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Hadland, Gracie. "Wolfgang Tillmans Became a Household Name Finding Beauty in the Banal. He's Ready to Re-Evaluate." CULTURED Magazine (January 16, 2026) [online]

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Wolfgang Tillmans Became a Household Name Finding Beauty in the Banal. He's Ready to Re-Evaluate.

The artist is the poster child for a certain aesthetic of 21st-century image: simple, austere beauty mixed with a deceptive amateurishness. Now the digital world has thoroughly caught up, and he's working to coin the next lexicon of contemporary photography.



Portrait of Wolfgang Tillmans by Pat Martin.

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It's 2026, and Wolfgang Tillmans enjoys the kind of status that could easily tip over into stasis. The 57-year-old German artist, whose photography career spans nearly four decades, is fresh off a major exhibition at Paris's Centre Pompidou (which he is careful to remind me was *not* a retrospective) and a 2022 survey at the Museum of Modern Art. It's fitting that his exhibition of new photographs, sculptures, and video works at Regen Projects in Los Angeles is titled "Keep Movin'."

Tillmans has managed the rare feat of transcending the art world's small, insider circles and their spillover into fashion and music. His name is shorthand for a certain aesthetic of the 21st-century photograph: simple, austere beauty mixed with a deceptive amateurishness. (There is always a whiff of humor around his occasionally banal subjects. Two of my favorite Tillmans photos include plastic water bottles.) Despite this esteemed position, the artist seems to be following his exhibition title's imperative: to continue. For someone who has carved out an aesthetic that has reached maximum—if diluted—saturation online in the last 15 years, he insists on constantly reevaluating what makes a contemporary image. "What's on the walls is a [the result of a] 40-year practice," he tells me, "of exploring what kinds of pictures are possible today."



Wolfgang Tillmans, *Time Flows All Over 5*, 2025. Image courtesy of Regen Projects.

When we meet at the gallery in January, his show is mid-install—his assistant is in the midst of putting prints on the wall—but Tillmans is eagerly awaiting approval from the

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Mount Wilson Observatory to photograph through its telescope later that day. He's animated, and as we begin talking, our tight 45 minutes turns into an hour.

The show feels like the result of someone sifting through recent material in search of connections, not with an endgame in mind. Tillmans seems to have formed "Keep Movin'" around a handful of general ideas or gestures—the social and political cycles and systems, as well as the processes that contribute to the construction of an image—and posits found and made materials to echo them. On the main gallery's walls are large prints from various bodies of work, as well as unframed works on paper made with a photocopier, and a handful of ready-made sculptures. "The subject matter is potentially everything," says Tillmans, "which doesn't exactly make it easier."

Several works depict moments of integration and connection: rivers flowing, ropes hauling ships to shore. In *Nautical Ropes and Concrete Lifting Loops*, 2025, industrial-grade nautical rope, a synthetic shade of bright blue, rests on the floor of the gallery like a sea creature washed ashore. Nearby is a close-up photograph of offal. The mind links the coiled rope with the squidgy animal intestine: both appear soft but are functionally strong. Tillmans is interested in these moments of confusion—when something unappealing is decontextualized into something beautiful, and vice versa. "I often work with our own expectations of beauty," Tillmans tells me as we stand in the middle of the gallery looking down at *Truth Study Center (LA03/04 Veiled Offal)*, which I at first mistook for a wool blanket. "Why do we think something is beautiful or not beautiful? Once you know what that is, why is it suddenly ugly?"

At the center of the gallery are a number of tables festooned with ephemera—from newspaper clippings of current events to stamps, drawings, and the brochure from the rope company that supplied the other sculptures. Tillmans titles these displays *Truth Study Center*, part of an ongoing practice he began in 2005. "I realized that most of the trouble in the world came from men claiming absolute truths, and that conflict and problems arose from that." Combining these materials reflects the artist's effort to conjure the truth of our times, laying information and misinformation side by side, examining mechanisms of manipulation in the media. The material reveals the absurdity of the times in which we are living, but the artist's political message does not reach beyond acknowledgment to indictment. "I am a positive person, an optimist—almost," he says. "I enjoy my eyes. I enjoy waking up in the morning, being alive. The work that I do is about play, experimentation, and discovery. I don't want to have that obliterated by what goes on in the world."

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Wolfgang Tillmans, *Wild Carrot* (Film Still), 2025. Image courtesy of Regen Projects.

One work, in particular, captures this merry observational precision. Tucked in one corner and playing on a loop is the video *Wild Carrot*, 2025, of a flower blowing in the wind. The blossom quivers, its concave structure containing what look like hundreds of smaller flowers tucked inside it. The film is accompanied by a tinkling soundtrack Tillmans made himself on the kalimba. “I had a moment—let’s not call it an epiphany, but a moment—and I was able to translate it, without having scripted it or without huge technical effort,” says Tillmans of the video work. “It’s just on the right side of amateur, and just technically satisfying enough that it really works. That’s what I want the photographs to do as well; they look like you could have seen them with your own eyes.” (Tillmans famously eschews any kind of digital manipulation or special effects in his work.) “I don’t want to set up a barrier that puts the audience down,” he continues. “I try to present the work with a low threshold. But behind that, of course, is an aim to master the medium to its greatest potential with the simplest of means.”

The almost naive whimsy of the bobbing flower left me with the sense that this person knows how to look—really look.

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Wolfgang Tillmans, *The Body Is The Journey 2*, 2018. Image courtesy of Regen Projects.



Wolfgang Tillmans, *Speech Bubble*, 2025. Image courtesy of Regen Projects.

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Wolfgang Tillmans, *Years*, 2021. Image courtesy of Regen Projects.