

## THIS IS NOT AN EXIT

Fionn Meade on Christopher Wool in New York



"Christopher Wool: See Stop Run," New York, 2024

The congested cityscape of downtown Manhattan and occasional vistas of the Hudson River, framed by badly insulated windows, complement Christopher Wool's work in "See Stop Run." For his exhibition, the artist rented a vacant 19th-floor office space on the corner of Greenwich and Rector Street, in a beaux arts building that initially housed the United States Express Company, to deliver his biggest show since a Guggenheim retrospective in 2013. In his review, Fionn Meade connects Wool's exhibited brushstroke paintings and scribble-like sculptures to the dilapidated space and the graffiti left by construction workers, which act as a fitting decor to the artist's procedural abstraction.

From title to setting, there is plenty of provocation and prompting in Christopher Wool's "See Stop Run," a quasi-survey exhibition of work made over the past decade that extends from paintings and photo series to recent sculpture, artists' books, and even a large-scale mosaic crafted in collaboration with Italian fabricators from stone and handmade glass. Composed of roughly 75 works, installed across the rough-hewn yet panoramic expanse of an unoccupied 19th-floor office space just off Wall Street, at the southern tip of Manhattan, the project is novel for its conjuring trick of epic proportions, even as it has the feeling of an odd heist, or world-turned-upside-down effect. The buzz regarding

location that precedes any visit is part of the strategy, as the show is independently produced and organized by Wool in collaboration with Belgian curator Anne Pontégnie. Up for more than four months, it is motivated by a stated "desire to escape the neutrality of contemporary art spaces, galleries, and institutions" and, according to the project's website, acts as a framework chosen by the artist as "an independent venue in order to escape the presumed neutrality of the 'white cube' as an idealized context."<sup>1</sup>

These location notes are an apparently effective preamble, and the resulting fanfare includes numerous press previews and profiles on the website touting the show's DIY aesthetic and underscoring that none of the works are for sale and how the aim is for Wool to take back the context of his work. Presumably this positioning means the renowned artist is here wresting an authentic vitality from the sapping neutrality of the aforementioned platforms of success and authoring a late-career reboot, or jag toward experimentation, or something like that. And yet an initial caveat is unavoidable, since the vast majority of the work was prepared for, partially produced, and previously shown in Wool's inaugural solo show with Xavier Hufkens gallery in Brussels in 2022, his largest commercial show in Europe to date. Unfolding over four pristine floors, it opened a large-scale architectural expansion at one of the gallery's primary locations. Also organized with Pontégnie as guest curator, the Hufkens show fits squarely within the institutional heft increasingly expected and delivered by upper-echelon galleries, providing exactly the idealized *mise-en-scène* now to be outrun. In other words, while "See Stop Run" is full of intrigue and great work, most of it has been and

will be back in the top commercial saddles again, making the repeated emphasis on "escape" and the resulting transposition of work to its current airy perch in the Financial District all the more engaging and curious.

Playing off recall to the wry poetics of Wool's famed word paintings of the late 1980s and early '90s – works that first brought him international attention and circulation – the short list of imperatives, "See Stop Run," acts like a directive for the entire endeavor: there is a plethora of work to see, the views and backdrop in the show are truly arresting, even show-stopping, and there is a seeking energy to the overall that jostles but also evades at every turn. Reached by an exclusive elevator ride up through a 1907 beaux arts building across from Trinity Church, there is no incidental wandering in. A hired greeter meets you in the lobby, before the zoom up suddenly opens onto an everything all at once: a vertiginous impact of space, materiality, and association, all on overdrive.

There's an immediate double-take thrill to the whole thing that answers any questions as to why here: unencumbered vistas loom over New York's harbor and some of the oldest buildings in the city, including Trinity's spire poking up amid the competing mix-and-match of skyscraper aesthetics from different eras. This is precisely the Manhattan architectural "frontier in the sky" Rem Koolhaas aptly labeled delirious and phantom in its compression and erasure of time and style.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, the U-shaped sweep of the floor reveals itself straight away as one left on pause, in mid-demo mode, waylaid by the pandemic, a place out of time, awaiting a renovation that hasn't arrived. A little research reveals this previously housed the offices for architect Daniel





Christopher Wool, "Untitled," 2021

Libeskind's firm, initially leased during work on the "master plan" for rebuilding the World Trade Center site, which is around the corner. The location is now part of a cold inventory waiting for the top of the market to heat back up, and the pause effect speaks to the dystopic cracks in Manhattan's speculative commercial real estate horizon. The space has been cleaned up to just the right off-kilter by Wool and his team: construction wires still dangle, cement floors trip and patch, walls are pockmarked, partitions stripped to the studs, and Wool's work is

everywhere in mimetic rhyme across more than 18,000 square feet.

Framed oil and inkjet-on-paper paintings lasso, whorl, and loop in pink, red, black, gray, and white layerings, placed in direct dialogue with plaster construction blobs dotting the space. They seem to carom off the tangled forms of Wool's wire sculptures of various sizes, some on pedestals, others hanging, and one placed most effectively on the floor. Put in concert with exposed wiring and extension cords, all are enlivened if made more literal. Likewise, an untitled

2020 series of blotchy paper paintings bob quickly along through iterations while gestural oil-stick curls and tubed-on smears over cephalic black monotype forms pose almost comically, as if trying on wigs or makeup, disguises for a future elaboration or pantomime. Even with echoes of Philip Guston's transitional works of 1965, his so-called dark paintings – where emergent black head shapes and bits of color sift through and hover over veils of gray patchwork – Wool's paper paintings are actually fun and portend something perhaps even freer and weirder yet to come. It is, however, the large-scale paintings and photographs – the artist's long-standing calling cards – that animate the stakes at play in Wool's run to and from his own maneuvers.

The faint seams that appear in the silkscreen-on-linen paintings on view indicate a layering process whereby blown-up details from previous works join in printed quadrants to create amoeba-like growths larger than doorframes, dark menace to be interrupted and partially occluded. Remixed from a series of monotypes done in the '80s that bring to mind Rorschach inkblots, the stain forms reveal their halftone dot-matrix structure as you come close, metastasized like lingering afterimages or peripheral incursions that now come to rest in the foreground. Seen here, the paintings beckon like the sucking pull of unwelcome portals, or under-the-microscope crawls of algae bloom or rot writ large, caught in mid-expansion and takeover. A sense of float and luminous viscosity. High up above the Financial District, however, in natural light, the paintings barely squeeze in between windows, amping up a reading of cavities, depressions, and torn holes amid an atmosphere of aftermath or impending fallout. For this is the gesture and metaphor on

which the hang of "See Stop Run" pivots, a feeling that the whole floor and perhaps the city itself is perforated, atomized, and dangling in peril.

The push and pull of these paintings provides a vortex that underscores the mood of fugitive and trespass space throughout, immediate in the construction lingo "OUT" that crops up spray-painted with arrows to indicate the removal of walls and supports. And the masculine liminality of the jobsite is further charged the more you look around and encounter graffiti left by workers, including a number of red and orange spray-painted erections and occasional phrases like "BLECH," "Pussies Everywhere," and "Jimmy Fuckin" left here and there, as well as discrete tags of the "LOCAL 94" and "Freedom Electric" work crews that ostensibly came to transition the guts of the space until work orders came to a stop. A number of these messages appear directly alongside paintings, situated like captions to an alternate reading of the show that only glimmers. As much as a spectral sense of history and phantom politics appears to gather outside – eras built and passed over, partially erased and replaced – it is this offset tension of interim demolition and dereliction that lends the show its deepest resonance. The incidental residue of desire on a worksite interior becomes a fitting decor to the constant buildup and erasure integral to Wool's procedural abstraction, echoed in the phrases "STAY NO" and the occasional "STAY" sprayed out vertically on exposed pipes.

The wormhole effect dilates over to Wool's photo series *Road* (2018), 18 low-angled black-and-white images of dirt roads trailing off through the squat scrubland of West Texas, where Wool spends much of the year. Harsh and dry nowhere beauty feels alive snaking through the splayed



"Christopher Wool: See Stop Run," New York, 2024

skyscraper. Taken together with *Westtexaspsychosculpture* (2018), another series of 18 photos, the images bring an unpeopled key to Wool's acute attention "out there" in another America, far from Wall Street. Shot in and around the town of Marfa, where he has a home and studio, the "psychosculpture" pictured runs from discarded to happenstance: cinder blocks prop up a precarious dwelling, worn-through tires and an ambulance gurney are tossed out together, massive water containers lie dry on their sides, a bird is perched atop a mountain of used shipping pallets, a motor boat is marooned and abandoned in the dust and sun, makeshift plywood stairwells press against the back of a building, and the forlorn comedy of

a huge tumbleweed comes to rest in a muddy side street during a rain squall.

Not unlike Martin Kippenberger's photobook *Psychobuildings* (1988), from which it draws inspiration, *Westtexaspsychosculpture* feels like it wants to approach social commentary, or reflect on the inverse of what is pictured, to say something about haywire capitalism itself, only to retreat instead into mostly formal, poetic observations and a prodding title. While the German artist's photos rifle through ad hoc city scenes and front-yard accumulations stumbled upon during his time spent in Spain and Brazil in the company of fellow painter Albert Oehlen at the end of the Cold War era – architectural facade details, lampposts,

balconies, botched and aborted cement supports to who knows what, stairwells, and a range of arrow signs – Wool perambulates alone, and the resulting daylight images are by turns mesmeric, stolen, and deadpan. In thinking through, by association, Kippenberger's cagey play at being a kind of artist cipher for painting, masculinity, and speculation, marauding as he did through operations of inversion, self-cancellation, privilege and its evacuation – a messy effort to underscore the negation inherent in style and position-taking itself – one finds it hard not to wonder at the ellipsis of resistance offered by Wool in the face of an ever-advancing hem of capital and market.

In a lengthy *New York Times* profile ahead of the Brussels show, Wool acknowledged as much glancingly, noting how repeat secondary-market auction sales in the past decade – reaching well over \$20 million for signature word paintings from the late '80s and early '90s – had impacted the reception of the work: "It sometimes feels not only like you're in a car that you're not driving. It feels as if you're tied up in the back of the car and no one is even telling you where you're going."<sup>3</sup> But it's exactly that reception that stubbornly lingers, making the show feel like a missed opportunity to take on such inescapable perception more directly. In fact, Wool's inclusion of a few select older works, specifically two spray gun paintings on enamel, *(Not so) Loose Booty* (1995) and *Untitled* (1994) from the period just after Wool stopped making word paintings, makes things all the more evasive. While relevant to the transition Wool was then making to erasure, overlay, and undoing, the favoring of mimetic abstraction here refuses to directly address the socioeconomic fault lines of the overall gesture and its critical inklings. Nodding to a phrase used repeatedly in his text

paintings, *RUN DOG RUN*, the show tips instead toward self-referential and hermetic.

"Christopher Wool: See Stop Run," 101 Greenwich St., New York, opened March 14, 2024

#### Notes

- 1 The website for "See Stop Run" includes a show description and Folder of press releases and related texts, including Pontégnie's essay. Available at [www.seestopr.com](http://www.seestopr.com).
- 2 Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: Monacelli, 1994).
- 3 Randy Kennedy, "Christopher Wool on What Brought a 'Sunday Painter' Back to Life," *New York Times*, May 30, 2022. Under a different byline, "See Stop Run" also received a lengthy *Times* profile soon after opening, which makes no mention of the Brussels context or previous feature on the same body of work.



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