



Suzanne & Lutz, white dress, army skirt (1993) (Photos courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery)

After Arbus

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In thinking about Diane Arbus, as one does from time to time, I came to a distressing realization: that I couldn't name a single photographer subsequent to Arbus (and Frank and Winogrand and Friedlander and Eggleston and the other

greats of her generation) who ranked on anywhere near the same level, which is to say, who thrilled me near as broadly, deeply or consistently. Looking back from Arbus, one sees Stieglitz, Weston and Evans; Cartier-Bresson and Atget; Fenton, Cameron and Nadar – a long lineage of soul-satisfying luminaries, whose images aren't likely to ever get boring.

But looking forward? There are many who produce admirable pictures, but none who don't feel, in some way, partial, like one chapter in a fine collection of essays rather than a volume unto themselves: Cindy Sherman, Jeff Wall, Nan Goldin, Lewis Baltz, Catherine Opie, Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth – all important artists who do what they do really well but who, for the most part, do only that. None approaches the poetic scale of Arbus' vision, or the sheer intensity of humanness she manages to encapsulate in a single picture.

Wolfgang Tillmans would not seem an obvious candidate for heir to the Arbus legacy. In fact, his work has virtually nothing in common with hers, either formally or conceptually. With the exception of the occasional celebrity, he photographs humble things: friends, fruit, piles of rumpled clothing. He prints his images in a variety of sizes, rarely doing them the honor of a frame, and puts such emphasis on the interchangeability of both subject and scale that he is commonly (and mistakenly) criticized for a casual approach to the medium. His current retrospective at the UCLA Hammer Museum, however – his first in the U.S., surprisingly – suggests a reason to be hopeful about the state of photography as a discipline. It's not so much a matter of his being a better or worse photographer than others of his generation (the medium has changed so much in the past three decades that a qualitative hierarchy would be virtually meaningless), but rather that he restores to the enterprise something that was lost back in the '70s somewhere: a certain holistic heroism of vision.

The distinction is more romantic than intellectual, I'll admit – and therein lies the problem. Photography obviously didn't disappear after 1971 (the year of Arbus' death), but, like art generally, went the way of the intellect, exalting concept over impression, thinking over looking. The romantic ideal of the photographer as pure eye gave way to the photographer as typologist, trickster and theorist. With Ruscha's "Every Building on the Sunset Strip," photography became a tool rather than a mode of being, and rarely achieved – or cared to achieve, or even

necessarily trusted – the sheer visceral (that is, visual/emotional/psychological) impact that previous generations strove for. It was not the goal of these works to thrill, exactly, but to dissect, analyze, stimulate and provoke. At best, the shift can be said to have rejuvenated a medium that had grown stale and repetitive, bringing it in line with the concerns of the wider art world. At worst, it shuttered the scope. Even the least conceptual of photographic projects today cling to themes, devices and statements; few brave anything nearly so broad and messy as the City, Nature or the Human Condition.

If there's anyone poised to bridge these two divergent currents, it's Tillmans. Born in Remscheid, Germany, in 1968, he emerged in the early 1990s sparkling with voice-of-his-generation promise. If you know his work only casually, these early pictures are probably the ones that you know: tender, snapshotlike portraits of sexually liberated, effortlessly gorgeous (in that loose, organic, European way), techno-era hipsters. Tillmans presented the work, as he has all work since then, in cluttered, frameless exhibitions, printing the photos in multiple sizes and taping them in freeform clusters directly to the walls, as well as in elaborate layouts on the pages of British and American fashion magazines.

The Hammer show, the installation of which Tillmans designed and oversaw (as he does most of his shows), affirms the best aspects of this early promise without indulging the hip factor or trapping the artist in its mystique. A seductive 1992 series called "Chemistry Squares" – 15 small, square, black-and-white images of sweat-glistening, Ecstasy-glowing club kids, taken on a dance floor somewhere in London – is the show's primary token of this cultural moment and, hung as it is next to a large photo of a sculpture of the Trinity, epitomizes the spiritual aspect that Tillmans clearly ascribes to that moment's communal idealism. His view of humanity is fundamentally optimistic and generous, which makes his portraits particularly engaging. The dozen or two assembled here, both early and recent, of musicians, artists and personal friends, primarily, are among his best and should leave no doubt of his pre-eminence in the genre. Few have such a talent for drawing vulnerability, kindness and complexity out of such a range of faces, classically picturesque or not.

The portraits, however, are only a fraction of what the show contains. There are also still lifes, landscapes, documentary works, abstractions, a video and a room-

size installation of glass-topped tables containing a collaged assortment of found images, newspaper clippings and other ephemera. There are conceptual threads to the show, sociological threads, formalist threads and political threads, all equally rigorous. There are moments when the work feels cool and cerebral and moments of extravagant visual indulgence; moments of dinginess and moments of elegance; moments of humor and pathos and joy and grief. The essays in the show's catalog go to great rhetorical lengths to isolate and justify several of these aspects individually – Daniel Birnbaum writes on the imagery, Dominic Molon on the conceptual framework, Russell Ferguson on the portraiture, Lane Relyea on the abstraction and Julie Ault on the installation – but what's striking, ultimately, is the perfect ease with which these aspects coexist in the work itself. What might easily have come off as aimless, schizophrenic or showy feels instead naturally and appropriately holistic. He titled his 2003 exhibition at Tate Britain "If One Thing Matters, Everything Matters," and that pretty much says it. His subject is nothing short of existence itself, in all its grandeur and banality.

Tillmans has resisted the strict designation of "photographer," which is understandable given the breadth of his practice and the general unpleasantness of being pinned into any one category, but he has nonetheless become one of the medium's most important visionaries. The show suggests an artist entering into an impressive maturity, moving beyond his stylish beginnings to become a voice of not only his generation but of the medium as a whole, redefining the terms of production and exhibition to propose an approach defined by neither the romantic ideologies of seeing nor the conceptual ideologies of thinking, but by a graceful and often profound interweaving of the two. The camera, for Tillmans, is both a tool *and* a mode of being, which makes following along the paths he uses it to blaze a deeply rewarding experience.?

WOLFGANG TILLMANS | UCLA Hammer Museum | Through January 7, 2007

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