

Willem de Kooning liked to say, to the annoyance of his more bombastic fellow artists, that he worked "out of doubt." Most artists do, whether or not they admit to it, but no contemporary artist has used self-questioning and self-doubt more productively than

Christopher Wool. For more than 25 years, his tough, edgy, mostly black-and-white paintings, drawings, photographs, and silk screens have resisted the comfort of single-minded interpretation. "Yes, but" sums it up for me," Wool says. "I can give you the yes today, but tomorrow is going to be the *but*."

For an artist whose career has developed gradually and without fanfare, this perennial ambiguity has worked pretty well. The Guggenheim Museum is giving him a major retrospective this month (October 25 through January 22, 2014), and one of his early word paintings sold at auction last year for \$7.7 million. At the age of 58, Wool continues to challenge himself and his audience. He recently did a series of stained-glass windows for a priory in an eleventh-century church complex in the Loire Valley, designed the sets for a new dance by Benjamin Millepied with music by Nico Muhly, and, he says, in a somewhat embarrassed whisper, "I haven't told anybody yet, but I'm trying to make sculpture now"—large-scale bronze pieces at a foundry in upstate New York. "Every time he manages to succeed at something, he makes it harder for himself," his friend the novelist Jim Lewis tells me. "I think he's very unsatisfied feeling satisfied. Constantly reguessing what he's trying to do is what he's trying to do."

I'd been told that Wool hardly ever grants interviews, and he turned me down the first time I asked. Eventually he conceded, though, and here I am in his vast studio space in Manhattan's East Village. It's the top two floors of a famous art-world building—I remember going to Pat Hearn's gallery on the ground floor in the 1980s and interviewing Eric Fischl in the painting studio that's now Wool's. He's a powerful-looking guy in knee-length shorts and a sleeveless T-shirt, and he has a gentle manner. Although his close-cropped hair is graying, he looks extremely fit, his muscles toned by rock climbing and basketball. He answers every question and then, seeing another side to it, revises his response.

The art world that Wool entered in the 1970s was a hotbed of conflicting trends and honorable poverty. The market for contemporary art was dead, and so, according to critical theory, was painting. Its place had been usurped by video, installation, body art, performance, and various forms of conceptual practice. "The death of painting had occurred before I started," says Wool, "but I hadn't been told about it. I was just young enough that I was able to pick and choose what was important to me. I'm a painter and an image-maker. Conceptual art was never my thing, and I don't think it's the best direction art has taken."

He pauses, gets us each a bottle of water, and continues, somewhat sheepishly, "I'm not sure the 'painting is dead' part was such an important issue. My argument has always been that painting and the other mediums are not essentially different, and the same goes for figuration and abstraction. I firmly believe it's not the medium that's important, it's what you do with it."

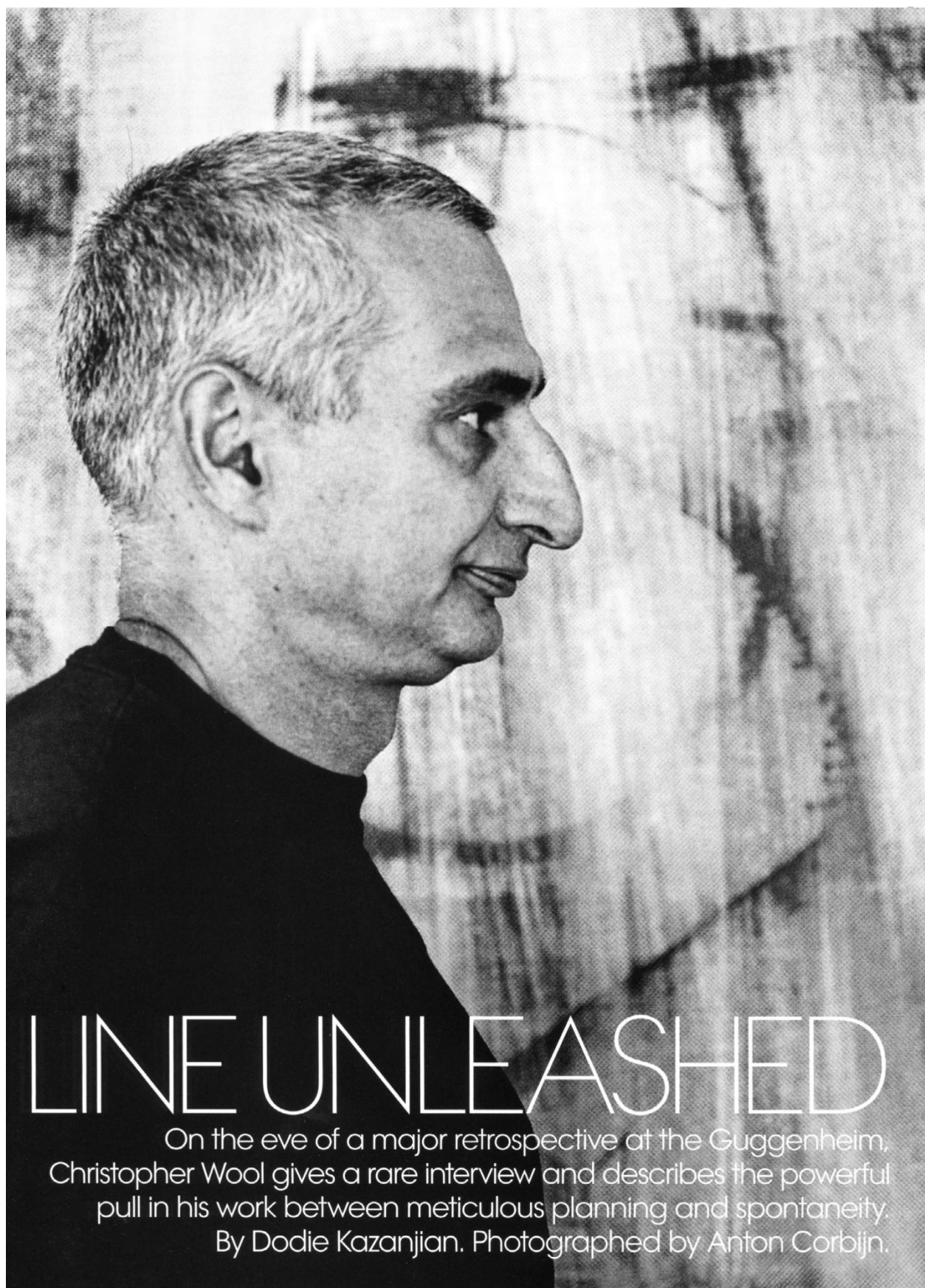
Christopher Wool grew up on Chicago's gritty South Side in the 1960s, an era of political and generational turmoil. His father,



PAINT IT BLACK

As personally low-profile as his paintings are sought-after, Christopher Wool in front of a work in progress in his East Village studio.

Sittings Editor:
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LINE UNLEASHED

On the eve of a major retrospective at the Guggenheim, Christopher Wool gives a rare interview and describes the powerful pull in his work between meticulous planning and spontaneity.

By Dodie Kazanjian. Photographed by Anton Corbijn.

Ira, who died last year, was a professor of molecular biology at the University of Chicago; his mother, Glorvye, became a child psychoanalyst. Both of them liked the idea of Christopher being an artist. (Ira later knew the Swiss artist Dieter Roth and acquired work by Roth and others.) When Christopher's younger brother, Jonathan, decided to be a lawyer, Ira's response was "What? Really?" Robert Gober, one of Christopher's earliest and closest artist friends, tells me that he "never knew any artists whose parents were so encouraging. Most of the artists I know became artists in spite of their backgrounds."

Wool says that he didn't decide to be an artist, that "it just kind of happened." In high school, he studied photography with a charismatic former Bauhaus artist, Robert Erickson, but switched to a painting class because his girlfriend was in it. He couldn't get into art school, he says, because "I didn't have any skills. CalArts was heating up then. They came recruiting at my high school and said, basically, anyone who wants to come can get in. So I applied and got rejected." He laughs. He went to Sarah Lawrence instead and studied painting with Richard Pousette-Dart but quit after one year because he'd taken two art classes (painting and photography) in his first year and wasn't allowed to take any in his second. In 1973, at the age of eighteen, he moved to Manhattan and spent a year at the New York Studio School, and that was it for formal education. From then on, he taught himself. On his twenty-first birthday, in 1976, he got his first studio and living space, a dirt-cheap fifth-floor walk-up in a run-down loft building in Chinatown, which he would keep for 25 years.

He hung out at Max's Kansas City, the Mudd Club, and CBGB, becoming part of the downtown punk and jazz music scenes and also the very lively experimental-film renaissance. "The whole New York nightlife universe was so intertwined with being an artist," he says. For a couple of years, he tried his hand at filmmaking, but "I was so young and so insecure about my artistic direction . . . and working with other people was not for me. The immediacy of painting was much more suited to my temperament. I could do the 'but' a week later, instead of three months later." The built-in contradiction here is that, since the late eighties, he has collaborated on art projects with Gober, Richard Prince, Richard Hell, Cady Noland, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and Josh Smith, all of whom were close friends. His collaboration with Gober yielded a haunting photograph of a dress (sewn by Gober out of fabric printed by Wool) being "worn" by a tree in the woods—the first published photograph for both of them.

A young painter in New York could live on very little in those days, and Wool supported himself in the usual ways—waiting on tables, doing rough carpentry, and helping more established artists. He worked for Joel Shapiro and learned a lot from him. Wool had his first solo show in 1984—seven monochrome abstract canvases—at the Cable Gallery downtown, which had been started earlier that year by Clarissa Dalrymple and Nicole Klagsbrun. (None of them sold.) His second show, at Cable two years later, was described in *Artforum* as "a cross between a Jackson Pollock and a Formica countertop." (Joel Shapiro revised this to "Sid Vicious meets Morris Louis.")

His breakthrough came in 1986 after watching a workman paint the corridor walls outside his Chinatown studio with a roller that had a pattern cut into it—an inexpensive

way for slum landlords to cover up moldy plaster. "I'd seen those rollers at Pearl Paint," he tells me, "and it dawned on me that it could be an interesting way to do something." He bought some patterned rollers and used them to cover six-foot-tall, white painted-aluminum sheets with all-over black patterns (flowers, clovers, leaves, vines, abstract geometries). The effect was definitely not decorative. Dripping paint and other intentional flaws took care of that and gave the paintings an uningratiating, urban grittiness that would become the touchstone of his future work.

The word paintings started about a year later. He had seen the words SEX LUV sprayed graffiti-style on the side of a white delivery van, and the image stayed with him. Using crude stencils, Wool repro-

duced the words in a vertical stack, black enamel on white paper; larger word paintings on metal (some of them nine feet tall) soon proliferated. He used phrases from popular sayings, jazz, movies, and other sources—HELTER (from the Manson murders), YOU MAKE ME (from a Richard Hell album cover), SELL THE HOUSE SELL THE CAR SELL THE KIDS (a written message in a scene from *Apocalypse Now*). Unlike the stenciled words in paintings by Jasper Johns, Ed Ruscha, and other contemporary artists, Wool's were stark, brutal, larger-than-life, and difficult to read, filling the picture plane, with line breaks in unexpected places. "I wondered if I knew what I was doing with these," he tells me. "And I didn't." My own reaction when I first saw them was a sense of being yelled at. They were offensive, funny, and indelible—you had to pay attention.

Like the roller pictures, the word paintings combined Pop Art and abstraction, and distanced (continued on page 377)



SAY IT LOUD

Apocalypse Now, 1988, one of the artist's early word paintings.



SEEING RED

Wool's *Minor Mishap*, 2001, with vivid color on a white ground.

Wool kept pushing his work into more indeterminate areas, making silk screens of his finished paintings, erasing or whitening out sections, and sabotaging his pieces in other ways as a means of generating new paintings. Looping abstract lines applied with an industrial spray gun allowed his hand to invade the image, and color (canary yellow, bubble-gum pink), in monochrome overlays, occasionally challenged the supremacy of black, white, and gray. Photographs—black-and-white, urban, and vernacular—were a major part of his output. “I’m not a photographer, but I do photography,” he says. “When Richard Prince was asked years ago about his photography, he said, ‘I’m practicing without a license.’ I think that’s a great definition of being an artist.”

Wool’s work has been shown since 1987 at Lühring Augustine Gallery in New York and in other galleries and museums in this country and abroad. It has not always found favor with critics or the public. Reviewing Wool’s 1998 survey show at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in *Artforum*, critic Dave Hickey perceived “trendy negativity” and “the wrong art, in the wrong place, at the wrong time. . . .” The New York critics, however, were increasingly impressed (“Wool is a very pure version of something dissonant and poignant . . . one of the more optically alive painters out there,” wrote Jerry Saltz in *The Village Voice* in 2004), and so were a lot of his fellow artists. “His paintings feel like they’re happening in front of your eyes, right now, in real time,” George Condo tells me. Richard Prince, who has known Wool since the mid-eighties, recently said, “I still want to be Christopher . . . want to change places with the guy and paint his paintings and photograph his photographs. . . . His art makes me feel good.”

Wool is married to the German-born artist Charline von Heyl. They met in the late eighties in Cologne (“She doesn’t remember this,” he says, laughing), where she was part of a group that included Albert Oehlen and Martin Kippenberger. They ran into each other again in 1995 at an Oehlen opening in New York. “We had a really sharp, ironic, fun conversation,” she recalls, and they started having friendly dinners together. A fire in his new studio building—the one he’s in now—destroyed much of his work on paper and left him feeling very depressed. He couldn’t get back into his studio for nearly a year, but his friendship with Von Heyl deepened during this period, and they married soon afterward. He was 42, and she was 37. The relationship is solid and sustaining, and she is as dedicated to her career as he is to his. (She shows her

complex, exuberant, and tumultuously colorful abstract paintings at Petzel Gallery in New York.) Neither one of them wanted to have children, and their lives are often quite separate. “We have different friends and different rhythms,” she says. “Our marriage is about the luxury of being alone together.”

Since 2007, they’ve been spending a lot of time in Marfa, Texas, where they bought a house on the edge of town. It takes a full day to get to Marfa from New York, and the peace and solitude of their lives there allow for a degree of concentration that’s new to both of them. “When I look out the window, I don’t see another human habitat,” says Von Heyl. “It’s only prairies, and the horizon is so far away.” They share a 7,000-square-foot studio in town, with a wall down the middle and separate entrances. When they’re not working they sometimes take long hikes in the Davis Mountains or pack a picnic and swim in the spring-fed pool in Balmorhea, about an hour’s drive away. The studio allows Wool to work on a much larger scale than before. He made his first horizontal painting there. “It’s not a landscape,” he insists. “I don’t think where you are influences your work directly.”

But with Christopher Wool, nothing can ever be quite certain. An urban artist who now drives a Volvo four-wheeler and a Toyota pickup in West Texas is clearly poised between “yes” and “but.” □

LINE UNLEASHED

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the artist’s hand from the image. He made around 75 of them between 1987 and 2000, and then he stopped. Christie’s contemporary-art expert, Amy Cappelazzo, tells me that Wool’s word paintings “are like the Holy Grail; we all know where every one of them is in the world. If an iconic one came on the market now, it could sell for upwards of \$10 million.”