

House of Characters

In the “House of Characters” created for Hermès’ spring display in Shanghai by Swedish artist Thomas Broomé, you can experience both a calming physical home, as well as the boundless freedom of his mind.

editor & writer: Wu Tingrong photo from: Hermès

If you’ve passed the Hermès Maison in Shanghai at Huaihai Road recently, you must have been drawn to the “House of Characters” in the display window. Whether it’s the clever arrangement of characters and images, or the seamless connection between space and surfaces, it’s enough to give you a delightful surprise.

In addition to the room’s scenery, with a tightly packed background of characters, the display window also features three-dimensional home furnishings made of characters: there is a spiraling flight of stairs, a clothes rack, table and chairs, a vase---looking in through the window glass, it appears as if you are in a corner, taking in the view of the entire room.

Since opening in September of last year, the Hermès Maison in Shanghai has had display windows designed by different artists for every season. The Swedish artist Thomas Broomé was invited to design this Spring display window. In this display, with its theme of “Modern mantra (La Maison),” Broomé has used characters to create a home within a home for Hermès. Stretching flat surfaces into three dimensions, he has created a bedroom, den, and corridor in the display.

In contrast with the themed displays of two previous seasons, Dutch artist Levi van Veluw’s “A Horse’s Orange-Tinted Journey” for the fall and “Museum of supernatural” for winter by French artists Zim&Zou, the style of the spring-themed display that Broomé has created with metal and characters is cooler and simpler. Yet it also definitely imparts the spatial sense of home.

The Hermès group, with its boundless enthusiasm for traditional arts and craftsmanship, believes that both display windows and the architectural designs of stores are both extremely important for the brand. This special emphasis is precisely why there have been countless classic window displays created by Ex-Hermès Display Window Director Leila Menchari: the Tokyo glass-walled Maison Hermès designed by Renzo Piano, Rena Dumas’ three-dimensional architecture in Seoul and her modified department store in Vancouver, as well as the modified corridor in Amsterdam and the three-story building in New York, and the classic display art and exhibitions created by the artist Hilton McConnic.

In Shanghai, the artist who will design each season's Hermès Maison display window is selected by Hermès headquarters in France. Broomé revealed that the careful selection process allows Hermès to place great trust in all its artistic partners. For this reason, Hermès has never told the artists what to do. Instead, it gives them a great deal of freedom. In this project with Hermès, Broomé has worked in his usual creative style.

Perhaps this freedom allowed him to use this limited space to convey his limitless imagination, turning a narrow display window into a spacious bedroom and den.

In Thomas Broomé's opinion, designing a "home" for Hermès was not especially difficult. That's because he could not be more familiar with this artistic technique of using the English names of items to reconstruct them. But when talking about this unique artistic method that he created, he says only that it occurred "by chance" and is "not a revolutionary breakthrough."

Broomé told us that the reason all of these ideas occur "by chance" is that he had already had this conception about using characters while in art school. "There was one day when I was in school until late at night, when I suddenly had this fantasy about characters."

This tiny idea floated around in his brain for fifteen years. It was only in 2006 that he truly began to realize these concepts, creating the first work in the Modern Mantras series, a black and white image using characters. The repeated shapes of these characters were like lines. They could be distorted, connected and transformed from various perspectives to suit the different shapes of the items.

Ever since that time, he has been using this unique artistic technique to depict a number of different still life images and spaces. Of these, his favorite is still the ideal home he "painted" using this method.

But Broomé candidly acknowledges that this is not a revolutionary breakthrough. "Actually, this is like a kind of artistic calligraphy. It's like how you see a Christmas card with 'Merry Christmas' written in bells. All I'm actually doing is using the names of different items to construct these items," says Broomé. Be that as it may, what he is doing is unprecedented.

Although this unique artistic technique is only something that happened to flash into his mind, this awareness of characters is exactly the artistic philosophy that Thomas Broomé would like to express. If we say that artists use images and colors to convey to us their visual observations of the world, then he hopes to use brushwork to convey auditory impressions, turning insubstantial characters and elusive sounds into something three-dimensional and real.

Choosing to use the names of objects is also like a kind of labeling. It compels people to pay attention to the simplest and most easily overlooked parts of our lifestyles in this age of fast-paced consumerism. A chair that has been labeled “CHAIR” seems to be using its entire body of labels to shout, in hopes that people will use a different attitude and perspective to take notice of this long-ignored item. But as far as Thomas Broomé is concerned, perhaps art has always been purer. It is just as he believes: everything is made completely naturally and of its own accord. He has never thought about how to “create” or “have a breakthrough.” Nevertheless, his observations and understanding of the world unconsciously permeate his works.

Reminiscing about the great passion for art which he has felt since childhood, Broomé summarized it as a kind of escape from reality. Only in the world of art is Thomas Broomé totally free. “I need a home life that allows me to feel safe. That’s because as an artist, I can only take risks in the world of my artistic creations when I personally feel safe. The freedom to create gives me total liberty and allows me to leave reality behind.”

Q&A

Thomas Broomé

Can you share with us the details of the process of creating this Hermès themed display?

We had been in discussions with Hermès since August of last year. After I fully committed to the project, it took about two or three months to bring it to completion. At first, I was planning to make a room, so at the beginning it was just a stage structure, like a theater. But ultimately, it changed into the space you see today, that spreads out from within. Although the entire creation has undergone continual revision, that’s exactly the reason that I love art: the entire creation is like a journey. You have an idea as your starting point. When you start to create based upon this idea, it will start to change shape. What you generally see is just the final phase of this creative journey.

In the past, you’ve always painted these spaces and still life illustrations made of words. Was this your first time making them into actual three-dimensional objects?

Yes. This Hermès PIPA folding chair was the first item I made. 3D printing technology has allowed me to make real objects out of “virtual” text. In addition to the PIPA folding chair, we also made a staircase, vase, table and chairs, and the Home-Valet multifunction clothes rack. Although it was my first attempt, the things I made came out very well. Maybe I’ll make other objects in the future.

What gave you the most trouble in the transition from two-dimensional painting to making three-dimensional objects?

At first, I thought this would be an enormous responsibility. But what's surprising is that I really didn't have many problems. That's because the chair I made this time was just a work of art. If you needed to make a chair that could actually support weight, then you'd really be looking at some serious challenges.

Your works combine text and art. At the same time, they encourage people to rethink the relationship between spaces and surfaces. What would you like to express with these works?

I think this is a question about how everyone looks at the world, and it emphasizes the importance of language. Our world is composed of different languages, texts and words. For instance, we have business terminology, the intimate language used between mothers and their children, and so on. What my Modern Mantra series is doing is just making these even clearer, allowing you to look at the world from a different perspective.

You think the text of language is important, but Chinese and English are written very differently. Did you consider using Chinese characters in your creations?

In the future, I hope to use Chinese characters to make a vase. This is an inspiration that I took from this trip to Shanghai. When I saw porcelains from different eras at the Shanghai Museum, I thought: how great it would be if I could use Chinese characters to make a vase!

What are your thoughts on the importance of art? Why do you create art?

Actually, we're talking about why we need art. I think it's because we need to see the world, and we need a reflection of the world. We need some people to observe the world, and then to make a reflection of it so that we can see the world. Otherwise, we live in this world, but we very seldom think deeply about it. When we see works of art, we see some aspects of life. These can be anything—it can be love, it can be hate...As for myself, the reason that I create art is very simple. In the beginning, I didn't have the idea that "I want to make a mirror for the world" to reflect society. As far as I'm concerned, it's just that I was able to do this. Sometimes, it's something really simple. When you're young and you get encouragement, you'll work hard and continue to do it well, and you generally get a lot of opportunities to paint.

The Hermès display window, located at Huaihai Road in Shanghai, has been transformed into an amazing stage, showing limitless ideas of home.