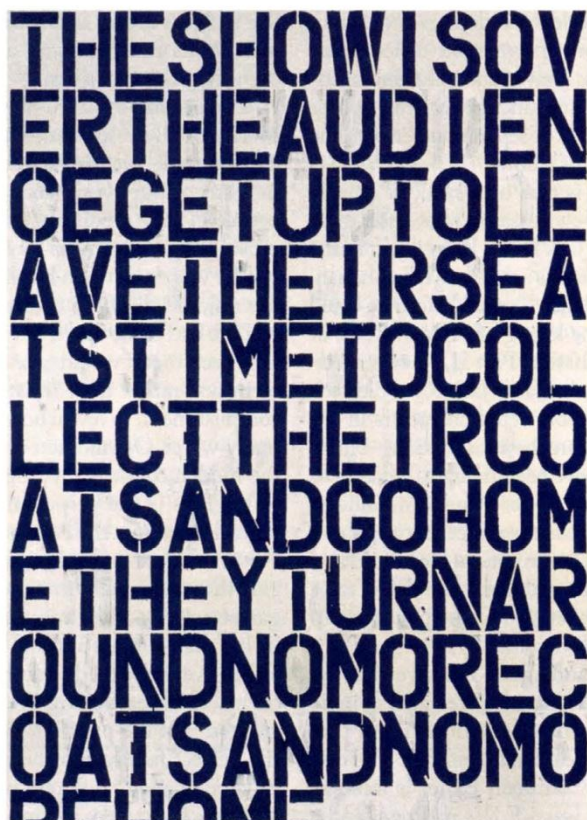


THE ART WORLD

WRITING ON THE WALL

A Christopher Wool retrospective.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL



Like it or not, Christopher Wool, now fifty-eight, is probably the most important American painter of his generation. You might fondly wish, as I do, for a champion whose art is richer in beauty and in charm: Wool's work consists primarily of dour, black-and-white pictures of stenciled words, in enamel, usually on aluminum panels; decorative patterns made with incised rollers; and abstract, variously piquant messes, involving spray paint and silk screens. Let's get over it. A dramatic retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum confirms, besides the downbeat air, the force and the intelligence of a career that, according to legend, caught fire in 1987, after Wool saw

the words "sex" and "luv" spray-painted in black on a white delivery truck. His stencilled repetition of those words, on paper, is among the earliest works in the new show. A cutely vandalized truck would seem a pretty humble epiphany, as epiphanies go, but it inspired a way of painting that quietly gained authority, while more ingratiating styles rose and fell in art-world esteem. If you are put off by the harshness of Wool's rigor, as I was, it means that you aren't ready to confess that our time admits, and merits, nothing cozier in an art besieged by the aesthetic advances, as well as the technical advances, of photographic and digital mediums. Once you stop resisting the gloomy mien

of Wool's work, it feels authentic, bracing, and even, on occasion, blissful.

Wool was born in Boston, to a molecular-biologist father and a psychiatrist mother, and grew up in Chicago, enthralled by art. In 1972, he entered Sarah Lawrence College, where he won permission to take two exacting studio courses, in painting and photography, promising that he would buckle down to required courses the next year. Instead, he dropped out, moved to Manhattan, and enrolled in the New York Studio School, the diehard academy of Abstract Expressionist technique and style. That training served him well. In a fine catalogue essay, Katherine Brinson, the curator of the Guggenheim show, notes a standard emphasis of Studio School instruction: the rendering of forms in charcoal by partial erasure. (Wool's later paintings do wonders with passages that are thinned, rubbed, over-painted, or wiped away.) Meanwhile, he plunged into the emerging East Village scene of punk rock, underground film, gallery graffiti, performance art, and up-all-night dissipation, as immortalized in the photographs of Nan Goldin. His friends and sometime collaborators included the painter James Nares, the writer Glenn O'Brien, and the poet-rocker Richard Hell. Wool briefly studied filmmaking at New York University, but by 1981 he had settled into painting, at first producing gawky abstract shapes that were influenced by the sculptor Joel Shapiro, who employed him as an assistant.

The efflorescence in downtown art was racked with schisms. Hot neo-expressionist painters like Julian Schnabel and Jean-Michel Basquiat went one way, feeding a vogue that became a market frenzy; and cool "Pictures" conceptualists, including Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince, went another. Money that instantly favored the former eventually got around to the latter. It can't have been clear at the time that Wool's middle way, of earnest painterly invention, which was anything but seductive, would triumph. Several other gifted painters—among them Peter Halley, David Reed, and Jonathan Lasker—gained success with conceptually alert abstract styles. Those artists now seem a bit dated. Wool doesn't. His works ace the crude test that passes for critical judgment in the art market: they look impeccable on walls today and are almost certain to look

"Untitled" (1990-91). Word painting has a history; Wool made it new.

impeccable on walls tomorrow. Lately fetching millions at auction, Wool's art leaves critics to sift through the hows and the whys of a singular convergence of price and value. Would that the expensive were always so good.

Renunciation benefitted Wool. He did not use color, or expressive gesture; their meanings could not be controlled. Nor did he indulge, as his friends Robert Gober, Richard Prince, and Jeff Koons did, in the easy ironies of adopting themes and images from mass culture. (Koons wrote the press release for Wool's solo show, in 1986, at the short-lived Cable Gallery; he keenly observed that "Wool's work contains continual internal/external debate within itself.") Wool liked the *éclat* of Pop-influenced art, but not its borrowed subject matter. Around the time of his delivery-truck eureka, he hit on a witty means of grounding high art in the everyday: the incised paint rollers once commonly used by slumlords to give tenement halls and stairwells the appearance of having been wallpapered. The tall paintings that resulted—floral or grille-like patterns, with skips and smears suggesting haste—have just about everything you could want of an all-over abstraction, plus the humor of their absurd efficiency. Can painting be so simple? It can for an artist who has despaired of every alternative. The expedient of the rollers, like that of the words that Wool proceeded to paint, suggests the ledges to which a rock climber clings by his fingernails.

Word painting has a history, from the snatches of newspaper text favored by the Cubists to Ed Ruscha's portraits of words that pique the mind's incapacity to look and read in the same instant. Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer have worked primarily with language; Lawrence Weiner does so exclusively. But Wool made it new. He merged the anonymous aggression of graffiti with the stateliness of formal abstract painting. Selecting words and phrases that appealed to him, he leached them of personality, by using stencils, and of quick readability, by eliminating standard spacing, punctuation, and, in one case, vowels ("TRBL"). The effort required to make out the messages may be rewarded, or punished, with a sting of nihilism: "CATS IN BAGS BAGS IN RIVER" or "SELL THE HOUSE SELL THE CAR SELL THE KIDS." (The latter is from a deranged officer's letter home in

"Apocalypse Now.") Once read, the words don't stay read. When you leave off making sense of three stacked blocks, "HYP/OCR/ITE" or "ANA/RCH/IST," they snap back into being nonsensical graphic design. We're not talking about a major difficulty here, but just enough to induce a hiccup in comprehension, letting the physical facts of the painting preside. The effect calls to mind Jasper Johns's early Flag paintings, with their double-bind readings of paint-as-image (it's a flag) and image-as-paint (it's a red-white-and-blue painting).

Traces of past American masters—Rauschenberg's sprawling montage, Twombly's sensitive scribble, Warhol's off-register printing, Guston's clunky animation, and even some dynamics recalling the god of the Studio School, de Kooning—abound as the show unreels up the Guggenheim's ramp. Wool increasingly mixes and matches mechanical and freehand methods in layered compositions. Thus, rolled patterns interact with splotches, transferred by silk screen from earlier paintings, and with interweaving skeins of spray paint. Wool no longer eschews gesture; sprayed lines curl and buckle in taut relation to the scale of the pictures. (That's de Kooningesque.) Colors—yellow, brownish maroon—have begun to make eloquently sputtering appearances. With no hint of pastiche, and still less of nostalgia, he is reinventing certain charismatic tropes of mid-century New York painting—or recovering them, as if they had been wandering around loose all this time.

I question the choice to mount many of the big paintings on cantilevered struts, so that they appear to float, in some of the museum's curved, top-lighted bays. It's like a magic trick that delights once. Deprived of flat walls, the pictures look lost. In a more apt tour de force, hundreds of black-and-white photographs are arrayed at intervals. Wool took them on nocturnal rambles between his studio, in the East Village, and his loft, in Chinatown. They are dismal with a vengeance, an encyclopedia of wrack, ruin, and squalor, wanly bleached by flash illumination. To make the world appear uniformly horrible requires rare discipline. Wool's grim shutterbugging suggests a peculiar creative psychology. When he feels bad, it would seem, he perks up. And when he feels worse he's golden. ♦