### I Can Make You Feel Good

- I often think about what White fun looks like and this notion that Black people can't have the same. Growing up with Tumblr I would often come across images of sensual, young, attractive White models running around being free and having so much fun—the kind of stuff Larry Clark and Ryan McGinley would make. I seldom saw the same for Black people in images—or at least in the photography I knew. My work comes from a place of wanting to push back against this lack. I feel an urgency to create a body of images where Black people are visualized as free, expressive, effortless, and sensitive.
- I aim to visualize what a Black utopia looks like or could look like. People say utopia is never achievable but I love photography's possibility of allowing me to dream and make that dream become very real.
- In my work I use the tools of documentary reportage, portraiture, fashion photography, art photography, and filmmaking. I view fashion as a space and opportunity to have clothes enhance my message about the Black body. I make very little distinction between my commissioned and my personal works, using them both as an opportunity to create this utopian universe—whether that's photographing Beyoncé, Spike Lee, skaters in Cuba, or my very close friends.
- Documented and real, or fictitious and staged, my images are characterized by an interest in purity and intimacy. In them, models recline, embrace each other closely, and peer into the lens, leaving evidence of a public display of affirmation in Blackness and a unifying visual text of hope. I also occasionally weave symbols into my portraits such as water guns and plastic resin chains—symbols of repression as a subtle reminder of the ways in which the Black body is still politicized, and sometimes unable to move through the real world as freely as I would like.
- I Can Make You Feel Good is simply a declaration. And one that I feel is gut-punching in its optimism. It feels important at a time like this to declare such a thing.

# The Exhibition as Idyllic Space

It is the picture of life contrasted with the fact of life, the ideal contrasted with the real, which makes criticism possible. Where there is no criticism there is no progress, for the want of progress is not felt where such want is not made visible by criticism. It is by looking upon this picture and upon that which enables us to point out the defects of the one and the perfections of the other.

- Frederick Douglass, "Pictures and Progress," 1864-65

I Can Make You Feel Good is the promise filmmaker and photographer Tyler Mitchell made to the audience with his first exhibition survey, presented at Foam Photography Museum Amsterdam in April 2019. Whoever accepts his invitation, then or now, or with this book, enters a candy-colored visual realm in which young Black people appear in the lightness of nature, or in front of idyllic studio backdrops, looking free, expressive, effortless, sensitive, and proud.

The photographs by Tyler Mitchell might as well have been long encountered already by the audience, in numerous fashion magazines, campaigns, or on social media. Displayed on a gallery wall, however, the same image is and isn't the same. Shifting to monumental scale, the photographs in *I Can Make You Feel Good* have left not only their original context of the manageable page but also the shoots and series they have been part of. Now viewed as single images, these photographs become like paintings. Proud portraits are interspersed with what seem grand historical scenes. Roaming this picture gallery, two young men—twins in fact—in rather harlequinesque

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outfits gaze melancholically at us, as if tired from their act. In another photograph, a girl licks a pink flower, as if trying to taste its color and scent. A portrait offers us a proud-looking young man wearing a pink suit with black buttons, with a purple scarf artistically wrapped around his neck. A hat, like a nightblue halo, encircles his head. He looks like a distinguished painter, and it is as if he himself just finished the idyllic, painterly backdrop of his own picture. Next, we look up to a woman and a man dressed in orange safety clothing, carrying their twin babies in their arms. Behind them, a frayed American flag flutters in the breeze of night, as if a depiction of victory after battle. Another scene shows a row of boys from behind, standing shoulder to shoulder, bare-chested. All dressed only in jeans, one of the boys also wears a heavy silver chain necklace around his neck. He has turned toward us, but seemingly unaware of our gaze; instead he looks down to the belt of his jeans that he is tightening. If not history paintings, these grand tableaus do refer to histories engraved in the Black consciousness. Taking the implications in these life-size encounters into consideration, one starts to wonder who the artist's promise of the exhibition title is really addressed to. Central to the exhibition is a table. It is a mood board, demonstrat-

ing a visual culture of Black representation, throughout history and the history of art. It expresses the artist's work process—this is how he feeds himself with inspiration in preparation for his fashion shoots and series—as well as the historical lineage his work draws from. Tyler Mitchell does not act alone. These pictures have been among us all the time: from the black-and-white photographs of Earlie Hudnall, Jr. to those of Dana Lixenberg, the documentary work of Gordon Parks, and from a photograph from a fashion shoot by Harley Weir for Grace Wales Bonner to the reproduction of a painting by Kerry James Marshall. One portrait particularly stands out. It shows the distinct face of the most photographed man of nineteenth-century America: Frederick Douglass. Remembered as one of the foremost abolitionists, and the preeminent Black leader of his century, Douglass ultimately understood photography as

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a powerful tool to rewrite racial prejudices in the United States. Very conscious of his pose, dress, and expression, with each portrait he presented America yet another image of Blackness that contradicted the prevailing racist stereotypes.<sup>1</sup>

Entering another room, the viewer becomes either trapped or safeguarded by a high picket fence—depending on the emotional impact this allegory has on you. In this video installation called Idyllic Space, we are invited to recline in the grass, and to look up to a sky in which hypnotic depictions are projected of young Black people eating ice cream, bicycling in endless circles, playing tag...The next room breaks the spell, however. In the video installation Chasing Pink, Found Red, the camera pans over a group of young Black people relaxing in a park on a warm summer day. What makes us drop out of the dream are voices reaching us from the corners of this room, voices expressing their experiences with racism, and how the idyllic moments that make up these video works have in fact been historically denied or discouraged among Black people. As Frederick Douglass wrote, from picture to picture what we are confronted with here is the depiction of life contrasted with the fact of life. Woven into Mitchell's work is a quiet but direct reference to the 2014 killing of Tamir Rice—a twelve-year-old boy who was shot by Cleveland police while playing outside with a toy pellet gun. A running thread through this display of works is the psyche of Black youth, that they should be careful about being too off guard in public for fear of persecution and even violence. The commentary we hear, crowdsourced by Mitchell from his followers on social media, is the critical undertone of reality echoing through this idyllic space. Are the delicate sleepers on their picnic blankets in Chasing Pink, Found Red, in fact, dead?

Tyler Mitchell describes his work as a "Black utopia." But to think of it as utopian is to understand his work as an unrealistic ideal. In his "Lecture on Pictures" (1861), Frederick Douglass stated that "man warms, glows, and expands only where [he] sees himself asserted broadly and truly." Roaming Mitchell's exhibition is to comprehend what has remained either largely

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overlooked or simply underrepresented: a demonstrably carefree, sensitive, intimate, and proud representation of people of color. His photographs are not invented—his models are real people, posing as themselves. Mitchell finds the people he casts in his pictures in the streets or through his social media, creating imagery with young men and women from daily life. What Mitchell essentially does is amplify the beauty and innocence that is already theirs.

Essential to art's subject is its audience. We can only start to understand the invitation engrained in his photographs—the *I* reaching for the *you*—after we have begun to know ourselves, artworks serving to that end. It is not a utopia Tyler Mitchell brings to life, but the revelation of an unseen piece of reality as it really is, broadly and more truly then we have ever seen it in pictures before.

 Mirjam Kooiman, Curator at Foam Photography Museum Amsterdam

<sup>1</sup> See Abigail Cain, "How Frederick Douglass Harnessed the Power of Portraiture to Reframe Blackness in America," *Artsy*, February 2, 2017, https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-frederick-douglass-photographed-american-19th-century.

#### A Marvelous Mundane

I aim to visualize what a Black utopia looks like or could look like. People say utopia is never achievable but I love photography's possibility of allowing me to dream and make that dream become very real.

Tyler Mitchell

Imagine a world—a tableau of visual landscapes—filled with play, leisure, delight, and wonder. We are invited into simple scenes of the everyday mundane in which people are shown as just being: standing there, leaning here, smiling, touching one another, or gazing upward at the sun. To consistently compose and frame this utopic vision lies at the core of artist Tyler Mitchell's conceptual ethos. His vision centers on the creation of a carefree world, a glorious Eden of sorts, and then populates this realm with Black bodies, that are simply being—there within the filmic or picture frame both at rest and in motion. While on the surface Mitchell's images exude a seemingly straightforward tranquility and blissfulness, the artist reveals a multimedia world of images, sounds, and spatial delineations, created on and through one another in order to posit ideas of what a Black utopia is or could be.1

Throughout the history of our imaging, this sense of limitless possibility is all too unique. It is something that is rarely represented with Black people as its protagonists. So often we are seen struggling, striving, pained, defeated, and surviving. While these states of being reflect aspects of our realities and experiences, Mitchell's work offers us another necessarily human dimension—a critical prospect in which to envision

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ourselves. His compositions are considered, complex, and multilayered, yet tightly framed and always intentional. They are comprised of very specific symbols, signs, and motifs. In one of his photographs, we see a young woman in a royal blue swimsuit seated at the beach on a sunny day. Half of her body rests in shadows and her sand-covered back faces us. Mitchell does not reveal her face but we imagine her expression and the day she has had, rolling in the sand, playing with friends, then resting and gazing up at the sky. Here, the artist draws on pose, gesture, form, color, light, shadow, texture, and contrast to build the scene and to constitute and set forth a series of Black cultural meanings around utopia, joy, and harmony in relationship to the Black body. The emotive quality of this photograph is undeniably there before us, and yet the artist also leaves it up to us as viewers to do the dreaming; to envision how this young woman's day has unfolded, and what has brought about her happiness.

This image hangs in conversation with others in Mitchell's New York City debut exhibition, I Can Make You Feel Good, at the International Center of Photography (ICP), that he and I organized together around his desire to literally and physically build a universe in which people experience, explore, and imagine the Black joy that can be found in the everyday mundane. And yes, Mitchell's work proclaims, there is such a thing as "Black joy." It is real and felt by so many of us. He wants all of us to feel it as we enter the gallery space. He wants us to see it when we are greeted by the image of a young man in a white T-shirt peering our from behind a light yellow sheet, which he raises up effortlessly with his hand. It is a sunny day and there are trees and blue sky behind him. His look is curious yet confident. On his shirt are the words "raise hell," the tone of which stands in stark contrast to the bucolic feeling of the image. But this is Mitchell's ever so subtle and subversive way of letting us know that this young Black man is here with both his calm demeanor as well as his power and intention. He will not be denied. We cannot deny him.

#### A Marvelous Mundane

Tyler Mitchell's gallery of two-dimensional photographs is flanked by two video installations, *Idyllic Space* and *Chasing Pink*, *Found Red* (both 2019), that are positioned on either side of his photographs as a means of creating a fluid conversation and greater context between all of his works on view. His photographs in some ways serve as an index to the poetic and lyrical narrative of his moving images. They introduce and mark specific people, moments, and sentiments that we later experience when visiting the video spaces. Together, Mitchell's images, both still and moving, take us on a journey through the marvelous mundane. And throughout the exhibition, Mitchell wants us to really look and feel along with him in his creation and presentation process. He wants us to feel free. And he wants—he hopes—to make each and every one of us... feel good.

Isolde Brielmaier























