mysticism – like a Jeff Wall. But that wasn't enough for me. I was just beginning to work with digital processes, and didn't want just to use objects to invoke associations."

He would work on construction sites during the day, or at night as a packer in a warehouse, to earn money for his picture production. The outcome, redolent with colour, was conspicuous at once. It was the beginning of what he calls "diving into the picture."

*Paranoia Royal* was the title given to his exhibition at Gallery Burkhard Eikelmann in Düsseldorf in 2005. A digital whirl of images, unending collages of visual raw material, his own photographs or again, geometric patterns, zoomed past the visitor to the gallery. The eye would attempt in vain to find bearings. The pictures presented so much that nothing could be seen. There was nothing to it but to set out on one's own journey, if seeing was to be understood. Those who wished could discover an Asian city – though there is nothing concrete in these vibrating pictorial tapestries. The viewer sensed that there was no penetrating that deep space for all there being twenty-five to fifty photographs woven into the one work.

*Embedded* or *DEFA Garten*, both dating from 2005, consist of round and oval elements that rotated like nerve cells and intermeshed like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Denker used photographs from brain research, read books on neurology, mounted photograph details on eyes, figures, house facades or other fragments of extant pictorial structures. The new pictorial organisms have no remnant of connection with our world or our perception. They liberate emotions and associations, question our mode of vision—and have passed beyond our grasp.

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Now he will spend months travelling the computer worlds for a picture, generating his own source images, combining them with downloads of news, from the spheres of glitz, war, film stills or advertising, and on his quest for the total picture leaves a trail of superimpositions, overlaps, distortion, intensification and combination. Perspectives fly asunder, the parts rejoin into a rhythmic staccato. Colour contrasts are no sooner set up than these visual accentuations begin to diverge again or, just short of dissolving altogether, to flow one into the other in undulations. Calm and agitation condition each other in constant motion. - A perilous game. 'The more you open your senses to the images, the more unbearable the unfiltered excess of optical stimuli in the world of routine out there becomes, into which one has to return.'

In order to understand how he finds his way to his pictures, this sampling, cutting and remixing, these film montages, transitions, pans and combinations of genuine and animated picture material, we present an interview that describes this process. In it, the term of algorithms occurs – a concept central to information science as applied in computing programmes and electronic circuitry. Martin Denker uses algorithms above all to alter colour and screening.

We spoke on December 3, 2006.

Martin Denker: On my computer, there are countless digital photographic databases from different sources. I mix everything – my own pictures and others. Take this for instance, an error the computer made. If files are too large and you shift them about on the screen too fast, you get anomalies.

Helga Meister: Evidently it's a huge file. How many different picture layers do you work with, then?

MD: With up to fifty. You can see it as resembling work with an overhead projector and laying many transparencies one over the other. In my case they are computed to merge without darkening the image on any of the planes in the process.

HM: You use motifs from science-fiction movies too, don't you?

MD: Here: this is a still from *Minority Report*, for example (the film version of Philip K. Dick's novel. I like this writer. He's the one who wrote *Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep*, one of the most sensational book titles there are, and the model for *Blade Runner*.) In that film, Tom Cruise is standing in a greenhouse where they breed curious plants and creatures. That's the scene I photographed. It's an identity thing. It's about the cybernetics debate.

HM: New paths of knowledge and new realms of experience play a great part in your art. How do you set about it?

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MD: I take shots of the film; then I do some research on the material and arrive at formal links between parts of machinery, the crown on the Statue of Liberty and plants, or thorns. In effect I lob myself the same ball all the time, like in squash.

HM: You mean, your art as a kind of rebound sport, then. Is this to say that you jump from one association to the next?

MD: Absolutely. It corresponds to the way seeing works. Neuronal processes in the brain interest me.

Sensory nerve cells store information, pass it on or process it.

The brain practically only talks to itself. There are up to a hundred billion brain cells and they're continually exchanging information.

From cinema to the Statue of Liberty, to ballgames and lobbying various associations, your own brain evidently chases across all that ground in a few seconds.

It's the way all communication and vision works, and my pictures. When you stand in front of one, every colour and every shape has its specific imagining, in the sense of imago – the generating of a picture of one's own.

HM: Do you play with the 3-D systems architects use?

MD: They're architectural visions generated by computer and which the human brain couldn't think up on its own – it needs [electronic] calculation to get there. You wouldn't be able to construct the Gehry buildings or the new Mercedes-Benz Museum that the Dutch office, UN Studio van Breukel and Bos built in Stuttgart, without satellite control as far as the statics are concerned. It's the satellite that governs the three-dimensional way of thinking. Otherwise it'd be too complicated to calculate where the pillars have to go in the ground. A computer can do more than a human being is normally capable of.

HM: You don't just assemble image layers, you alter the individual motifs within the strata and redesign them. How did you arrive at that strategy?

MD: I was sitting having a glass of beer with a friend in a pub when he told me how you could create three-dimensional images by yourself with a computer programme. 'You should have a look at it sometime. What's interesting about it is that you don't extract and collage the photograph; you can design your forms three-dimensionally straight off and build them into your picture. Vector Works it's called, it's a programme for architects and designers.' So I repeat my previous actions – first I watch the movie, then I hear about the application, and then I spot this retro-design oil lamp as a virtual model on the Internet. With this

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programme, it's easy to convert the two-dimensional lamp into three dimensions. And suddenly the distorted lamp and the thorns on the Statue of Liberty take up a dialogue, and you're back with the plants. But I can also discard individual layers of the picture, as I can the background. I want to find a distillation out of the maximum range from all the pictures, my own and the found ones.

HM: You studied painting. Tell me how you work with the graphics tablet and the pen instead of the brush and palette. Evidently you build colours up and tone them...

MD: I can multiply or split the colours of the source material, I can make differences in a colour and define the contrasting colour for each original colour. For red that would be cyan, or for green, German Telecom's magenta. Blue has yellow as its complementary colour.

HM: If you could you put that in slightly more tangible terms . . .

MD: A picture consists of millions of picture elements, that is, pixels. With sixteen to seventeen million colours, this might be red number 13.8 million. Now, I can calculate for this red the degree of saturation, i.e. the intensity and luminosity of the colour. If I withdrew all the saturation from the image, it would be black-and-white. Each hue is calculated and can be changed. I can move the colours of the spectrum in relation to each other. If I slowly intensify the cyan values, everything changes instantaneously. I can 'dodge' the colours like a darkroom technician, I can lighten or again, burn them. With every key-stroke, you get a totally new cosmos of images. I'm constantly sifting and making pictures.

HM: So we're talking about things out of this world. The title of your latest picture is *IIUltimoParaiso* – The Last Paradise. Tell me how you struck on that title.

MD: I was in Formentera in 2006 and saw some pretty shattered people there, including drug dealers, criminals, alcoholics. Of course there are pleasant spots on the island too, but in my experience it was a real Doomsday feeling. I discovered the title on an advertising poster, 'Formentera il ultimo paraiso.' My titles come about more by chance than anything.

HM: Let's move on. You like layering patterns over your concrete pictorial information like camouflage netting. What led you to these Sixties wallpaper patterns?

MD: They're bubbles. I can create ravines with them. At the moment I'm interested in baroque chandeliers. I set up the camera at the Hotel Imperial in Vienna, with me in the original armchair, and photographed the arrangement with the delayed-action shutter release. At the Imperial I imagine what the furniture and the décor looked like when modernism irrupted on the classical way of life of the nineteenth century. Thomas Mann was a guest here – I love the mood in his *Magic Mountain*. What was it like under Ludwig, the Swan King? What was the smell like in a city of coal stoves? My dream is a journey through

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time. The Hotel Imperial was built about 140 years ago. So I imagine how funny it would be to be sitting in the chamber of state in the royal palace.

HM: You're sitting in your picture on a cloth-upholstered, matt-lacquer chair, a laptop in front of you like an easel, and you're gazing at your self-portrait in the mirror.

MD: I dragged over another image, trimmed it, cut it out and matched it in order to cover up a piece of the laptop cable. When I have the time, I'll alter that little area too. Then not a soul will be able to tell that there's been any manipulation.

HM: What was your intention in slipping one image into the other?

MD: I'd like to alter the truth of the picture. I ask myself why we see something. I can direct the viewer's eye and start off a chain of associations. The fresh fruit on the ground could be Temptation, the apple points to Adam and Eve. You can control all that. I've started an archive on Neo Rauch. He's got the socialist palette, but he has loads of Pop too. With the pipette I can transfer an olive green from a Rauch jumper onto my picture. I can create the mood of a Neo Rauch within two minutes. My picture is still there, but with the command 'Replace colour', certain tonal values and colour contrasts are changed. They say he's a post-communist surrealist. He's a superstar, like Andreas Gursky.

HM: I see him more as a melancholic and ironist. He works with Socialist publicity images and catalogues, with opaque colours from the 1950s and 1960s. But how do *you* think? Why do you continually work with new, glassy-permeable zones that transcend extant space?

MD: I think like a painter, not like a photographer.

HM: What are your pictures? There are many questions I'd still like to ask, say about visual paranoia, about fictitious states and their surrealism? Is it about finding possibilities of a new way of designing light and life inches from the brink? Is your art an attempt to make of the visual chaos an order lying beyond material things? Does your slice of reality seem as if it had been sighted from a distant star? Do you engage in a defragmenting of material in order that it might generate cosmic energies?

MD: Windsurfing on our oceans... sheer joy!