

TWO COATS OF PAINT

Award-winning blogazine, primarily about painting

Christopher Wool's Winning Gambit

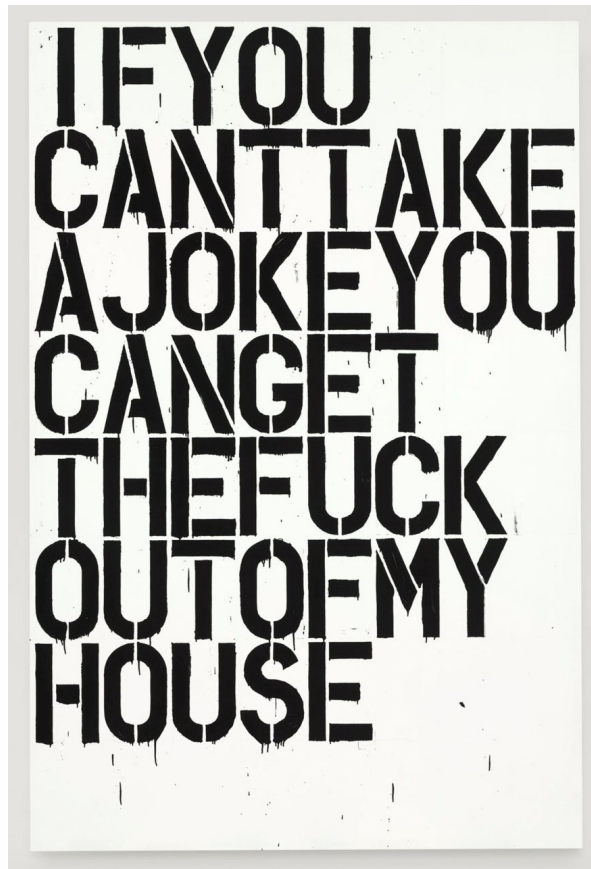
SOLO SHOWS March 20, 2024 7:24 am Contributed by Adam Simon



101 Greenwich Street: Christopher Wool, See Stop Run, 2024, Installation View

I've known **Christopher Wool** for a long time, since we were both teenage students at the New York Studio School in the 1970s. **Philip Guston** made annual visits and I remember his indignation at being asked to look at Christopher's work. I believe he said that Wool's all-over paintings should have been shown to someone like **Larry Poons**, not to him. In retrospect, Guston's dismay seems to have been prescient and a little ironic. Wool's breakout text paintings in the 1980s produced a similar response among painters as Guston's cartoonish figure paintings had a decade earlier. Both overturned current orthodoxies.

Throughout his career, Wool has made the painterly interesting by bringing it through the back door, like an uninvited guest. Using rollers, stencils, silk screen, spray paint and appropriated text, he has continually surprised viewers with his ability to make the seemingly offhand visually compelling. While the text paintings registered for some as iconic emotional outbursts (“IF YOU CAN’T TAKE A JOKE, YOU CAN GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY HOUSE”), the emphasis was equally on materiality, just as it had been with earlier work that used pattern-making rollers, which slumlords favored to paint over shoddy plastering jobs. Both series employed wet-on-wet enamel paint. Wool seemed to be seeing how far he could stray from traditional painting without losing the essential juice. He was pushing the parameters in a way that felt knowledgeable, as exploration rather than wholesale disregard or rejection. The text paintings were pictorial in a way that those of **Jenny Holzer**, **Joseph Kosuth**, **Barbara Kruger**, or **Les Levine** never were.



Christopher Wool, If You, 1992, enamel on aluminum, 108 x 72 inches

For the next four and a half months, Wool will be exhibiting a survey of work from the last three decades on the 19th floor of an office building at 101 Greenwich Street in Manhattan’s financial district, titled “See Stop Run”. It’s an audacious idea, made possible in part by the glut of unrented commercial space in the aftermath of the pandemic and by so many people working remotely. The show combines painting, photography, and sculpture. There are no text paintings, which Wool has said he considers an aberration. Since the early 1990s, his work has been primarily abstract and gestural. He presents several large-scale paintings, created using silkscreens and scaled up from smaller oil and inkjet paintings that hang in proximity to the larger works.



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The site is clearly between tenants, with exploratory holes in the walls, scrawled graffiti probably left by workmen, and exposed wiring. It's the kind of raw space that once was readily available and affordable for artists to rent in NYC. Natural light fills the space through multiple windows on all four sides. It is startling just how in sync this setting is with the art on display. Wool's work has always referenced the elemental: drawing as scrawl, painting as spill, sculpture as jumbled metal. Everywhere you look the art echoes the dereliction of the space, such that space and work uncannily merge. Even while focusing on a single piece, you are aware of the exhibition in its entirety.

Some of the sculpture consists of ready-mades – found balls of tangled fencing or baling wire from around his home in Marfa, Texas. Other sculptures appear to be found but are not, or not entirely. Still others are bronze castings from wire or steel cable. Whether they are fashioned or simply discovered feels unimportant in the larger context of the show, which facilitates an open-ended dialogue between the made and the found, the spontaneous and the mechanical, the remarkable and the ordinary. The wire tangles do the work of traditional sculpture: looping arabesques sitting on pedestals, the pedestals striking an interestingly discordant note in an untraditional setting.



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The silkscreen paintings evoke automatism but have been tweaked in Photoshop. A piece from 2023 may be the first expressionistic mosaic I have seen, as roughhewn as anything else in the show. I was struck by how the photography informs the rest of the exhibition. There are some examples from the series “Incident on Ninth Street” from 1997, documenting the aftermath of a fire in Wool’s studio in Manhattan, and a 2018 series centering on dirt roads around Marfa. Both series feature location devoid of people. The Ninth Street photos amplify the gutted character of the setting for this exhibition, while the Marfa photos evoke a sense of aloneness amid nature, the roads resembling drawn gestures that enter and shape an existing landscape of dirt, trees, shrubs and sky.

This exhibition is a gambit of sorts. It presses the question of how much Wool’s artwork – in its embrace of the offhand, the gestural, and the incidental – has been informed by contrast with the preciousness of the white cube and calibrated lighting. The gallery context may have imbued the work with elegance that belies the roughness of its affect. My own feeling is that the gambit pays off. Whatever is lost in terms of acquired elegance is offset by a feeling of reclamation. Situating the art within the unfinished architecture feels corrective, asserting the primacy of the work’s origins over its subsequent role as luxury object. I can imagine this show as a nuanced tourist attraction, seen as an eccentric repurposing of unrented architecture removed from the intimidating settings of galleries – and a psychic return to the last time there was a glut of unoccupied commercial space in New York City, the 1970s.



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