

**TYLER MITCHELL**  
**WISH THIS WAS REAL**  
**28.03 – 17.08.2025**

## **INTRODUCTION**

**Tyler Mitchell is one of the leading photographic artists of his generation. He was born in Atlanta, Georgia (USA) in 1995. As a teenager he had a passion for both skateboarding and film. At twenty-three he became the first Black photographer to shoot the cover of Vogue magazine. His photography brings together art and fashion. This exhibition presents nearly ten years of his work and is the artist's first solo exhibition in Switzerland.**

Tyler Mitchell is driven by dreams of paradise against the backdrop of history. His photographs propel a visual narrative of beauty, style, utopia, and the landscape that expands visions of Black life and embraces the extraordinary radiance of the everyday.

His bold use of color and his effortless attention to fashion as a performance of personhood and self-determination led to features in style magazines. In 2018 Mitchell was commissioned to photograph Beyoncé for American Vogue's September issue, making history as the first Black photographer to shoot the magazine's cover. "I try to depict Black people in a real and pure way," Mitchell says. "I hope there is an honest gaze to my photos."

Photo Elysée presents Mitchell's first solo exhibition in Switzerland, covering nearly ten years of image-making, and demonstrating the influence of the "New Black Vanguard," which American writer Antwaun Sargent describes as the proliferation of images by Black photographers who work between the genres of art and commerce. Since his rise to prominence in the world of fashion, Mitchell has also pursued a dynamic artistic practice. From portraits made in the United States, Europe, and West Africa to his video installations and his latest prints on fabric and mirrors, he traces photography's vital role in shaping a visual realm in which refuge and repose are central.

This exhibition considers Mitchell's work through three loose themes: portraiture and youth in *Lives / Liberties*, the landscape as a stage for leisure and community in *Postcolonial / Pastoral*, and the preservation of social memory in *Family / Fraternity*. At the center of the exhibition is *Altars / Acres*, an intergenerational display of works by artists and photographers with whom Mitchell shares a profound sense of lineage and dialogue, among them Garrett Bradley, Baldwin Lee, Carrie Mae Weems, Gordon Parks, and Grace Wales Bonner. "These images depict

moments of play, moments of human connection, moments of familial connection,” Mitchell says, “all happening along and in spite of the history of the southern landscape.”

*Wish This Was Real* is curated by Brendan Embser, senior editor at Aperture, and Sophia Greiff, curator at C/O Berlin Foundation, in collaboration with Tyler Mitchell Studios. Unless otherwise noted, all photographs are archival pigment prints courtesy of the artist.

## LIVES / LIBERTIES

**As a young person Tyler Mitchell took up skateboarding. He also discovered his love for the creative potential of photography on social networks, such as Tumblr. His first photoshoots feature young Black people experiencing carefree moments of leisure and play.**

Mitchell was a Tumblr kid. Growing up in Atlanta, he absorbed photography through the site's endless scroll and startling juxtapositions between art history and contemporary culture. He was also enmeshed in skateboarding groups, using a digital camera to make skate videos inspired by filmmaker Spike Jonze, whose *Video Days* (1991) is considered one of the most influential examples of the genre. When Mitchell moved to New York, he began reading British style magazines such as *i-D* and *Dazed*, the “bibles of cool,” as he calls them, and studying Ryan McGinley’s energetic chronicle of young skaters and artists in the era-defining photobook *The Kids Are Alright* (2000). Skateboarding, Mitchell has noted, is “not a sport that’s built on competition, it’s one that thrives on community.”

In his early videos and photography, Mitchell began to experiment with portraiture and fashion, often collaborating with friends to stage scenes around New York or on improvised sets. He was pursuing an idea about what leisure might look like for Black youth, the effortless, carefree sense of utopic space inspired by his memories of playing in fields and parks in Atlanta.

But in an era of dramatically increased scrutiny of violence against Black men—Black Lives Matter emerged in 2013 after the acquittal of a Florida man who killed teenager Trayvon Martin—visions of leisure could also be seen as a mode of self-protection, and respite as a route to personal liberty. Mitchell later reflected on the twinned emotions he felt at the time: the ever-present specter of violence coupled with the creative possibilities of exuberance and pride. “In many different ways,” Mitchell says, “my work is about striving for self-determination, for agency, for empowerment and joy against the backdrop of history.”

## POSTCOLONIAL / PASTORAL

**Many of Mitchell's photographs are set in nature. In art and literature, natural landscapes have often been depicted as pure—separate from the history that takes place in them. The people Mitchell portrays in his images seek a connection to the land, despite a history of injustice.**

In the pastoral tradition in art and literature exalts in the purity of natural landscapes, as though nature were entirely disconnected from history. Mitchell grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, which has more green spaces than any American city and has often been his muse or a backdrop for images that evoke memories about the South. His work in Georgia, and other verdant scenes from England to upstate New York, envisions the idea of the “postcolonial pastoral” associated with the novels of Toni Morrison—a romantic evocation of the land that is thorned with trauma. For Mitchell's subjects, paradise has not been lost, but instead fought for, claimed, savored, and emblazoned despite the backstory of slavery, segregation, and injustice.

Mitchell made the landscapes in his series *Dreaming in Real Time* (2021) as the pandemic was beginning to recede. He had not been home to Georgia in nearly a year. Each scene contains multiple characters and an array of narratives and references to paintings by Georges Seurat and Kerry James Marshall, and Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), about a Gullah community living on a Georgia coastal island. Mitchell wanted to “overwhelm the frame” with joy and connectedness, and to make images that are too often “sequestered in the public imaginary.”

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In his series *Chrysalis* (2022), Tyler Mitchell further pursues the theme of the “postcolonial pastoral.” The title refers to the pupa of a butterfly, implying that the series might be a story about emergence. Here, young men seek solace through ablutions and communion with nature. Like the figures in Mitchell's works printed on fabric, which conjure the laundry line—“the symbol of domestic Black life,” he says—they are each protected in their own thoughts and worlds.

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Mitchell's newest works push the boundaries of photographic presentation through dye-sublimation prints on silk, jersey, linen, or cotton, sometimes clipped to a clothesline or draped over a wooden frame. The pictures often retain the palette of his editorial work, but the figures are elusive: some are only partially visible, obscured by sheets of fabric within the original image, which offers a surreal, mise en abyme quality. In these works, Mitchell pursues a form of storytelling based on poetic gestures. “I'm thinking about how fabric plays a role within the home, how it can contain memory,” he says. The title of his mirror piece is a reference to Toni Morrison's 1977 novel *Song of Solomon*, in which a young Black man named Milkman Dead travels from Michigan to Virginia in search of his family origins and a mythological

song traced back to his great-grandfather. Euphoric after finding a long-lost relation, Milkman leaps into the iridescent surface of a river, exclaiming: “Don’t give me no itty bitty teeny tiny tub, girl. I need the whole entire complete deep blue sea!”

**ALTARS / ACRES**

**In this section, Tyler Mitchell shows the work of artists who have inspired him. These artists include photographers, filmmakers, sculptors, fashion designers, and musicians. Despite their differences in age and practice, Mitchell believes they are all part of a larger conversation about the possibilities of Black creative expression.**

This display is a tribute to the artists and photographers who have shaped Tyler Mitchell's practice, providing an intergenerational spectrum of experimentation, intellectual heritage, and cultural expression. The white picket fence, an indelible symbol of domesticity and separation, appears in Paul Strand's modernist icon *The White Fence* and recurs in Dawoud Bey's series *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*, which places the viewer in the perspective of enslaved people who fled to freedom under the cover of darkness via the Underground Railroad, in the period before the American Civil War. In works by Carrie Mae Weems, Earlie Hudnall Jr., Gordon Parks, and Baldwin Lee, the spontaneity and lightness of youth provide a pretext for Mitchell's utopic visions of Black leisure. Artists working in a variety of mediums, such as Gee's Bend quilter Loretta Pettway Bennett, filmmaker Garrett Bradley, sculptors Rashid Johnson and Hugh Hayden, and fashion designer Grace Wales Bonner, envision Black material culture, memory, and sound. "The dialogue happening over a century of art-making—these ideas have been explored and revisited and interpreted in a myriad of ways—really gets at the significance of the conversation that my project is trying to have with the world," Mitchell says, "a long-term, continued engagement with Black artistic production."

**FAMILY / FRATERNITY**

**Tyler Mitchell has always been interested in how Black people memorialize their families and display pictures in their homes. This series of photographs was taken in a Brooklyn townhouse and features friends and people he knows.**

In 2020 Mitchell was awarded a fellowship from the Gordon Parks Foundation, for which he made a series of portraits and still lifes that recall both Parks's mid-century work and the Black home as site of cosmological memory. "I had an obsession with vernacular photographs—Black life depicted and photographed indoors and domestic spaces—and how we create agency for ourselves within our private lives and homes, in spite of what might be going on 'out there,'" Mitchell says. This suite of photographs pays tribute not only to Parks's multifaceted practice as a chronicler of Black lives in photography and film, but also to Deborah Willis, the pioneering art historian and Mitchell's professor at New York University, who has written extensively about how Black photographers shaped the medium from the point of its inception in the mid-nineteenth century.

Mitchell worked with friends and acquaintances to make these works in Bedford-Stuyvesant, an historically Black neighborhood of Brooklyn full of handsome townhouses—many passed down through generations—and thought about the rituals of dress, display, and devotion to ancestors. These works represent a synthesis of Mitchell's central motivations as an artist, from the power of style to the inspiration of lineage. In this respect, he is a successor to a generation of photographers who wielded the camera to reframe images of Black life with nuance and complexity. "Gordon Parks had the same experience, in terms of remixing the concept of fashion," Willis has said in a conversation with Mitchell. "Those images from the civil rights movement, and when he was in people's homes, he could see how people were dressed, and he knew that they were not dressing for his camera, but for themselves."