

# Art in America

NEWS & FEATURES EXHIBITIONS MAGAZINE NEWSLETTER SUBSCRIBE 

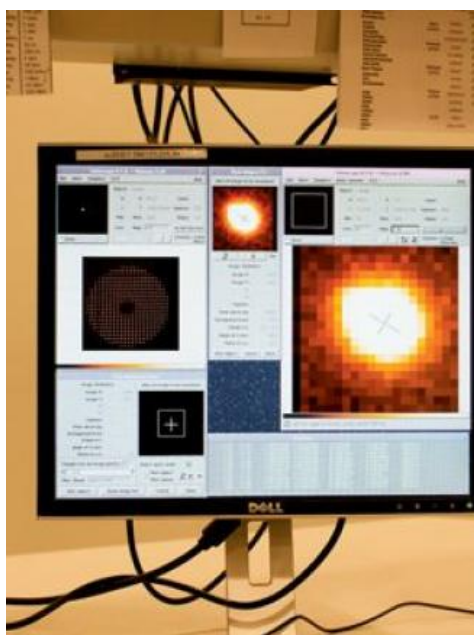
REVIEWS SEPT. 24, 2013



## Wolfgang Tillmans

NEW YORK,  
at andrea rosen

by Courtney Fiske



Wolfgang Tillmans:  
*Guide Star; ESO*, 2012,  
inkjet print, 63¼ by  
94⅞ inches; at Andrea  
Rosen.

ADVERTISEMENT

"From Neue Welt," the title of Wolfgang Tillmans's latest show at Andrea Rosen, was inspired by Albert Renger-Patzsch's 1928 photo book, *Die Welt ist schön* (The World Is Beautiful). An influential, though contentious, work of German New Objectivity, *Die Welt* attempted to catalogue the beauty latent in everyday life. Like his forebear, Tillmans speaks sincerely of "essence" and "truth," trusting in his camera's ability to foster a keener, more sensitive sort of seeing. A record of the artist's past four years of travel across five continents, "From Neue Welt" presented selections from a much larger series that Tillmans collected in the book *Neue Welt*. The show cohered less by subject matter than by Tillmans's particular way of looking, which treats the everyday as both a social reality and a source for formal, almost painterly, compositions. Here, where sumptuous abstractions neighbor documentary street scenes, and an image of a star-sodden sky is placed adjacent to a close-up of a pixelated Dell monitor, the real grades into the aesthetic.

As is typical of a Tillmans show, the work in "From Neue Welt" can be categorized into classical genres of still life, landscape, portrait and abstraction, belaboring their parameters while collapsing the traditional hierarchies among them. The show's idiosyncratic hanging mirrors its eclectic content, with oversize framed prints flanking images of more modest scale, which are nailed to the wall or affixed to it with binder clips. All are cobbled into groups that rhyme in color and contour.

Amplified by Tillmans's tendency to crop close and enlarge, the digital photographs' near surreal density of detail overwhelms the



**Art in America**  
**ARTNEWS**

**DAILY  
MONTHLY  
QUARTERLY**

11 issues of Art in America  
4 issues of ARTnews  
artnews.com  
artinamericamagazine.com

**SUBSCRIBE Artnews.com/Combo**

viewer's capacity to absorb it. *Outer Ear* (2012) trains on its eponymous subject, resolved against a blurry background of stippled scalp. Fuzzy and flushed like the skin of a ripe apricot, the ear assumes a sculptural form, its end folded in the elegant curve of a Henry Moore. Viewers can only grasp these subtleties in person, lending the objects in Tillmans's show what Walter Benjamin described as an aura, which contravenes digital photography's easy reproducibility.

For all his subcultural stripes, Tillmans, who made a name for himself photographing underground club scenes in London and his native Germany in the early 1990s, shares in Renger-Patzsch's traditionalism. The compositions in "From Neue Welt" are deliberate, even classical, despite their casual air. Most are organized around strong diagonals, verticals and horizontals and juxtapose moments of focus with planes of gauzy haze. Some, like *Shanghai night, a* (2012), a saffron-hued scene of men playing a board game in crouched concentration, resemble a half-remembered painting. The image suggests a blurring of mediums that reaches its height in "Silver," Tillmans's ongoing series of cameraless abstractions for which printer ink has been used as a substitute for acrylic and oil, resulting in numinous expanses of color. Placed nearby, realist photographs like *Shanghai day, a* (2009), a cropped view of construction workers, feel somewhat out of place; as a meditation on labor and capital the image is too vague to have punch.

Tillmans's work is most impactful when the social commentary is oblique, as in *FESPA Digital / FRUIT LOGISTICA* (2009), a gridded array of diptychs taken at the printing and produce fairs named in the title. Tillmans's photographs depict baroque displays of fruit surrounded in fair booths by inkjet images of the same; in one image the blown-up flesh of an avocado recalls the impossible smoothness of Ingres's *Grande Odalisque*. Plumbing photography's capacity for seduction, the piece raises productive questions about the blurred line between fine art and advertising, implicating the camera in economies of fetishization and desire.

Tillman's work may be accused of superficiality, taking a cue from Benjamin's 1931 critique of Renger-Patzsch's *Die Welt* for assuming a photographic posture that "can endow any soup can with cosmic significance," while vitiating its politics. Still, Tillmans's fundamental concern is with description and a certain aesthetic caress of life. Though it may be attractive to claim for "From Neue Welt" some revelatory account of globalization, this is neither the show's achievement nor, it seems, Tillmans's true project.