

REGEN PROJECTS

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Los Angeles Times

Photographer Wolfgang Tillmans snapped a Frank Ocean cover, but he's a rock star in his own right



Photographer Wolfgang Tillmans is currently staging his 10th show in L.A. at Regen Projects. (Mustafah Abdulaziz)

"Do you mind if I smoke?" asks German photographer Wolfgang Tillmans with a laugh during a recent video call from his home in Berlin.

As he lights his cigarette, he looks every bit the renegade artist he is known for being. At 57, Tillmans is in the midst of staging his 10th exhibition in Los Angeles since the mid-1990s at Regen Projects. He is one of the most celebrated photographers of his era, with a practice that collapses the distance between fine art and the pulse of street culture, spanning epic abstractions and the familiar textures of contemporary life.

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At the same time, Tillmans has another life as a serious electronic musician, recording a series of experimental albums, including his most recent, 2024's "Build From Here." He is deeply connected to the music world, and photographed the cover for Frank Ocean's acclaimed "Blonde," making him a rare artist to be in major museums while genuinely engaged with popular music and the club scene — a bit of a rock star in his own right.

The official opening of his Regen show, "Keep Movin'," attracted a line that wrapped around the building. Fans are drawn to his varied strands of work, which move instinctively between disparate approaches and subject matter, from famous faces to images sensitive to light and shape, in subjects as simple as the curve of paper folded softly over itself.



A security guard, right, stands near the work "Robin Fischer, Dirostahl, Remscheid 2024" in German-based photographer Wolfgang Tillmans' current exhibition, "Keep Movin'," at Regen Projects. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

During an early walk-through for a few dozen invited guests, Tillmans held forth on his personal cosmos, surveying pictures from the experimental to the deeply intimate. Portraits, politically charged tabletop collages and quiet photographs that capture the simple vibrance of daily life are strewn across Regen's 20,000 square feet of gallery space.

"I see my work evolve more in evolutions, rather than in revolutions," Tillmans said, gesturing to a conceptual wall-sized image created with a photocopier.

His Regen show, through March 1, also features short video works and the abstractions of camera-less images he considers "pure photography," created in the darkroom by shining light directly onto photosensitive paper. There are pictures relating to human sexuality and images from nature. Each subject and approach is an ongoing concern left

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intentionally open-ended, and never contained within a single project, title or grouping. They are all inseparable in his own mind, free from categories or a finite series of pictures.

“I am aware that these art historical categories exist in my oeuvre, but I’m not seeking them out,” Tillmans explained after the walk-through. His practice is not about “working through one series or genre and then moving on to another.”



Installation view of Wolfgang Tillmans' "Keep Movin'" at Regen Projects. (Evan Bedford / Regen Projects)

On his trip to Los Angeles, Tillmans made a long-planned visit to the Mt. Wilson Observatory to satisfy his lifelong interest in astronomy. He used the giant telescope to capture the twinkling of Sirius, the brightest star in the night sky. This preoccupation resurfaces at Regen in a large-scale print of 2023's "Flight Honolulu to Guam," revealing a star field above the clouds.

Tillmans' interest in stargazing goes back to his adolescence, and images of the moon and cosmos recur in his work. "It gave me a sense of not being lonely, seeing the infinite sky and universe," he says. "I always felt it was a very grounding experience that all humans share. I always got something from this — besides the beauty and the formal marvel of it all — this sense of location and locating myself."

His depiction of the heavens is just one of many threads and themes that run through his decades of work.

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A piece of work personally hung by photographer Wolfgang Tillmans in his current exhibition, "Keep Movin'" at Regen Projects. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

Early in his career, Tillmans began shooting for the British street style magazine i-D, creating portraits of the famous and unfamous, while also documenting club life and gay culture. In 1995, Taschen published his first book, which made a stir with portraits of soft, indirect illumination, emphasizing naturalness. By avoiding the dramatic lighting and exaggerated special effects often seen in pictures of youth culture, he landed on a distinctive visual style.

"I felt the heaviness of life and the joy of life," Tillmans says. "I saw myself as a multifaceted complex being, not just as young. So I experimented with lighting and film — how can I photograph my contemporaries in a way that approximates the way that I see through my eyes? And that was stripping back anything effectful, almost taking away the camera."

He continues to do assignment work for magazines, which he considers part of his artistic practice. Several recent portraits are at Regen, including a foundry worker in Tillmans' hometown of Remscheid and another of actor Jodie Foster. The editorial work brings him into contact with people and places he might not otherwise meet.

In 2000 Tillmans became the first photographer and first non-British artist to win the prestigious Turner Award. Tate Britain staged his mid-career retrospective in 2003 and the Hammer Museum in Westwood mounted his first major U.S. retrospective that same year, which traveled to Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C.

Coming after major retrospectives at the Pompidou Centre in Paris last year and the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, in 2022, the Regen show dispenses with the

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retrospective frame while quietly performing a similar task — taking in the main currents of Tillmans' work over the past two decades, and a few images dating to the late '80s. His relationship with the gallery began with his first Los Angeles exhibition.



Visitors walk through photographer Wolfgang Tillmans' exhibition, "Keep Movin'," at Regen Projects in Los Angeles. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

As ever, the images are displayed in a startling range of shapes and sizes: framed and unframed, huge wall-size prints hang alongside tiny, snapshot-scale pictures. One of the largest, "Panorama, left" (2006), spans nearly 20 feet and hangs only from bulldog clips. Smaller pictures are simply taped to the wall, but nothing is meant to indicate hierarchy. "The biggest may not be the most important, and the smallest might be overlooked," he explains. "It's a little bit like projecting the way that I look at the world."

In his first decade of exhibitions, he had no frames at all. "I taped those photographs to the wall, not as a gesture of disrespectful grunginess, but as a gesture of purity," he adds. "That sense of immediacy — and not imbuing something with outside signifiers of value — lets the fragile piece of paper speak for itself."

One of the current show's larger conceptual pieces, "Memorial for the Victims of Organized Religion II," fills a corner with 48 rectangular portrait-sized photographs, all of them solid black or dark blue. It's a near-replica of a work shown at the Pompidou with the same solemn title, created to recognize those "physically maimed or mentally harmed" by doctrine and intolerance.

"I myself have a spiritual side," says Tillmans, still grateful for positive experiences attending a Lutheran church in his youth. "But over the years I've become ever more distrustful of organized religions and seeing the role of religion in government. I find it incredibly immodest for humans to tell other humans what God wants."

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When he's not exploring his spirituality and creativity visually, he focuses his energy on the music world. It's a natural setting for Tillmans, who is increasingly active releasing his own electronic-based pop music. He's occasionally worked as a DJ, and has been involved in acid house, techno and other electronic music. Despite his notoriety in the art world, he has no concern about hitting the charts.

"This is part of my work. I'm doing it the same way that I'm doing a photograph. I'm not doing a photograph to be peak popular in two months' time," Tillmans said. "It's there and it's still there in 24 years."