

REGEN PROJECTS

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WOLFGANG TILLMANS

TATE BRITAIN

MARTIN HERBERT



Wolfgang Tillmans, *Conquistador II*, 2000, color photograph

How to begin nailing a photographic oeuvre whose cast of characters ranges from Kate Moss (radiant in Alexander McQueen) to a brown rat (rapine in a gutter), whose still-life subjects flip from pink roses to a porky penis unleashed beside an airline breakfast, whose locations encompass antiwar demonstrations and tropical ponds? Check the manual, of course. *If one thing matters, everything matters*, the more than 2,400-image book that functions as—and generously exceeds the role of—an exhibition catalogue for Wolfgang Tillmans's 301-photograph, two-video, seven-room monographic monster at Tate Britain, includes a hand-drawn, crisscrossing flowchart that anatomizes and interlinks the several dozen subject matters he has been pursuing since the late 1980s. Lines flex outward from the set of "People" to subsets like "crowds/strangers," "soldier," "nude/sex"; "*Struktur*" incorporates "bridges/streams," "astronomy," "light

REGEN PROJECTS

effects”; “Still Lives” is a license to annex anything nonhuman; and so on. It’s a rampant plan to engulf the world, a donning of protective and connective procedural layers against life’s walloping flux, and a reminder of why, alongside Warhol and Richter, Hanne Darboven is another avowed hero of the German-born, London-based Tillmans. When, a mere eight images into the Tate show, he and curator Mary Horlock dealt out *Macau Bridge*, 1993—a hazy, industrial-sublime view of a half-built highway bridge in the Far East, crane boom angling in—and bracketed it with a shot of two punks taken for a fashion magazine and a monochrome study of a deliriously sweaty clubber, it was clear that the artist has no hesitancy about offering photographic metonyms for his own bridge-building practice.

But Tillmans, who won’t embrace one possibility to the exclusion of others, only partly desires a stable, well-riveted structure. His installations have increasingly hinged on the inclusion of previously shown photographs, their significance modulated by surprising juxtapositions with new ones. Echoing this, his pictorial world is one of negotiable values, and of one key value in particular, beauty—where it turns up, why we conventionally think one thing delectable and another not, what the political ramifications and exclusions of that consensual process are, and how activism might have a beauty of its own.

Take, for example, *Zeitungsstapel* (Stack of newspapers), 1999, an asymmetric image of paper dumped for recycling, and its next-door neighbor, *Conquistador II*, 2000, a worryingly luscious view of the evening sky strafed by purple and crimson gusts of what Tillmans, in the title of a similar picture, calls “fucked-up chemicals.” If you don’t start thinking about beauty (and rethinking its terms today) as you look at these images, then the work could fairly be said to have failed you. Of course,

TILLMANS’S PICTORIAL WORLD IS ONE OF NEGOTIABLE VALUES, AND OF ONE KEY VALUE IN PARTICULAR—BEAUTY.

while beautiful things are often fragile, unfixed, and soon spent, not everything bearing those qualities is traditionally seen as beautiful. Tillmans militates against that notion in single photographs—*Sportflecken* (Sport stain), 1996, for instance, which turns a stained, crumpled white T-shirt into a whisper of an absent body, a recent tumble, and a present languor—but he does so most effectively in baroque viaducts of floating signifiers made from a mix-and-match of disparate images.

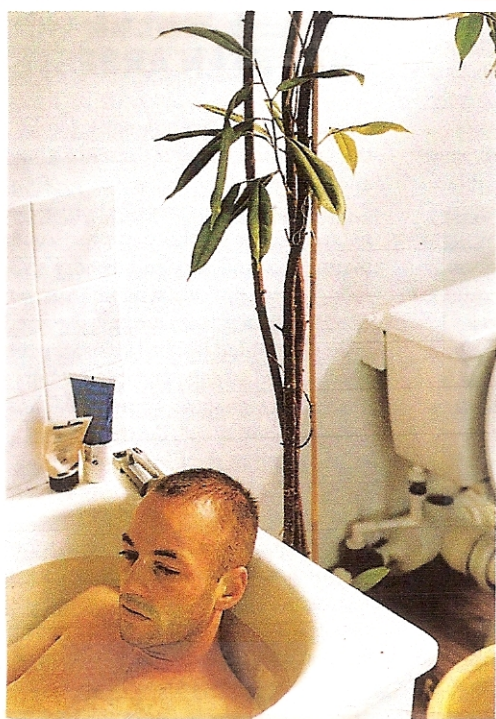
Spreading across two walls of the show’s second room were ostensibly unrelated photographs from 1995–97 (unframed, as are most all the works in the show, in the name of increased immediacy rather than slacker faux nonchalance). Reading the images approximately from left to right, following the numbered order suggested in the gallery’s hand-out, one came across celebrities from the ’90s (the aforementioned supermodel Moss, the simian Britpop group Supergrass); several examples from Tillmans’s series on the Concorde, seen wonderingly from the ground; more unearthly wonder in a glimpsed view of the comet Hale-Bopp; and, printed massive, a view of the artist’s then-boyfriend, the painter Jochen Klein (who died of an AIDS-related illness in ’97) taking a quiet bath. The shot, one of Tillmans’s best known, was

suddenly and unexpectedly illuminated with neon sadness by this periphery of rocketing stars and now grounded sky-birds and was followed up affectingly with a comparatively small and modest example of one of Tillmans’s aerial views, a downward gaze at Earth as if seen by an ascending figure. This assemblage was so much greater than the sum of its parts as to suggest that Tillmans is essentially an installation artist who works with photography. It was genuinely heartrending, mostly as a tribute to a dead lover but also because it had been spun together from thin air and—despite the fact that this show, Tillmans’s first substantial museum exhibition in his adopted country, on occasion reconstructed entire swaths of previous shows—will probably never be presented in this way again. Gone, gone, gone.

Mortals can’t sustain such intuitive flashes, and Tillmans experimented enough here to guarantee some dodgy moments. The insertion of a small, jolly portrait of electronic musician Richard D. James into a sequence of the extraordinarily sensual, large-scale darkroom experiments, collectively titled “Blushes,” that Tillmans has been making since around 2000—shimmering pink abstracts that look like massively magnified sprays of blown pigment, or fluttering cosmic eyelashes, or photography dreaming of the stop-start velocity of de Kooning’s brushstrokes—felt like a willful puncture of briefly achieved ambrosial flow. *Lights (Body)*, 2000–2002, a semisuccessful foray into video installation that focuses on a club’s spotlights swiveling in strict tempo to a jackhammer hard-house beat, seemingly mocks Tillmans’s own penchant for fine-tooled German precision by inexorably recalling Kraftwerk’s robotic movements, yet reminds one that his gift is not for the single isolated subject. And the show closed on a sociological note of honking obviousness: a wall of images, revolving around half-empty churches and packed, sweaty clubs, which pointed out that rapturous communion increasingly occurs on Saturday night rather than on Sunday morning.

But this misstep—a rare example of going a bridge too far—only fleetingly detracted from a show that offered numerous chains of fugitive diamonds sourced from the coal face of the everyday and that, in the process, performed a feat that art should pull off more regularly: making one feel *better* about being alive right now. □

Martin Herbert is a London-based writer and critic. (See Contributors.)



Wolfgang Tillmans, *Jochen taking a bath*, 1997, color photograph.