

# REGEN PROJECTS

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## DAILYSERVING

### Too Serious for a Series

March 18, 2011

L.A. Expanded: Notes from the West Coast  
A weekly column by Catherine Wagley



Wolfgang Tillmans, Installation view, March 12 - April 9, 2011. Photography by Brian Forrest. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

There's a video—one of many—that's been circulating the web since last Friday. It's called "Tsunami Hitting City of Kamaishi" and it lasts for a grueling four minutes and thirty-eight seconds. The first thirty seconds show a view of the Pacific coast that's relatively calm, though overcast. Ships float by distantly and you can hear the inquisitive voice of a child in the background. No one sounds too disturbed. Then, by second thirty-nine, you see sudsy water foam up and pull boats from where they've been docked into the city. The becomes violent but slowly—it takes a few more drawn out seconds to register that something really, really bad is happening. By minute number two, the water's roof high. By minute four, the city's barely there, and that kid who sounded inquisitive and chipper a few minutes ago has started whimpering. Devastation, literally. Yet the weirdest part is that the video feels rhythmic, as if what's happening makes intuitive sense.

The same friend who sent me the Kamaishi video also told me about how Japan had moved 13 feet closer to the U.S. since last Friday. He brought this up just after we left the March 12th opening of Wolfgang Tillmans' new exhibition at Regen Projects in West Hollywood, which is why I now see Tillmans' Iguazu whenever I think "Tsunami."

It feels too obvious—an image of gushing brownish water, falling downward in a gorgeous triangle, standing in for a disaster that manifested in a tidal wave. I'd rather have one of Tillmans' t-shirt or jean photos, with wearable, human swells and rifts lodged in my mind. But I wouldn't want it to be the work of any other artist (what if one of Tomory Dodge's post-apocalyptic eruptions, or Doug Aitken's smooth-as-molasses, foreboding-as-hell videos had become synonymous with Tsunami?).



Wolfgang Tillmans, Iguazu, 2010, Ink jet print on paper, 54 1/2 x 81 5/8 inches, Edition 1/1, 1 AP. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

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When you push aside the fixations on “slacker” images, the fashion-art collide, and rave culture that has trailed Tillmans through his career (a career that, somehow, has gotten quite long), what you’re left with is an artist who understands time and speed far better than most—probably because he refuses to conform to the constructs of either, while at the same time refusing (or just showing little interest in) non-conformity.

Tillmans’ current exhibition at Regen Projects, his sixth with the gallery and the only one since 1995 to feature camera-based work exclusively, at first glance appears atypically linear. The images, all large, with the itinerant feel of travel photographs, hang on a single level. They’re not staggered and stacked like previous Tillmans installations have been. Yet, seen as a body, they’re just as intermittent and tangential as anything in the artist’s oeuvre. You walk from Times Square to a hotel room to an airport terminal to a fountain to a photocopier, then past egg cartons to an Argentinian vista. These scenes look like they’ve been caught and honed by someone, a globetrotter, with a sophisticated sense of space who happens to stop for a minute while moving through the other life he leads. (Lecturing at LACMA two weeks ago, Tillmans said that, in the 90s, he’d been hailed as photographing his generation, while really, he was just photographing his life, but not his life—not exactly.)



Wolfgang Tillmans, Installation view, March 12 - April 9, 2011. Photography by Brian Forrest. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Tillmans began making work with the help of a company photocopier just before the Berlin Wall fell. He started publishing images in magazines like *i.D.* soon after and then exhibiting in galleries. He continued through a decade of relative warlessness, at least in Western Europe and the U.S. (one of his books, *Soldiers: The Nineties*, chronicled the amorphous roles of men in uniform during this time), but endless technological revolutions (when he started, Tillmans used to promise collectors reprints of his digitally processed images should they fade, and they inevitably did; now, they rarely do), and through a subsequent decade of drawn-out international tensions (soldiers have definite jobs again). Through it all, he’s been remarkably good at staying themeless, never working serially. Working in “series is serious,” Tillmans joked during his recent “feature length” (his wording) lecture at LACMA.

Japanese novelist Kazumi Saeki, who experienced the March 11th earthquake from near Sakunami, likes series and published an op-ed in the *New York Times* this week in which he tries to make sense of disaster. Near the end, he remembers the ten years he spent as an electrician. “My main job was to travel around Tokyo, repairing lights, including street lamps and the hallway and stairway lights in apartment buildings,” he writes. “For this reason, the sight of the well-ordered, unbroken expanse of the city’s lights always brought me a great sense of relief. Will I ever again experience such peace?”

If series is serious it’s also safe—and calming, like a line of city lights. Tillmans’ work has never been like that. At Regen Projects, each photograph is, on its own, a well-ordered thing. Iguazu, for instance, is stunningly composed, but, in a room of images, it has no real partner. The pictures don’t give the satisfaction of continuity or cohesion. They’re not safe in that way. And, unlike the Tokyo lights, they can’t be repaired because they’ve already been perfected.