

WOLFGANG TILLMANS



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AT THE WALKER ART GALLERY LIVERPOOL

It is with great pleasure that we present this important group of works by Wolfgang Tillmans at the Walker Art Gallery. Nine of the works were acquired by the Arts Council Collection in 2009 and this is the first time they have been shown, and in addition the artist has included three other works that come directly from the studio. This exhibition is all the more extraordinary for being a unique collaboration between the artist and curators here at the Walker, who have enabled a fascinating dialogue between Tillmans and some of the treasures of this great Liverpool collection.

Although his subject matter parallels traditional genres, with an emphasis on portraiture, landscape, interiors, still life and, more recently, gestural abstraction and the monochrome, Tillmans always makes the viewer aware of the physical quality of photographs.

“I love the piece of paper itself, this lush, crisp thing. A piece of photographic paper has its own elegance, how it bows when you have it hanging in one hand or in two and manipulate it, expose it to light – I guess it is quite a gestural thing.”

Since 2000, Wolfgang Tillmans has become increasingly interested in the chemical foundations of the photographic medium. Abstract works, created without a camera, now appear next to the figurative photographs. This step from ‘picture’ to ‘object’ is perhaps best demonstrated in the works from the “Lighter” series. These colourful photo-paper works are folded, creased or otherwise manipulated and contained under Plexiglas lids, enabling a subtle play with the material surface and the resulting illusion of lines and contrast.



Gedser 2004

Cover: *Faltenwurf (Morgen) II* 2009

The work entitled *Faltenwurf (Morgen) II* 2009 provides a bridge between the more figurative and the purely abstract. Part monochrome, part still life, and almost a portrait, the photograph focuses on discarded clothes slung over the back and seat of a chair. Tillmans has always photographed clothes, fetishising their surfaces, colours and the signs of wear. Here at the Walker, the artist has chosen to hang the work so as to emphasise its relationship to the depiction of sumptuous drapery in the adjacent paintings by Reynolds and his contemporaries. Through this juxtaposition we are suddenly aware of the sensuality in what might appear rather formal 18th century portraits.

The still life in this group, *Beerenstilleben* 2007, is characteristically located on a windowsill and features the vernacular debris of 21st century life: plastic food containers alongside a solitary, leftover almond and the more symbolic burned down candle that might have appeared in the Dutch still lifes of the 17th century as a reminder of mortality. Tillmans repeatedly speaks of his awareness of the fragility of human life, and of his desire to celebrate it. In his still lifes as in his portraiture, one understands his intense, emotional relationship to the subjects of his work.

In his portraiture, Tillmans works with his subjects to choreograph what one might suppose are quite spontaneous shots. The work titled *Dan* 2008 in this group, presents a nude man. The photograph is taken from a characteristic angle, above the subject; Tillmans has very often used this technique and considers the “view from above” what he calls “the unprivileged view”. It is the viewpoint that anyone can have who bothers to climb a cliff, a tower or a ladder. In this instance, the perspective has the effect of abstracting the subject’s body into a series of dynamic axes. In *Gedser* 2004 and to an even greater extent in *Empire (Punk)* 2005 the emphasis is on clothing, associated with identifiable urban ‘tribes’, and on the seemingly unselfconscious moment. *Empire (Punk)* in particular recalls Tillmans’ earliest works, and the subject matter draws our attention to how the material/physical aspect of the image and the subject are interwoven. *Empire (Punk)* is a pixelated image of a punk boy wearing army clothes and boots which has clearly been fed through a fax, and the beautifully grainy streaks and machine-made patterns and swirls bring immediately to mind the disjointed, anarchic spirit of punk music and the visual ‘noise’ of vintage punk flyers.

The way Tillmans installs his work has always been a precisely considered exercise. He has referred to groups of works as “mind maps”, and the disposition of works in relation to each other, as much as the actual hanging method, is central to the creation of meaning across each group. First known for hanging photographs from white binder clips and map pins, the installations had a feeling of temporariness that suited the fleeting, fragile quality of the social situations pictured, as well as serving to emphasize the physicality of the photographic object. In recent years Tillmans has framed works, as part of an ongoing exploration of the materiality of photography. Rather than being separate voices, the figurative and abstract elements of Tillmans’ work relate closely to each other, referencing each other and adding layers of meaning; in this exhibition at the Walker Art Gallery the ‘dialogue’ has been opened up to include voices from other centuries with such respect, wit and subtlety that the result is an exciting new perspective on both the contemporary and the historic.



Our heartfelt thanks go first and foremost to Wolfgang Tillmans and to Reyahn King, Director of Art Galleries, National Museums Liverpool, for accepting the proposition of this ambitious collaboration with such energy and realising it with such style. The artist’s commentary on the exhibition in the pages that follow is a wonderful insight into his thinking, and draws us closely into the processes that lead him to individual works in the Walker’s collections. We are grateful to Maureen Paley and her team in London for their support, and indebted to Ann Bukantas, Head of Fine Art at the Walker Art Gallery and to Ann Jones, Curator for the Arts Council Collection, for their tremendous contribution in delivering the exhibition. Finally our warm thanks go to Wolfgang’s assistant Karl Kolbitz, our own Victoria Avery and Andy Craig and Richard Roberts from National Museums Liverpool for their meticulous work and attention to detail on the project.

Caroline Douglas

Head of Arts Council Collection

Room 1 (Medieval and Renaissance)
Joachim Beuckelaer, courtesy Schorr Collection
Dan 2008



Commentary by Wolfgang Tillmans

Silver 57 is part of a series dating back to the 1990s. It began as paper fed through the machine to clean it, so there are some traces on it relating to this physical process, and then it was enlarged to this size. It is completely analogue, interacting with material and light, controlled and intuitive at the same time. This room is exclusively for early religious art, all of which uses a lot of gold, making the gold-covered parts of the works very two-dimensional – the gold sits on the surface. Similarly in *Silver 57*, the picture is very flat, abstract, and very unlike *Freischwimmer 151*, which has visual depth. The emptiness of *Silver 57* is seemingly like a blind mirror which throws you back on yourself.



Room 1 (Medieval and Renaissance)
Silver 57 2006



Dan is a picture of a man in what at first seems to be an improbable act of balancing. Upon closer inspection one realises that the photograph is taken from above and *Dan* is standing firmly on the ground on his concealed left leg. When photographing people I often look for a coexistence of vulnerability and strength, which is how I would define beauty. I'm touched by Medieval and Renaissance representations of the human body. There is a sense of fragility, almost helplessness, that shows an awareness for the precarious state we all share. From one point in room 1 you can see both *Dan* and *Silver 57*, and see the similar skin-like colour.

Room 1 (Medieval and Renaissance)
Dan 2008

On visiting the Walker in preparation, I responded not only to the paintings, but also to the spaces, and in this room [2] I was drawn to a huge Flemish tapestry, *The Triumph of Fortitude* c.1525, and I thought it was interesting what it did in this space; that in all the galleries there are oil paintings in wooden, often gilded frames, and that here there was one object which was completely unframed and suspended from the top, very much like my large-scale inkjet prints. It was a formal connection that drew me to it. *Freischwimmer 151* is 4 x 5 metres - sized exactly to replace the tapestry.

The tapestry is extremely narrative, it came from a time when pictures were often the only way to tell stories and retain memories. My work, which has replaced it, is completely abstract and hints at the unconscious or otherworldly. It wasn't taken with a camera but was done by photographic processes. It has drifts, in the mainly grey shades; some are completely soft and then pinpoint-sharp shapes arise. It also activates all the skies in this room's paintings with the same steely blue colour.

In these Medieval and Renaissance galleries there is often very dramatic subject matter. The religious subject matter is taken out in my work; these are not about certainty, but the unknown, about opening up the reading and testing your eyes and allowing free association, which is really what I think is important in all art reading.



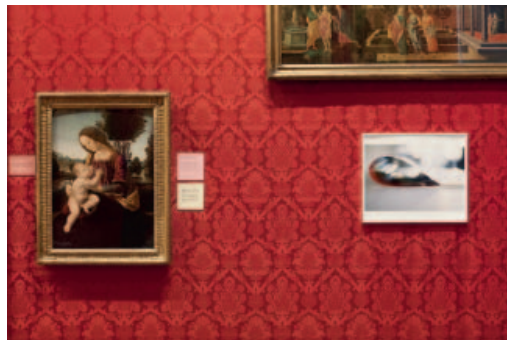
Room 2 (Medieval and Renaissance)
Freischwimmer 151 2010
paper drop (London) 2008

I have always been interested in Old Masters. I have learnt to see them as contemporary in their times and recognise that they were dealing with questions of art and life through what one might consider the straightjacket of the religious subject matter. When you look past that you'll see them as commentary on their point in history.

There is a theme running through a lot of this work which connects questions of the picture object and the question of the surface and the sculptural. This isn't of course something initially associated with photographs, but I found for myself that photography is the perfect medium indeed to work about these issues.



Paper is the material basis of almost all my work. In 2000 I began making it the subject of my work and, soon after, I started making pictures of glossy photographic paper itself, which I had exposed to specific coloured light before processing it. In this piece, *paper drop (London)*, the red and blue tones inside the 'tunnel' of paper, created by flipping over the edge of the sheet of paper onto itself, mix with reflections of light falling in from the back. I found that the light behind *Virgin Suckling the Christ Child* by a follower of Lorenzo di Credi had an interesting semblance to the mood in my *paper drop*.



Room 2 (Medieval and Renaissance)
paper drop (London) 2008



Room 5 (18th century)
Faltenwurf (Morgen) II 2009

This was one of the first ideas I had at the Walker, as I am always amazed at the way that these eighteenth-century portraits almost seem like a pretext for painting drapery. The face is a tiny proportion of the surface of these paintings and in some cases more than half of the painting is covered with a depiction of fabric. *Faltenwurf (Morgen) II* refers to this art historical theme but exercises it on very everyday things, like t-shirts and jeans. These are very simple objects but I have given them the same attention to detail as these painters did in their works. There is this disparity in class between my picture and these society portraits, if one can call them that.

One of the first works I made as a student in Bournemouth was a picture of a pair of jeans hanging to dry over a banister and I am really attracted to how this very flat fabric has the body imprinted into it - again it is this link between photography and sculpture, the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional, the fabric being super-flat but being used to cover a three-dimensional object. There is of course also a sensuality in it that I am drawn to.

I have a strong interest in clothes as a way of communicating with the world - they are how we present ourselves to the world, like a membrane between the body and the outside world; the thing which is physically closest to us. They are hugging our skin and in the process of that they carry an imprint of the body. Even though they are actually very flat and thin they are sculptural objects. This is an aspect which runs through the whole group of works that the Arts Council Collection has acquired.



In this installation the entire wall is an active part of my work. I asked for two high-up paintings to be removed, leaving exposed the shadow that is left after years of light bleaching away at the surrounding wall fabric.

The interesting connection here is that Turner has this fascinating abstraction, or what we see as abstraction today, as it is not quite clear if he saw it as that. There is a modernity in him that is interesting and it is all about light - light is the first thing that comes to mind in both Turner's and Daguerre's paintings. Daguerre is a far less well-known painter, but is hugely well-known in photography as one of its co-inventors. Next to these are two of my latest works, called *Lighter*. They are three-dimensional picture objects where the photograph has been folded and bent into a three-dimensional shape. In one case it is just a black photograph, which means that it has been saturated with light and that makes it black when you process it, but the shiny surface reflects light very strongly, so that you've got this black photograph with all sorts of light bouncing off it. The light reflects from it differently as you move. The other one is a dark red, burgundy piece which has been folded in the darkroom in darkness and then exposed to light so that the image which appears is a reflection of the three-dimensionality of the picture. They are a strange fusion of sculpture and picture. They are encased in perspex boxes, which makes them like specimens, they become these quasi-scientific objects. I placed the *Lighter* works on top of the shadow of a second Turner painting that had to be removed for this project. All four works on this wall, plus the shadows of the removed ones, are connected through different manifestations of light.

Room 7 (Romanticism & early 19th century)
Lighter, red II 2008; *Lighter, AC 3* 2009
 Right: *Lighter, AC 3* 2009





Opposit page: Room 10 (Impressionism & after) *Empire (Punk)* 2005, William Hamo Thornycroft *The Mower* c1882-94
Left: Cameron 2007



For this installation I moved Thornycroft's *The Mower* into the room of nineteenth-century Impressionist and naturalist paintings. The room was cleared apart from a few works which I left exactly where they were. I only left works that could be described as having a rural or manual labour feel – a shepherdess by George Clausen, a woman ironing by Degas, a seascape by Courbet and a landscape by Charles Conder. I added *Empire (Punk)* – a very large piece made by enlarging a fax of an early photograph of mine – with its graphic interaction between analogue and digital and chance and control. Also, two smaller photographs, the photograph of a market vendor, *Cameron*, and the photograph of a painting by Wilhelm Leibl, a German naturalistic painter of the same era as Courbet. I positioned *The Mower* to face in the direction of the punk, with the farm boy from the

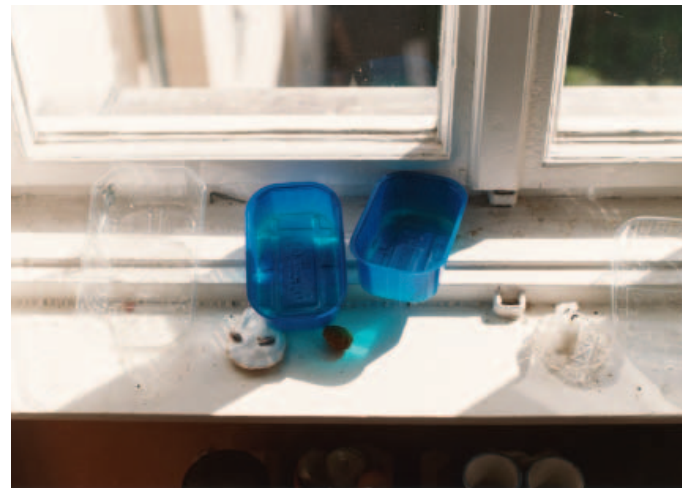
Leibl painting looking in from the side. The punk, as a member of our post-agrarian, post-industrial society, looks with a slight smile into this world of different priorities and occupations. *The Mower* in return becomes detached from his role as a farm worker and is reconsidered as the subject of admiration for his perfect beauty and body.



I've been an admirer of Patrick Caulfield for a long time and I was excited to find this still life alongside a 'still life' relief of a glass of water by Michael Craig-Martin on the adjacent wall. It seemed a great opportunity for me to see two of my works alongside two by British artists I admire. All of the other works were removed from the room except these two, which remained exactly in their place, leaving odd gaps of wall space – a strategy I also used in the nineteenth-century room. Immediately a whole range of connections opened up between the shades of blue in all four works, the play of transparency and translucency at work in our still lifes but also in the picture of the man with a mobile phone. Caulfield's and Craig-Martin's works are from a pre-digital age but both pre-empt the use of layers and image manipulation, now so common in a lot of imagery surrounding us. *Gedser* is one of my only works that employs any kind of digital manipulation. Instead of hiding this and making it look perfect, I deliberately made an awkward job that still looks believable on a composition level, but totally 'unacceptable' in terms of photo-professional skill.



Room 13 (1950 to now)
Beerenstilleben 2007 and *Gedser* 2004
 Patrick Caulfield *Still Life – Autumn Fashion* 1978
 © The Estate of Patrick Caulfield.
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Michael Craig-Martin *A Glass of Water*
 1984 © the artist
Beerenstilleben 2007



Lighter, red II 2008

Biography

Wolfgang Tillmans was born in Remscheid, Germany in 1968. He moved to the UK in 1990 to study at Bournemouth and Poole College of Art and Design. For almost two decades he has exhibited internationally, at venues including Tate Britain, London (2003), PS1, New York (2006), Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2006), Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin (2008), Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2008) and most recently at the Serpentine Gallery, London (2010). In 2000 he became the first photographer to win the Turner Prize and in 2009 he was awarded the Kulturpreis der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Photographie. He divides his time between London and Berlin.

List of works by Wolfgang Tillmans

Unless stated otherwise, all works are owned by the Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London. Purchased in 2009 with the assistance of the Art Fund. Partial gift of the artist and Maureen Paley, London.

Unless stated otherwise, all other works shown in the installation images are from the collection of or on loan to the Walker Art Gallery, National Museums Liverpool.

Wilhelm Leibl painting 2002

C-print in artist's frame, 61 x 52.8 cm
Courtesy Maureen Paley, London

Gedser 2004

C-print in artist's frame, 63 x 52.8 cm

Empire (Punk) 2005

C-print in artist's frame, 243 x 181 cm

Silver 57 2006

C-print in artist's frame, 228 x 181.2 cm

Cameron 2007

C-print in artist's frame, 42.6 x 32.5 cm
Courtesy Maureen Paley, London

Beerenstilleben 2007

(Berry still life)
C-type print in artist's frame, 145.2 x 212.8 cm

Dan 2008

C-print in artist's frame, 43.9 x 33.9 cm

paper drop (London) 2008

C-print in artist's frame, 54.3 x 64.3 cm

Lighter, red II 2008

Folded c-print in plexi hood, 64.5 x 54.2 x 3.9 cm

Lighter, AC 3 2009

Folded c-print in plexi hood, 64.5 x 54.2 x 12.5 cm

Faltenwurf (Morgen) II 2009

(Drapery (Morning) II)
C-print in artist's frame, 210.2 x 145.2 cm

Freischwimmer 151 2010

Inkjet print, 378.5 x 508 cm
Courtesy Maureen Paley, London

The Arts Council Collection supports artists in the UK through the purchase and display of their work. Since it was founded in 1946, the Collection's acquisitions policy has always been characterised by a spirit of risk taking combined with an informed appraisal of current practice. As a consequence, the Arts Council Collection is now the largest national loan collection of modern and contemporary British art in the world. For more information about the Arts Council Collection, please visit our website at

www.artscouncilcollection.org.uk

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Exhibition organised by Ann Bukantas and Ann Jones with Victoria Avery and Andy Craig

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