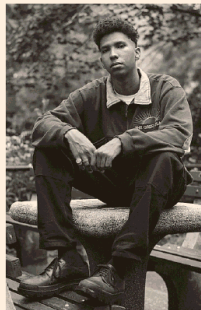


Arts Life&Arts

Visions of an American utopia

Tyler Mitchell | The photographer and filmmaker talks to *Enuma Okoro* about looking to the past and future in his first solo US gallery exhibition



Clockwise from above: the photographer Tyler Mitchell in New York; 'Impact' (2021); 'Nap' (2021); 'Connective Tissue' (2021)

Miranda Barnes/The New York Times/RedUX/Eyewire; Tyler Mitchell/Black Shainman Gallery

The young man walks through the arched opening of the café in West Chelsea, and glances about. He's tall and elegantly lean, wearing Bode designer shorts with an exquisitely crafted navy-blue boxy Bode button-down shirt with white zigzag lines. He could easily be a model, instead of the one usually behind the camera.

He catches my eye and a huge genuine smile spills over his youthful face. There's a sweet familiarity about the 26-year-old photographer and filmmaker Tyler Mitchell that catches you off guard.

We are meeting for tea right around the corner from the 20th Street Jack Shainman Gallery, where Mitchell's first US solo gallery exhibition, *Dreaming in Real Time*, will open in September. It's a show with some 20 photographs focusing on visual storytelling in a series of tableaux featuring family and friends in his home state of Georgia. A collection of older work, *I Can Make You Feel Good*, will be on exhibition simultaneously at the 24th Street gallery location.

The new exhibition marks a shift from the fashion and editorial work that has made Mitchell a recognisable name. It's just one of several pivotal moments in the past three years. In 2018, at 23, Mitchell shot Beyoncé for *US Vogue's* September issue, the first black photographer to shoot a cover in the magazine's 128-year history.

From that rocket launch, his career has included other magazine covers, fashion photography for top designers, and portraits of public figures, including the newly elected vice-president Kamala Harris, for another *Vogue* cover. He is also a 2020 recipient of the Gordon Parks Foundation fellowship.

Yet there's an aura of carefree



humility and gentleness around him, attentive and observing, and picking up what he aligns with as he encounters life. And in his conversation, there's a quiet wisdom that belies his age.

"After all that was happening with that huge [Vogue cover] shift in my life [came the recognition] that it was more exposure but it wasn't a huge shift in terms of the work I wanted to make. There's a continuum and continuity. The assignments I took afterwards were about staying true to what my work was about."

The work in the upcoming exhibition – evocative photography of black men, women and children at leisure in a calm, stress-free existence – is magical. It haunts you with the ghosts of things that feel familiar; you recognise a sentiment, a mood, a feeling that has the potential to transport you easily to one of your own narratives, real or hoped for.

Part of this comes from Mitchell's awareness of the relationship between photographer and subject. Far from the dictatorial relationship many fashion photographers have with their models, collaboration is part of his working ethos. He allows people to show up in front of the camera in the expansiveness of their full selves, opening the possibility for good accidents, magic moments. Mitchell's models and subjects are sometimes cast but largely pooled from a network of family, friends and people he meets on social media.

"These images in the new show are to elicit relaxation, repose and reprieve from what we've seen and experienced over the past year," he says. "I wanted to show a multiplicity of fun, of different sorts of leisure, families, groupings of black life in one frame."

Mitchell, who grew up in a middle-class family in Marietta, a suburb of Atlanta, recounts how his love of images came through his father's enthusiasm for movies, giving him an early exposure to "classic style storytelling, films by Hitchcock and old murder mysteries". For Mitchell, it was his interest in skateboarding that propelled him into making films himself. The sport was seen as unconventional in the Southern

communities of which he was part, but Mitchell, raised on Tumblr, discovered the skateboarding counterculture he needed online.

"I really got into it, and it was such a portal into filmmaking and photography, because there's a whole art form around skateboarding and filmmaking," he says. "There's a whole style and way of editing. I started to become obsessed with filming my friends. I followed the yellow brick road from there, and knew I wanted to pursue this as more than just with skating, as a filmmaker and image-maker."

Mitchell was accepted into the film programme at New York University. His first DSLR camera had both a video and a photo mode, so he was already thinking about film and photography as interchangeable media for him.

"I was in the film programme, but I was starting to get small commissions with magazines like the *Fader* and *Wonderland*, to photograph musicians. I found it so intriguing, because I could really speak to culture a lot quicker and collaborate with people that interested me, be it in music or fashion or politics or whatever, through photographing them."

It was on an NYU documentary photography trip to Cuba that Mitchell really dove into the art form. Taking candid photos of the skating culture in Cuba was the first time, he says, he really felt he could be a photographer.

The pictures in his upcoming exhibition are part of the same continuum. They frame communities that hold a commitment to foster and relish the freedom of expansive celebratory public life for black people. In the past, Mitchell has spoken of creating "visual utopias" of black life; now, he says, "the impulse was showing a mixture of black joy and repose in public space in one frame, but also how black people can also command a certain vastness of landscape – while at the same time being cognisant of certain spatial, historical and political realities."

"I hope to create a reference to the past, to the land we've lived on over generations, but also into the future, asking



"I hope to create a reference to the past . . . but also into the future, asking what that could look like"

what that could look like, for black people to re-command this space and re-habit it in a new way."

In one powerful and provocative image, "Georgia Hillside (Redlining)", Mitchell recreates the discriminatory practice of redlining zones in cities and towns based on racial or ethnic make-up, overpainting the landscape to section off more areas for black people to enjoy leisure time. A couple enjoys a picnic, a young woman in a flowy yellow dress lies on her back gazing up dreamily at the sky. A young man flies a kite in the distance. Ordinary, childlike activities such as hula-hooping and kite flying appear repeatedly in Mitchell's oeuvre, making an immediate connection with viewers.

"It's not just specifically about hula-hooping or flying a kite," he says. "It's also about where these images can transport you after viewing them." In "Nap", Mitchell photographs a couple lying on a blanket on the grass, only showing us a portion of their intertwined legs. The boy is wearing jeans and penny loafers, and the young girl's bare calves extend to ankles in white socks, her feet in 1950s classic black and

white saddle Oxfords. It suggests a nostalgic story of young playful love between teenagers who have nothing to fear if caught in public spaces; a very different narrative from what was likely for black youth in the Jim Crow era.

Such celebratory stories of black bodies, replete with intimate moments, continue with the beautiful close-up of "Connective Tissue", a young father lying bare-chested on his back in sand dunes with his toddler son cradled on his stomach, the child open-mouthed and filled with joy.

Mitchell articulates why a gallery exhibition is important to him. A new way of thinking about his work was catalysed by a 2019 show at the Foam Museum in Amsterdam, which travelled to the International Center for Photography in New York in 2020.

"The spaces that did inspire me, which were really the internet, screens, Tumblr and YouTube videos, provide an energy I want to bring into the gallery space," he says. "I've learned to look at the white cube space as another venue to practise ideas instead of as a daunting formal space where I had to follow certain rules."

"When I ask him what he thinks the "new black aesthetic" is, which he has referenced in the past, he replies with a mix of humility, genuine curiosity and quiet confidence. "Who knows? I find it always evolving. Rather, I find my work [in relation to it] always evolving. The beautiful thing about the multiplicity of black artistic production is that there is no way to pin it down into a singular thing. My voice is one contribution to the amazing conversation and cultural consciousness happening right now."

His pictures are evocative, soft, vulnerable and confident. A viewer can look and be enlarged and blessed by them. It is as though Mitchell makes his way through the world capturing playful but powerful images like fireflies in a jar, glimmering with light, and offering his jars up for us to make our way towards another future.

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