

# SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

frieze  
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## The Possible Document

HERALD ST, [LONDON, UK](#)



Wolfgang Tillmans, *Economy* (2006)

If you're expecting a show replete with the cacophonous hang of Wolfgang Tillmans' 2003 Tate Britain retrospective, then Herald St's new group show, which features the photographer, is not for you. 'The Possible Document' is devoid of photographic clutter, but one is still expected to have some reverence for Tillmans – encouraged by the lone photograph hanging in the entrance like an ancestral portrait in a hall. Titled *Economy* (2006), the A4-sized image is of an unused pot scourer floating on top of an inky black background. The photograph announces a penchant for the abstract, a theme which runs through most of the work included in the exhibition, and shows Tillmans at his best, documenting a mundane object and elevating it to a form of beauty – a silent abstract that mutes the necessity for thorny exegesis.

'The Possible Document' is not advertised as a themed curated show, but it certainly includes a group of artists who are concerned with the photographic medium – the processes, the chemical treatments, the

2021 S WABASH AVE  
CHICAGO IL 60616  
+1 (312) 226 2223

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darkroom, and the mimetic games that the medium inspires. It is not representation that links the work of Tillmans, Anthony Pearson, Annette Kelm, and Josh Brand, though the initial encounter with *Economy* hints at a sense of domesticity that is reiterated in Kelm's large C-prints. Dominating the middle room, this four-image series resembles a study in interior design. The bold fabric patterns evoke a cultural world tour – from Florence Broadhurst to Liberty prints to tapa cloth – but a closer inspection of the photographic plane reveals the patterns to be details of mass produced cushions, carpets and linen. The ridges and weave of the fabric are clearly evident. By photographing the lowly details of domestic trappings, Kelm is pointing out the tricks of the medium – photographs are manipulative imitations of reality rather than straightforward documentation.

The inclusion of Tillman's work, *Joy of the World* (2008), in the centre of the space puts a halt to any further domestic narrative. The piece is a standard, functional table, but it does not resound with traces of the home – there are no worn patches where plates once lay. It's completely the wrong height for the domestic sphere, better suited to the Pitt Rivers Museum, used to display the prizes of anthropological tours. Seen as Tillmans' very own wunderkammer, *Joy of the World* displays the traces – icecream menus and magazine clippings – of both the artist's research and the 'real world' which is evident in his work. The work also further illustrates a process in developing an image.

Before the age of digital, photography was a medium at the mercy of the darkroom. It was (and still is) a process which, at best, can reveal a perfect representation of the world, at worst the flaws of the medium – the flaws that give form to the work of Pearson and Brand. Whereas Tillmans and Kelm push everyday objects into abstraction, Pearson starts with the tools of the trade: cutting, burning and ripping fragments of materials, solarizing the remnants in the darkroom to produce abstract, spectral images that are completely removed from the optical lens. But in an attempt to deny the intrusion of the lens, and in limiting the form to the darkroom, Pearson seems to mimic a painterly abstract pursuit but without the benefit of the third dimension that the painted surface creates. As with Pearson, Brand's series of C-prints in the adjoining room, which look like colour-treated prints of lino-cuts developed directly onto light sensitive paper, there is a lack of graphic boldness that belittles both artists' work when hung next to that of Kelm and Tillmans.

Such photographic game-playing can be done well though; Len Lye, for example, produced moving image in the 1930s produced by scribbling and scratching directly onto celluloid. For me, films like *Free Radicals* (1958) still stand as the perfect rhythmical manifestation of the visual treats that can be generated from the darkroom alone. But such magic is not evident in Pearson or Brand's work. What we are left with, is, as the title surmises, a possible document – something that can only be used to furnish further evidence and that is not at all assured on its own.

**Nicola Harvey**

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