

REGEN PROJECTS

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Tillmans's Touch

Artist Deftly Controls His Seemingly Unruly Works

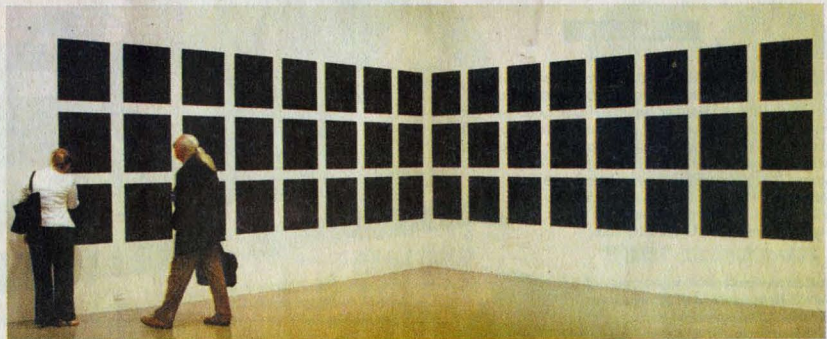
By BLAKE GOPNIK
Washington Post Staff Writer

Wolfgang Tillmans, one of today's most influential contemporary artists, takes snapshot-style pictures of his slackest techno-party pals, but he also shoots impressive images of piles of gold bullion.

He takes almost-abstract photographs of blank sheets of photo paper as they curl back onto themselves on his studio floor. He also presents pared-down abstract

sculptures made from sheets of photographic paper, colored and folded. He enlarges pictures found in newspapers until they fill a wall, and reduces his own most famous photographs until they're post-card size. And then he assembles all these absurdly varied kinds of pictures and objects — some framed as precious works of art and others stuck up with pins or Scotch tape — into an installation that crawls up and down and all across the gallery walls.

See TILLMANS, N9, Col. 1



BY BILL O'LEARY — THE WASHINGTON POST

Chaos often reigns in the Hirshhorn's Wolfgang Tillmans show, but "Memorial for the Victims of Organized Religions" has other ideas.

The Casual Feel of Tillmans's Images Is No Accident

TILLMANS. *From N1*

At the Hirshhorn Museum, where a touring show that is Tillmans's first U.S. retrospective opened Thursday, the result is stunning. And it's compelling just because it's so perplexing.

Tillmans's individual pictures are often notable. But what's most impressive is the way they come together into a larger, more substantial whole. It's hard to put your finger on what makes Tillmans's totality so strong. But equally hard, I think, to resist its pull.

Being hard to pin down is part of what gives Tillmans's art so much traction. Most works of art present us with self-contained little worlds that seem sufficient to themselves. The 400 or so images Tillmans gives us at the Hirshhorn seem to open out to a wider world, capturing some of that sense that the lives we live are more open-ended than art is.

That's something that artists have always struggled to capture. And every time they succeed, they also fail. Every time that art seems to evoke life "just as it is" (such a tempting goal, because art can come so frustratingly close to life), it also sets it up as merely the latest flashy artistic move.

Tillmans has worked harder than most to make his art feel as if it's plucked straight from reality, maybe because he's more concerned than most with how quickly such effects become just more artistic fluff.

Tillmans's first stab at making art that seemed authentic to the feel of life came early on, with his straight-ahead images of the folk he partied with and loved. He didn't want his art to be about art; he wanted it to be about people. So he used a technique that mimicked a point-and-shoot effect, where who's in the shot seems to matter more than how it's taken. But Tillmans is too good for his own good. Whether he wants to or not, he creates piles of striking pictures that viewers can't resist.

"Adam, Red Eye," near the beginning of this show, finds an echo of its subject's flash-induced red pupils in the bright red lockers behind him. That makes its "casual" moment seem as decisive as anything by Henri Cartier-Bresson, whose famous photos tried to catch the instants in the passing flux when accidents cohere into arresting images.

Ditto for Tillmans's shot of his late partner, Jochen Klein, taking a bath in 1997: The apparent accidents of its composition, with a houseplant dead center and its subject and his bathtub barely in the shot, become a perfect, and perfectly compelling, image of what accidents look like. "Empire (Punk)," a hugely enlarged photo of a lousy snapshot sent by fax, captures all the random artifacts of its transmission. This ought to make it about as casual as anything can be — but instead it seems like an artistic distillation of casualness itself.

Or maybe Tillmans was simply the victim of his own success, like all those dedicated realists before him. An approach that seemed either not concerned at all with beauty, or even opposed to it, came to be one of the dominant aesthetics of our time. It was copied in fashion shoots and advertising throughout the 1990s.

Ever since the Tillmans mode became a fashionable photographic style, his career has seemed to be about finding constantly new ways to achieve his earlier effects — to somehow be a guy just doing stuff, rather than an artist striving to engender Art. The seemingly chaotic sprawl of his images across the gallery wall, and the apparent accidents of how he frames and hangs them, all speak to that ambition. They all signal that Tillmans doesn't have a settled goal in what he does; he just goes with the flow.

In an installation called the "Truth Study Center," Tillmans fills a gallery with 23 knocked-together wooden tables. He then covers their tops with masses of news clippings and assorted photographs, some by him and others found, some clearly meant to look good and others resolutely not. The accumulated imagery seems to come straight from Tillmans's stream of consciousness, as he contemplates all the objects and issues that have impinged on him. (One unusually spare table in the Hirshhorn version of this installation hosts nothing more than the pages of an article published barely three weeks ago by Naomi Wolf, titled "Fascist America, in 10 Easy Steps.")

Another striking piece at the Hirshhorn, with a somewhat similar dynamic, is called the "Concorde Grid." It consists of 56 photos of that historic supersonic jet, barely glimpsed as it takes off and lands above the scrappy



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ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY, NEW YORK, AND REGEN PROJECTS, LOS ANGELES

"Truth Study Center," above, seems to be a contemplation of the objects and issues that have impinged upon Tillmans. "Arkadia I," from 1996, appropriates a point-and-shoot effect. Below, the artist himself.



BY STEPHEN DUPONT

landscapes that surround your average airport. The unruly feel of its images seems to capture the "lifelike" encounter between an insignificant onlooker and an iconic object as they meet by accident within the haphazard

flow of time.

But every time Tillmans seems to be doing one thing — becoming, that is, an artist with a trademark strategy for making art — he veers off in another direction.

He seems like somebody who avoids allegory and classic symbolizing, right? And then he makes a piece called "Memorial for the Victims of Organized Religions," which consists of 48 sheets of photo

paper, in elegiac shades of black and midnight blue, arranged in a grid on a wall. They're like photographs of what it is to shut your eyes, or to focus on a starless night, in mourning for the evil deeds religion has inspired. So a work that seems at first glance to be art at its most formal and abstract — like the Ellsworth Kelly color patches at the National Gallery, but without the color — turns out to have the closest ties to issues the artist cares deeply about.

Maybe Tillmans's steadfast contrariness, his determined indeterminacy — like the sheer, meaning-defeating quantity of information he provides — are all part of his attempt to make an artwork that evokes life. That is, taken as a single work, the Hirshhorn's Tillmans exhibition provides a living, mutating, dynamic portrait of the man who made it, in the act of making it. Its shifts, twists, refusals and perplexities provide a faithful record of the shifts and twists and refusals and perplexities that any life is built around, but that most any art will have a tendency to iron out, just because of almost any art's inherent order.

That includes the art of Wolfgang Tillmans.

Even disorder can become an ordering principle; it takes effort and ambition to achieve randomness. Look at the wooden tables in Tillmans's "Truth Study Center": Their inconsequential look is achieved through very careful carpentry. The lifelike energy in Tillmans's agglomerations of images is achieved through very deliberate labor, the dimensions and components of each museum installation are recorded with a tape measure before a show comes down, so it can be re-created in any part of it that is bought.

The Hirshhorn installation is much closer to a carefully considered magazine layout meant to capture a chaotic, energetic feel — Tillmans was famous early on for his design of magazine spreads of his own art — than to an actual tipped-out box of old photos.

The true surprise of the Hirshhorn exhibition isn't its disorder; it's how fine it looks. That's not how I felt the first time I saw a similar Tillmans installation. I was sure that it was about a compelling exploration of ugliness and the truly haphazard. But now Tillmans has taught me better.

He's taught me that, all along, his work has simply had the trademark look of the latest captivating art — or of what captivating art has come to look like, since he came on the scene.

Wolfgang Tillmans is at the Hirshhorn Museum, on the south side of the Mall at 7th Street SW, through Aug. 12. Call 202-633-1000 or visit www.hirshhorn.si.edu.