

REGEN PROJECTS

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wolfgang tillmans
DECEPTIVELY EFFORTLESS AND MUCH IMITATED, TILLMANS'S EDGY
PHOTOGRAPHS ARE INTIMATE REFLECTIONS OF CONTEMPORARY LIFE
BY JORI FINKEL PORTRAIT BY JASON SCHMIDT



IN THE
STUDIO



"Wolfgang has such a fascinating mind," says dealer Maureen Peley. "If he weren't an artist, he could run a major corporation." Tillmans in his London studio, above, and examples of his portraits and more recent abstract images: (1) *Lutz & Alex on beach*, 1992; (2) *It's only love give it away*, 2005; (3) *Lutz & Alex sitting in the trees*, 1992; (4) *Four boots*, 1992; and (5) *Freischwimmer-23*, 2003

IN THE STUDIO

IT'S HARD TO SPEND any time in Wolfgang Tillmans's London studio without, if only for a moment, seeing the entire place as a dance club. Look up at the skylight, and you will notice the remnants of a party—a mirrored disco ball and a string of Christmas lights hanging from a crossbeam. There's also a pair of turntables in the corner, a reminder that Tillmans made the London tabloids a couple of years ago by spinning at trendy nightclubs like the Cock and Nerd.

"I do clear out the studio for a party once and a while, maybe once a year. And you can see my studio in some of my 'hangover' pictures," says Tillmans, 37, looking not at all hungover and very clean-shaven in a dark green sweater and black pants. His studio, located in a large loft in the East End, has all the professional equipment befitting an internationally celebrated photographer: darkrooms and computer stations, a dozen worktables and stacks of supersized prints unrolled on the floor and taped to the walls. Here he likes to play CDs when he works, and talks about the connections between music and his photography, his rather fashionable life and his very successful career, openly and without apology.

But do not, his supporters warn, mistake Tillmans for a slick version of Nan Goldin, who is famous for her gritty, diaristic photographs of friends and lovers. "There's a widely held

misconception that Wolfgang goes to clubs with an Instamatic camera and shoots whatever happens to catch his attention," says Russell Ferguson, chief curator at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. "When you see the whole body of his work, it's impossible to continue to perceive him this way."

Ferguson is doing his part to correct the myth. He and Dominic Molon of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Chicago have curated Tillmans's first retrospective in the U.S. The show runs at the MCA

May 20 through August 13, and at the Hammer September 17 through January 7. While the exact selection varies between venues, both feature well-known early shots of Tillmans's friends, such as Alex and Lutz, who appear in numerous photographs, and his lover Jochen Klein, a painter who died of AIDS in 1997. Along with his portraits, there is also a strong emphasis on his more conceptual work of recent years, including his "Concorde Jet" series and several abstract prints from his current show at PS.1 in New York, through May 29.

Both the MCA and the Hammer are hosting a room-size installation called *truth study centre*, first shown last fall at Maureen Paley, the artist's gallery in London. The installation consists of a group of worktables set up to display objects, photographs and appropriated texts and images, such as newspaper clippings about the widespread European dismay over President Bush's reelection in 2004. Thanks to both its archival sensibility and its political orientation, the work figures prominently in Molon's catalogue essay, which argues that Tillmans is not a "snapshot" photographer in the tradition of, say, Stephen Shore as much as a conceptual artist who uses photography as a tool, in the spirit of Ed Ruscha and Richard Prince. Molon goes so far as to compare *truth study centre* with Marcel Broodthaers's *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des*

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"I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN INTERESTED IN THE ACCIDENT, THE CONTINGENT, THE FLEETING"

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(6) Suzanne & Lutz, white dress, army skirt, an early work; (7) *Freischwimmer 16*, 2003; (8) *truth study centre*, 2005, a large-scale installation; and (9) Jochen taking a bath, 1997



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(10) Lutz & Alex holding cock, 1992, first appeared in the pages of *i-D* magazine; (11) Tillmans's 1993 solo show at Daniel Buchholz gallery is remembered for its unconventional installation style; (12) Haselmaus, 1995; and (13) Lutz, Alex, Suzanne & Christoph on beach, 1993



"PHOTOGRAPHY NEVER HAS THE SAME SOCIAL POWER WHEN IT SEEMS STAGED"

Aigles, a fictional museum project from 1972 exposing the limits of institutional display.

Tillmans himself encourages this reading to some degree. "I'm the total opposite of a diarist of life," he says. "My job is to think about the world visually, and I do it best through the camera." When asked outright whether he even considers himself a photographer, he says he thinks of himself as a "cultural being" above all else. "In school I painted, drew, made clothes, made music—all the things an overly expressive and observant artistic teenager would do," he says. "Photography was the last thing I came to. It is not a necessary medium for me, but it is a great gift."

Still, Tillmans says he understands where his "snapshot aesthetic" reputation comes from. "You always get stuck with what you're first known for. It's just a function of human nature," he says. "It's like [the singer] Marc Almond of Soft Cell, who is still, 25 years after the fact, associated first and foremost with the song 'Tainted Love.' It's something you can either accept or despair over."

In Tillmans's case, the attitude has been acceptance, and the song that's hard to stop humming is his early work for *i-D* magazine. Born and raised in Remscheid, Germany, he moved to Hamburg after graduating from high school in 1987. There, a self-described "music-loving and love-loving young man," he discovered nightclubs and the acid house scene. He began capturing that scene for *i-D* in the early '90s (he entered Bournemouth & Poole College of Art in England in 1990 and studied there for two years, then moved to London). For the magazine's "sexuality" issue in '92, he also shot a series of

photographs of his friends Lutz and Alex in suggestive positions. Most famously, in *Lutz & Alex holding cock*, he appears bottomless while she is topless, "a way of making them both vulnerable," Tillmans says.

He stresses that these were editorial work and not fashion assignments, as many have assumed. "Photographing for magazines was not about saying Gucci or Prada is hot," he notes. "It was not about the fashion industry." As Ferguson points out, there are very few brands or labels featured in Tillmans's photographs. His work is not about commodities. "He likes to photograph things that aren't for sale or are free," says the curator, "hanging out with friends, laughing, dancing, having sex, being in nature, being active politically."

Tillmans's first solo show, which took place in 1993 at the Daniel Buchholz gallery in Cologne, was filled with these kinds of intimate, humble and provocative images. Critics at the time assumed the shots were unscripted glimpses of men and women testing traditional gender roles, but the artist says he

often cajoled or guided his subjects and used flash guns for lighting. "I constructed this world from the start, as much as someone like Jeff Wall," Tillmans explains. "The difference is that I made my staged scenes look as real as possible. Photography never has the same social power when it seems staged."

Today that show is remembered for its unconventional exhibition format as much as for its content. It was the first time Tillmans hung magazine spreads featuring his pictures along with unframed photographs of varying sizes in salon-style groupings, using Scotch tape and steel pins to hold the works to the wall. (The use of binder clips would come >>



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later, as would rampant imitation of seemingly spontaneous type of presentation by younger artists.) The goal was to create a nonhierarchical and nonlinear visual rhythm. "Photography very happily sits in a book," says Tillmans, who has designed 19 of the 21 books that bear his name. "I'm doing things in galleries that I can't do in books or magazines."

Since the Cologne exhibition, the artist has offered his trademark photographic installations for sale. Along with selling unique works and multiple editions of a single image (including 12-by-16-inch prints in an edition of 10, 20-by-24-inch prints in an edition of 3, and one 80-by-52 inch print by itself, all priced between \$5,000 to \$30,000, depending on size), he reserves one of each image in a show to be sold together as a group. The Walker Art Center bought one of these installations from the Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York as early as 1995; the Guggenheim Museum acquired another in 2002 and the Tate Modern bought one in 2004 from Maureen Paley in London, four years after awarding Tillmans the Turner Prize and one year after giving him his first major retrospective.

Like the Tate show, rather democratically called "If Anything Matters, Everything Matters," the American retrospective attempts to bridge the gap between Tillmans's early portraiture and his more recent abstractions, such as "Blushes," 2000-03, a series of cameraless prints made by exposing photographic paper directly to light. While these works look very different, Tillmans sees them as part of the same continuum, pointing out that his "Blushes" invite comparisons to hair, wire and skin, while the early portraits filled with clothes and fabric can be read for their abstract patterning.

"There is not a hard line between my portraiture and my abstraction," he says. "There's an assumption

"I THINK ABOUT THE WORLD VISUALLY, AND I DO IT BEST THROUGH THE CAMERA"

that abstraction is more experimental. But all of my work allows for the mistake, allows for chance to come into play in a skilled and controlled environment. I have always been interested in the accident, the contingent, the fleeting."

This sort of mindful channeling of chance extends to Tillmans's work installing his own photographs. He doesn't finalize a display until he arrives at the museum or the gallery and can face the actual walls. But that doesn't stop him from trying out (he calls it "rehearsing") a major installation well in advance. This winter, for example, he kept 1:10-scale foam models of the MCA and the Hammer Museum in one corner of his studio so he could experiment with different arrangements of images.

Visit the studio another time, says Paley, and you are just as likely to find Tillmans designing a new book, with a maze of page proofs laid out on the floor. Discussing his steady stream of publications and exhibitions, Paley describes him as one of the most energetic and enterprising artists she's ever met. She compares his studio with Warhol's Factory.

"Wolfgang has such a fascinating mind," Paley says. "He is very organized, very structured, and has a great ability to multitask. If he weren't an artist, he could run a major corporation."

But Tillmans himself has another alternate career in mind. "If I weren't a photographer," he says, "I would love to be able to sing." ■



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(14) *Blushes* #3, 2000; (15) From left: *Empire (Punk)* and *Empire (Christ)*, 2005; (16) Tillmans works out museum exhibitions ahead of time in his studio using scale models of gallery spaces; and (17) *paper drop (white)*, 2004

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