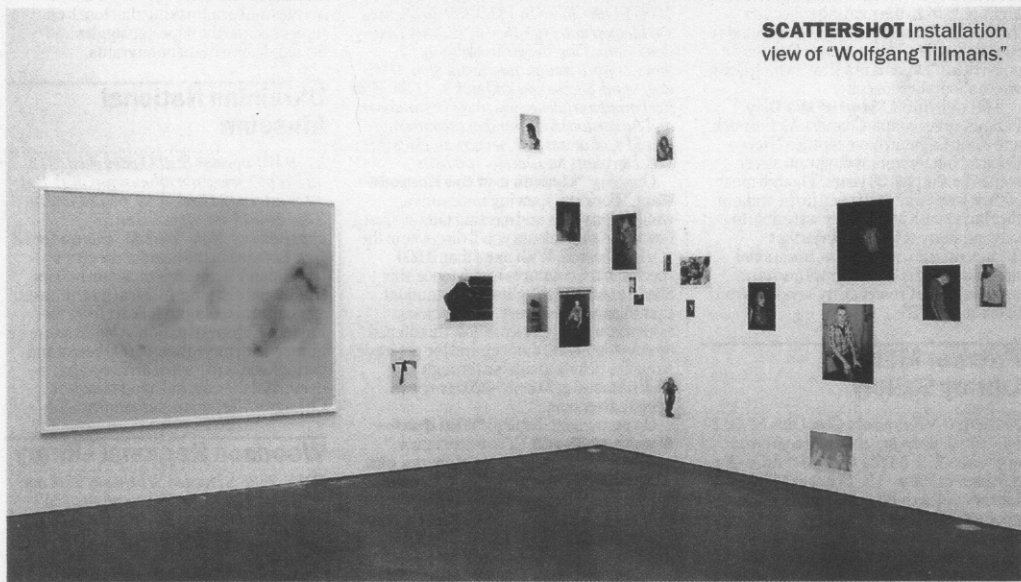


SCATTERSHOT Installation view of "Wolfgang Tillmans."



Living life off the wall

Wolfgang Tillmans hangs his stylish images at the MCA. By **Ruth Lopez**

Artists who equate taking on commercial projects with selling out might want to consider the way photographer Wolfgang Tillmans approaches work: In short, it's all art.

"Wolfgang Tillmans," on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art through August 13, was co-organized with the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and is the first survey of the German photographer's work in the United States. (P.S. 1 in New York exhibited a collection of Tillman's abstract photographs earlier this year. Titled "Freedom from the Known," it was billed as Tillmans's first museum show in the U.S.)

Tillmans was born in 1968, won a Turner Prize in 2000 and has become something of a curator's pet, praised for the way he presents his work as well as for the strength of his images. He insists on installing his own work, an intuitive process based on the dynamics of the space. It took him four days to put up his dizzying array of more than 380 images in the two large gallery spaces at the MCA, taking a contemporary whack at the traditional salon style of stacked pictures. The ink-jet images, mostly unframed and in varying sizes—hung with binder clips or tape—are in deliberate groupings that invite free association. There are also no distracting labels (though a booklet

with diagrams is available), making the walls installation art. Tillmans didn't invent white space, but it sure is his friend.

What Tillmans has done is cut out the middleman, but that's not a problem for museum staff. Dominic Molon, curator of the show at the MCA, weighed in on which images he felt were the strongest, then he stepped aside and let Tillmans do what he usually does.

"I am always of the belief that the artist is the strongest champion of their work and best suited to take the lead in defining what the content of the

"The artist is the strongest champion of their work ..."

show should be," Molon says.

Getting Tillmans on the MCA schedule was a reflection of Molon's curatorial input. Molon also wrote the essay for the catalog, in which he makes a case for the consideration of Tillmans within the framework of the conceptual art history of photography.

What makes Tillmans's work compelling to so many is partly his distinct way of presenting images, but also his dynamic eye with the traditional genres of portrait, still life and landscape. Tillmans wants them to work in tandem rather than be considered individually.

He started working in the late 1980s by documenting the techno rave club scene in London, where he

went to art school and where he still lives and works. His work took a more serious turn when his boyfriend died of an AIDS-related illness in 1997. Tillmans photographed simple, powerful images, like the view from the hospital window. In later years, as he took on magazine assignments, he never considered himself a fashion photographer, although he has had an impact on that world. "From the beginning, he has seen magazines as an interesting way to expand the definition of where one's art can be presented," Molon says.

For his portraits, Tillmans seems to be conscious not just with how he poses his subjects, but the textures of the surroundings. "For me there is this sort of tension with this immediacy you get with the subject; there is this unguarded connection between viewer and subject that Wolfgang is able to capture," Molon says. "But he is still coming from a very structured formal approach."

Much of Tillmans's work may reflect a snapshot aesthetic, but he is making deliberate aesthetic decisions with each click of the camera.

When Tillmans had his Tate Britain show in 2003, he titled it "if one thing matters everything matters." Take that with you when you go see this show—which is a form of visual democracy in action.

"Wolfgang Tillmans" is at the Museum of Contemporary Art through August 13. See Museums & Institutions.