Step into Liquid

MICHELLE KUO TALKS WITH WOLFGANG TILLMANS ABOUT THE ASCENDANCY OF INK-JET PRINTING

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Wolfgang Tillmans, *Freischwimmer 151*, 2010, ink-jet print on paper, 12' 5" x 16' 8". Installation view, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.

MICHELLE KUO: I was struck by your reaction to the David Hockney exhibition in London this past spring ["A Bigger Picture," Royal Academy of Arts]. Beyond any sheer aesthetic pleasure, you seemed especially taken by the show's structure, in which traditionally painted canvases were shown alongside digitally produced paintings as well as arrays of video monitors that functioned as display "canvases."

WOLFGANG TILLMANS: Hockney's exhibition is a fascinating example of the veil we put around medium. This is a subject I've been dealing with in my work from the beginning, so I was intrigued to see this set of issues appear in another artist's practice—and excited by the exuberance of the show. Not only by his relentless dwelling on the subject matter of nature but also by his iPad paintings, which were actually ink-jet prints on paper mounted on Dibond. I was curious to see how these digital images were presented as material paintings in drop-shadow frames. And they resonated with the multipanel video screens showing moving images made with nine cameras. Ultimately, though—even if the work celebrates new media and technology, just as Hockney has done in the past—it almost seemed as if the iPad and video pieces were there as foils, to underline, by contrast, the masterly position and unsurpassable value of actual oil on canvas.

Last month I was in Cologne to take a portrait of Hockney, and he talked about how amazing the quality of ink-jet printers is today, how they can produce colors beyond those of any other medium. But then he added, "The images have to be drawn. You have to draw them. It can't come from photographs." I found this so telling, this notion that something hand-drawn will print differently from something that is photographed, and that the printing technology itself could be used, ultimately, to uphold this hierarchy. The ink-jet printer itself obviously doesn't care where the input, the color values, come from, whether something drawn, scanned, or photographed; the printer merely prints the color space it can technically cover.

In fact, the show demonstrated there is an unprecedented equality among different media today. But it also made clear that there is a deep psychological attachment to traditional hierarchies of medium. And I have been observing this leveling—and the attachment to hierarchy in the face of it—for many years. For example, the same medium exists in completely different museum departments. If one looks at the traditional divisions of modern art, the same category of mechanically produced work exists across the print department, the photography department, the painting and sculpture department, plus obviously architecture and design.

MK: And just as the boundaries between those traditional mediums themselves have become increasingly murky, markets and institutions have seemingly reinforced those divisions all the more.

WT: We have arrived at a point where a large proportion of "painting" is actually ink-jet printing. This is an amazing fact. But, almost as astonishingly, it is never really talked about. A photographic ink-jet print on paper, an iPad drawing printed on ink-jet paper, and an original design printed on ink-jet paper are all technically exactly the same. Perhaps it's time to rethink the remarkably persistent categorization of artworks. In my view, we are all making pictures.

MK: How is this condition of "pictures" reflected in your work, and how did you come to work with digital photography and ink-jet printing yourself?

WT: I always saw myself as a picture maker, using whatever means were available to make a new picture. I started working with digital printing in 1986. I used the first black-and-white laser photocopier by Canon in a copy shop to print a one-off zine. When

Wolfgang Tillmans, *Lutz & Alex sitting in the trees*, 1992, ink-jet print on paper, 63 x 47 ¼". Installation view, Maureen Paley/Interim Art stand at Unfair, Cologne.

I started experimenting with this new machine, I realized how much more meaningful those photocopies were in texture and in presence than the drawings and paintings I was making at the time—that this mechanically produced object had a richer texture because of the rather rough dot screen and the surface lines generated by the technology of the moment. It was digital, which meant it should be perfect, but in fact it wasn't; the process always created some degree of interference and unevenness, which I liked. Then in 1992, in order to make larger pictures, instead of tiling many A3 photocopies together I found a brand-new Canon Color Bubble Jet Copier A1, which was really a photocopier unit with an ink-jet printer inside it that printed on twenty-four-inch rolls of paper.

I realized that I could make large-scale, lightweight pictures by photocopying my smaller, hand-printed photographs from the darkroom and enlarging them to four feet by five feet. I hung each picture as a sheet of paper on the wall, unframed, so that there was nothing between the viewer and the ink-saturated matte surface. Because these early ink-jet prints were executed with unstable dyes, I realized that if I wanted to have the advantage of this fragility and more immediate spatial relationship, it was essential to find a way for people to perceive them as permanent, and so I accompanied the works with the original photograph and a certificate, instructing the owner how to reprint the picture when the first copy faded. While this was a practical solution, it also afforded viewers the opportunity to break down certain barriers of materiality—attaining a paradoxical permanence even as attachment to the "original" print was obviated.

MK: And that transitioned away from the heavy vehicle or container—like the thick wood and Plexiglas frame or the light box—that was standard practice for large photographs and also associated with a certain strain of conceptual photography.

WT: Yes. I wanted to avoid the heavy language of large-scale photographs. The unframed ink-jet print was definitely an exception to that language, and it

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was seen as a dramatic, rebellious gesture at the time, although it has since become a common practice. But for me, it was not so much an objection to the frame. It was about the love of this immaculate object as it comes out of the printer or processing machine. It was about acknowledging the objectness and the specificity of materiality. I was asking: How can I present this object, which has always been just that—an *object*, a print, for me, and not just a conduit of information? And how can I bring it to the wall?

For my small-scale C-type prints, I found a way of taping the photograph that wouldn't harm the surface and was detachable from the back, in order to foreground this attention to materiality. After some years, though, I became known for this way of installing my work; it felt important to reinvigorate the dialogue about the photograph as an object and not let it drift into the background as merely the expected way of encountering my work. So I introduced frames and showed them next to the unframed work. This juxtaposition held open the possibility of a reversal of meaning, or a questioning of expectations.

MK: The frame, or the border, gets pressured differently within newer media. In several photographs that you took for this piece, which are close-ups of ink-jet works by different artists, you focused on the edges and corners.

WT: Because that's really where the picture begins and ends, where it meets the real world around it. It is a crucial point—where the reality or the body of the work, so to speak, manifests itself. It is also, importantly, a juncture where you can often see the paint or ink or pigment meet the material support underneath. So I've always been interested in the ways in which artists deal with the corners and edges, how they are managed and handled. Whether viewing a Velázquez or a Jeff Wall, after taking in a picture as a whole I take a look at its side. I like to observe the shadows that stretchers cast—as in a room of Rothkos on view recently at MOMA, which could be viewed afresh by blocking everything else out and only concentrating on the shadows cast by the bottom corners of the paintings.

MK: Modern ink-jet technology also produces something you've referred to as "smooth color," the experience of pure, solid color.

WT: The experience of pure color has been heightened to a new level: That is where I think there has been a

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seismic change in technology, what Hockney referred to as colors that have not been possible before, colors with a deep richness—not a lurid richness. The quality of ink and ink-jet printing has become even more amazing in recent years, and manufacturers are now using pigmented ink, which lasts much longer than traditional C-type color photographs.

We have come to a point where the ink-jet printer actually has a bigger color space than C-type photography. But I have also noticed that there remains a faith in the optical C-print because it is connected to a unique negative and not to a set of codes. There is a tendency to want to hold on to the analog for some sort of authenticity.

MK: And yet images generated by a set of codes are dominant, across vastly different types of imagery—from the commercial pictures at the digital print fair you visited in Barcelona, for example, to a late Polke on vinyl.

WT: In its most extreme state, a contemporary ink-jet painting on stretchers inside a museum is technically the same as an advertising banner stretched on the aluminum framework on the museum's facade. For some that may be a little hard to stomach.

MK: One could cynically surmise that's why various artists have tried to bring the symbol for the artist's hand or the gesture into their art, by adding an "original" painterly touch with washes of paint or color on top of the ink-jet-printed image, just as late Warhols were individualized in that way.

WT: Yes, that seems a bit anachronistic. Interestingly, I think that for a younger generation of artists, expressive gestures are more naturally performed on digital recording surfaces, like trackpads, stylus tablets, or iPads. And these pictures' first state of being is immaterial. They are just as immaterial as a digital photograph on a computer screen or a FreeHand illustration. They are all categorically the same, but there still seems to be a hierarchization of this material, which is a near-ethical dilemma that I find fascinating.

In order to transfer such imagery into an exhibition space, it has to be mediated back onto a physical substrate, unless it will be shown on monitors. Probably one sad day, exhibition spaces may be covered floor to ceiling in digital screens as thin as wallpaper. But today the challenge is this: Everyone who makes digital images uses the same machines made by a handful of manufacturers that produce state-of-the-art ink-jet printers. From Gerhard Richter in Cologne to a photographer in Tokyo to a fine art printmaker in Los Angeles, they all use the same set of machines.

MK: On the one hand, that introduces a bottleneck, because so many of those parameters are completely predetermined—but they then have endless permutations. You can introduce a boundless series of layers of different visual registers—scans, vector graphics, photographed imagery—into what is outputted.

WT: And now you can print onto anything—canvas, wood, glass, metal, Mylar, you name it. The choices going into making a specific pictorial object are all important here: What is a good way for this image to exist in the real world? Of course there is also the question of how one can assure that monetary value is attributed to the image. It's hard to ignore the fact that we still value the notion of an image on canvas more highly than if it were on wood, and therefore a sculpture, or on paper, and therefore a photograph.

MK: Nevertheless, the principle at the moment is always the same: ink pigment sprayed onto something. Which raises questions of reproducibility, of editioning, of uniqueness. None of this is new, of course—from early hand-wringing about photography to the industrially produced objects of Minimalism. Yet what seems new is the pervasiveness of one type of *media* across so many supposedly different *mediums*.

You also point to something interesting, which is that despite the sophistication of our programs or printers or technical apparatuses, it is still extremely difficult to achieve the same results. That even though we think that things are infinitely reproducible, in fact reproduction itself is still always slightly contingent on—

WT: On the touch and the craft and the knowledge of the operator of the printer. The reproducibility of art has to some extent always been an ideal, because the moment the data meets the physical world, you are dealing with the idiosyncratic consistency of the pigment powder that has been mixed into the ink liquid in Japan by a specific company.

For instance, the static charge that creates a slight blip in the flow of data or ink, the inconsistencies in paper or other base materials, and printing profiles and program updates mix with variables like humidity and temperature in the print workshop—anybody who has experience in fine printing knows how frustratingly difficult it is to achieve a perfect result. Just as my work addresses its relation to medium, it also directly addresses our relationship to perfection and accident.

MK: It recalls Warhol's paintings: the randomization of texture and the introduction of noise into those screenprinted surfaces—versus now, when nothing falls through the grid of the screen.

WT: Because today's best ink-jet prints have become a closed surface, with no screen or dot visible to the naked eye. The surface is 300 dpi or more, with HD information density. But random noise still happens in digital photography, in which a photo sensor translates what it sees or doesn't see into zeros and

ones. In extreme low light, cameras generate random information. I used this effect in photographs of the night sky, where at great enlargement a star is no longer distinguishable from a pixel that just displays a random charge.

MK: Do you see the users—whether you or an ad agency or a graphic designer—as subject to the technology, waiting for the next advance, looking forward to the opportunity to play around with whatever new tools are designed? Or is it also the other way around: The producers are looking at what their users desire in terms of each next-generation development?

WT: I don't think that the artists are the ones who are actively pushing the development, and I don't think the developers are looking to artists, necessarily. But there is no denying the incredible democracy of this medium and in these extremely powerful tools. The technology is on the desktops of millions of people using all kinds of applications, making everything from home video to political signs. One has to see this as an opportunity. What does it mean, then, for the art object?

MK: Now the ink-jet print is a kind of material picture that parallels the register—in resolution, in color—of the picture on the screen. But this portends a homogenization of vision even as it suggests new possibilities for imaging.

WT: It's mind-boggling. Digital has created an advance in quality at the same time as it has created an incredible degradation of standards and of expectations. Just think of how we only watch films in fuzzy YouTube quality.

Buying a digital camera three years ago was, for me, a total revolution. I needed to learn my language for the second time. I suddenly had to deal with high definition, that every picture now sees more than my eye can see. This was about a whole new way of seeing, of working. In the past I had always said that 35-mm film was exactly right for my photography because I want my photographs to look like what my eye sees. And photographs recorded on large-format film always left me cold; they are impressive, but they have nothing to do with my experience of the world.

Now I have suddenly found myself with a small SLR [single-lens reflex] camera that has the sharpness of large-format film. So I have really had to learn to adapt to a different process—because there is no point in artificially adding grain to these pictures. That would be so wrong. And about four years ago there was a new generation of digital cameras with sensors exactly the size of 35-mm film, and so optically the lenses perform exactly the same as those in my 35 SLR. Before, I could always recognize digital photographs. Now they don't have the same quality of flatness that they once did. Because of the portability of these supersharp cameras, I can carry on in the way that I move around the world and keep the same angles and perspectives as my previous work.

The transition was tough. I didn't want my medium to look nostalgic, but could I still make pictures of the same emotional charge and intensity? This is all coming together, in a way, as I prepare for my exhibition "*Neue Welt*" [New World] at Kunsthalle Zürich in September. As I've worked on this show, a whole new layer has entered my work, which can only be seen in person in front of the actual prints. The depth of detail is so great that a picture can never be memorized in its entirety. It's as if in each one there is a sense of the infinite complexity of matter—a kind of trompe l'oeil effect that is neither clinical nor cold but surreal.

MK: This seems like part of a shift to a different visual order, one in which a surfeit, an exponentially greater magnitude, of information is simultaneously readily available—both within the camera's viewfinder and in print—and totally beyond our perceptual capacity.

WT: I had experienced this act of learning a new visual language once before, when starting to work with cameraless, nonfigurative pictures in the darkroom. These shifts, some chosen, some forced on us by technological development, shouldn't be seen as a threat. They are profoundly exciting.

MK: If *Pictures* was famously coined by Douglas Crimp as a way of talking about the class of images being made in the 1970s that did not seem self-reflexively preoccupied with their own medium specificity but instead addressed new types of representation—film, photography, television, advertising—Crimp articulated the ways in which such "pictures" were still committed to modernism, to its radical aspirations and to its investigations into signification and representation, along the lines of Surrealism and Pop. To his mind, these artists in the '70s had merely turned from modernism's internal, formalist questions of medium to questions of the psychology of the image and its relation to (consumer) desire.

It seems that, on the one hand, the "pictures" you speak of deal very much with this territory—the realm of desire, psychology, consumption (those lurid images at the digital-printing trade fair!). But on the other hand, the universe of pictures you are talking about also appears to break with modernist radicality, with older critiques of representation. The landscape has changed, even if we are leaving many of its possibilities unexplored.

WT: Well, the Pop silk screen was at the center of this tension between the radical and the commercial in the postwar period. And decades before that, Walter Benjamin spoke of mechanical reproduction as, in a way, freeing the artwork from its cult status, its role in ritual, and allowing it to enter the realm of the political. But paradoxically, today, when almost all of our images involve mechanical reproduction, we are hardly aware of the social functions that the new technology might fulfill; instead we persist in tethering it to the realm of cult and ritual, which is the fetishization of images stretched on canvas. □

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