

Tittel, Cornelius
"We Can Talk But You Can't Quote"
BLAU.

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BLAU

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Miuccia PRADA

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ZU HAUSE BEI BEUYS,
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UND SCHMELA

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BERLINS VERSTECKTE
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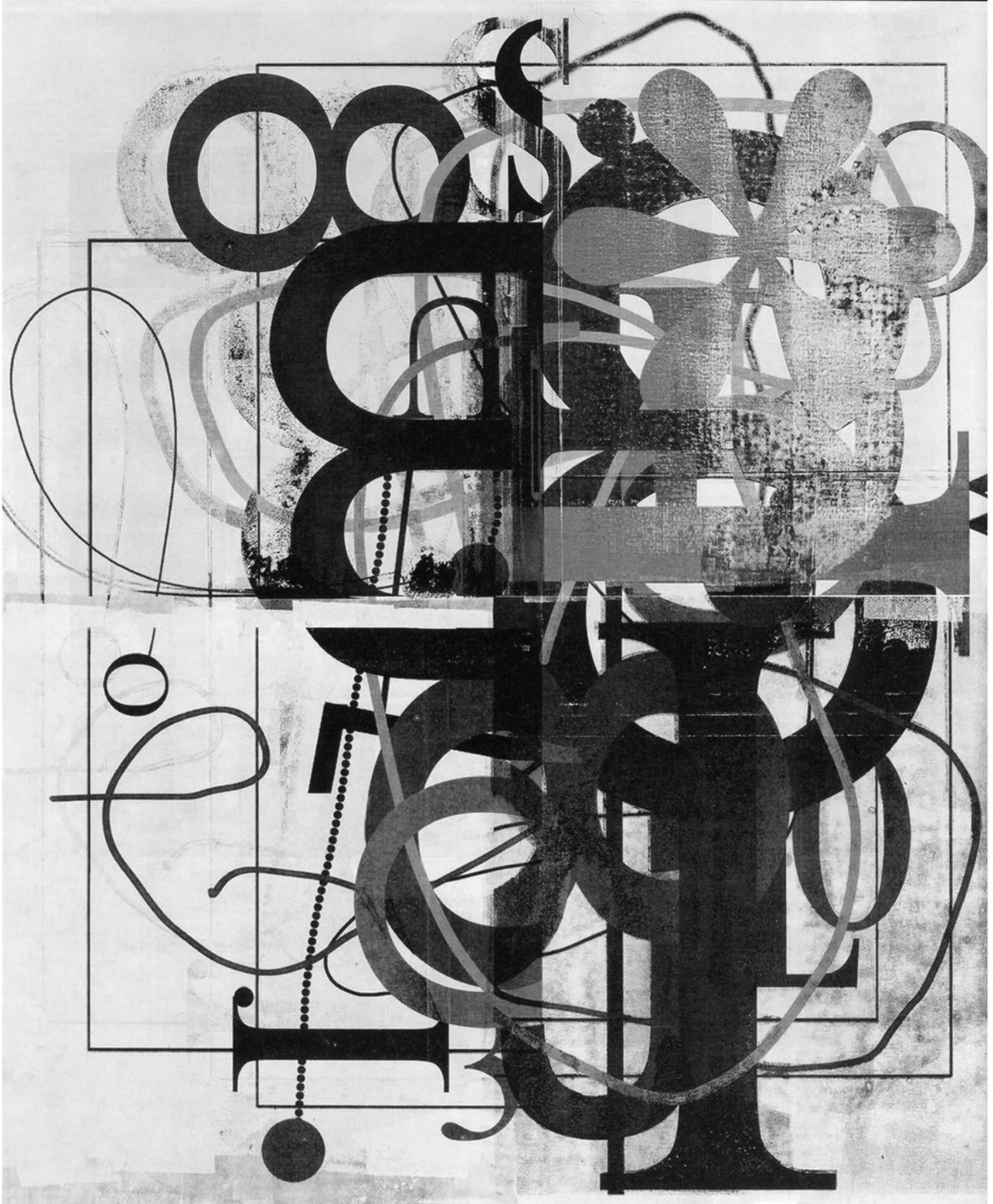


CHRISTOPHER WOOL
UND DIE RÜCKKEHR DES
NEW YORK NOIR

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UNTITLED, 2014
Siebdrucktinte und Emaille auf Leinen, 274 × 244 cm

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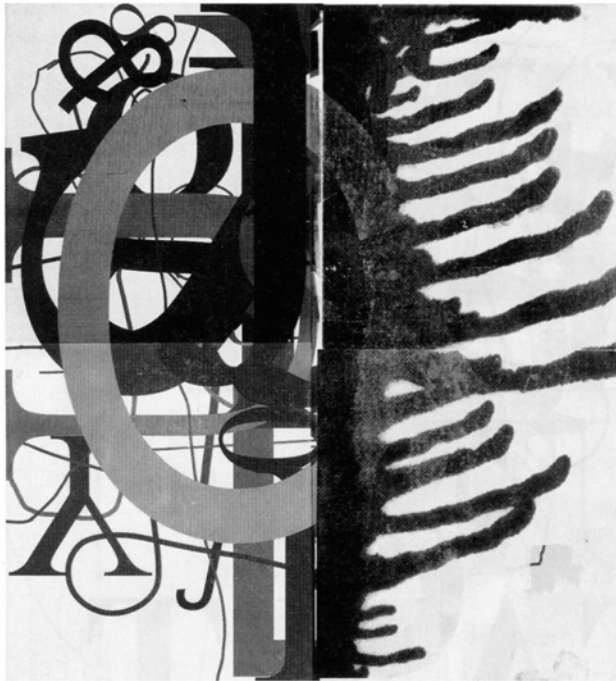
— CHRISTOPHER WOOL

His word paintings? Uninteresting! Almost everything that came before that? A child's drawings. After a three-year pause in work, CHRISTOPHER WOOL is showing his first new images in BLAU. A studio visit with the most expensive artist of his generation, who wants everything except to be quoted. *By Cornelius Tittel*

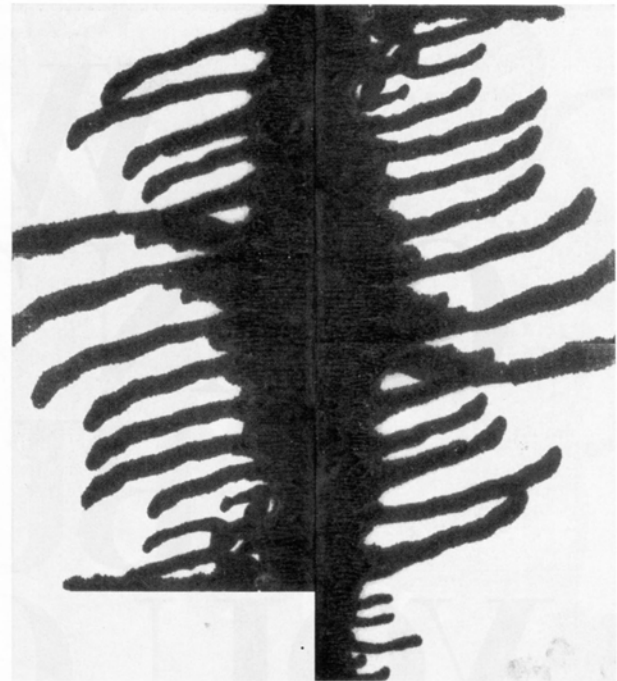
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At some point, it must have been in the mid-80s, Christopher Wool was sitting in a bar with a friend. His friend asked him to make three wishes: What were the three most meaningful things that could happen in Wool’s career? A show in the Guggenheim, answered Christopher Wool. And a cover for Sonic Youth. Thirty years, one Guggenheim retrospective, and one Sonic Youth cover later, Christopher Wool sits in his New York studio. He can’t remember what the third wish was. It doesn’t matter, he says, and sets his reading glasses down. Wool is 59 years old and, if it weren’t for the reading glasses, he would look like someone who is used to striding stealthily over rough terrain: tough, closely cropped hair, a gray hooded sweatshirt, black jeans, and lightweight hiking shoes. The man who is considered the master of cool, perhaps one of the most important American painters of his generation, tells the story of the three wishes because he is proud of how everything worked out, even if it came late in life. The fact that one of his new sculptures was recently installed at a prominent plaza in his native city of

Chicago? He doesn’t know anybody who wouldn’t be honored by something like that. The fact that Wool is talking at all is a stroke of luck. He hasn’t painted for three years, a period during which the Guggenheim revered him just as much as the art market. In 2013, his painting *Apocalypse Now* sold at an auction at Christies for \$26 million. And it would have been no surprise if Wool – who has never been a self-marketer and who avoids interviews and charity galas – were now finished. Up until this point, he has done the nearly impossible: Performing a balancing act between the Guggenheim on one hand and Sonic Youth on the other, between accolades from the Upper East Side and credibility from the Lower East Side, his work has never relinquished its secret. Might that have been his third wish? A hint of a smile crops up at the corners of his mouth. No. Keeping his secret is hard work, that much is evident. Lives of famous colleagues have demonstrated that after one, two, perhaps three wrong decisions, the magic starts to fade. A collaboration with a fashion label here, an exposé there, one too many red-

carpet photos – never before have artists of his ilk had so many opportunities to destroy their own auras so quickly. But Christopher Wool is the last person we need to worry about in this regard. “Because he is the way he is,” says the director of a large gallery that has carried his art for years, “I know almost nothing about him. But please don’t write that down.” “Please don’t write that down” could almost be Christopher Wool’s slogan. Or even: Write what you want, as long as it doesn’t have anything to do with me. Wool hates being quoted, but surprisingly, he still allows his conversations to be recorded. Recording is ok, to quote him word-for-word is not, after all he has fought long and hard not to become the type of artist whose statements are repeated without end. It’s as if there is nothing worse for him than eliminating space for viewers to formulate their own thoughts about his work. So this will be a kind of behind-the-scenes discussion, a privilege normally bestowed only on the art historians and curators who write the lengthy essays for his museum catalogs.

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Why? Perhaps because there might also be something he would like to say to the public even without a museum show, perhaps because the discussion is about his first new sculptures and paintings after a three-year break.

Keeping his secret is hard work, that much is evident. Never before have artists of his ilk had so many opportunities to destroy their own auras so quickly.

During my visit last summer, we sat in an empty studio, empty except for two paintings by Albert Oehlen. A black-and-white digital image and a large, gray painting of a laboratory cat from the late 90s. This time, the cat is gone, the computer image is hanging in the office near the entrance, surrounded by artworks: Robert Rauschenberg, Hans Hartung, Georg Baselitz. The first two are from his father’s collection, the latter, an homage to de Kooning, is a new acquisition. And then are there Wool’s new paintings; he talks about them as well, Rorschach-like motifs and typographical, branching structures.

The tape is already running. Christopher Wool, born in Boston in 1955, grew up in Chicago. His mother is a psychiatrist, his father is a professor of molecular biology. Wool seldom speaks about his early influences, but Robert Donald Erickson – a pupil of László Moholy-Nagy – was his art teacher in high school and must have made a lasting impression. Wool shows me a photo he took when he was 18, a black-and-white shot of houses with a razor-sharp composition, which looks like it could have come right out of the Bauhaus, 50 years earlier.

Wool, who describes himself as an enthusiastic teenager, decided to study art at the age of 17, even though, as he tells it, he didn’t have the least bit of talent. At Sarah Lawrence College in Yonkers in the state of New York, he met Richard Pousette-Dart, one of the founders of the New York Studio School, who immediately tried to dissuade him from becoming a painter –

not least because he considered his pupil too young for that kind of commitment. A year later, Wool transferred to the Studio School in Manhattan to continue studying painting. His teacher at the Studio School was also a prominent representative of abstract expressionism – Jack Tworkov. Wool talks about this time – about Rothko’s and de Kooning’s work, from which he learned about the plasticity of color, about how paintings aren’t actually flat, how they have depth and then rush forward again, about push and pull and Hans Hofmann’s theories, according to which the abstract expressionists had not by any means broken with the history of art, but instead were part of a continuous line of tradition tracing back to Cezanne. And as Wool calmly describes all this, it becomes clear that he may well be the only star of postmodern painting still working with the ideas and ideals of the Black Mountain College, the training grounds for abstract expressionism that Tworkov taught.

And naturally, says Wool, he rejected everything his teachers taught him. But he did follow Pousette-Dart’s advice to seek one’s own path continuously, no matter how convoluted it may seem. Wool was just 19 years old when he left the Studio School and rented his first studio.

New York in 1974 was a different city looking out at a different planet. Vito Acconci had just performed a piece at Sonnabend Gallery, where he was hidden from sight below a ramp, masturbating and communicating via loudspeakers with the visitors who were walking on the floorboards directly above him. Gordon Matta-Clark had sawed through the middle of a single-family house in New Jersey. Chris Burden had himself nailed to the back of a VW bug. And the only ones to make money with their art were Johns, Rauschenberg, and the other stars of Castelli Gallery. What exactly Christopher Wool did in the following years is difficult to reconstruct. In 1978 he gave up painting for



CHRISTOPHER WOOL, FOTOGRAFIERT VON MARK PECKMEZIAN, NEW YORK, 30. MARZ 2015

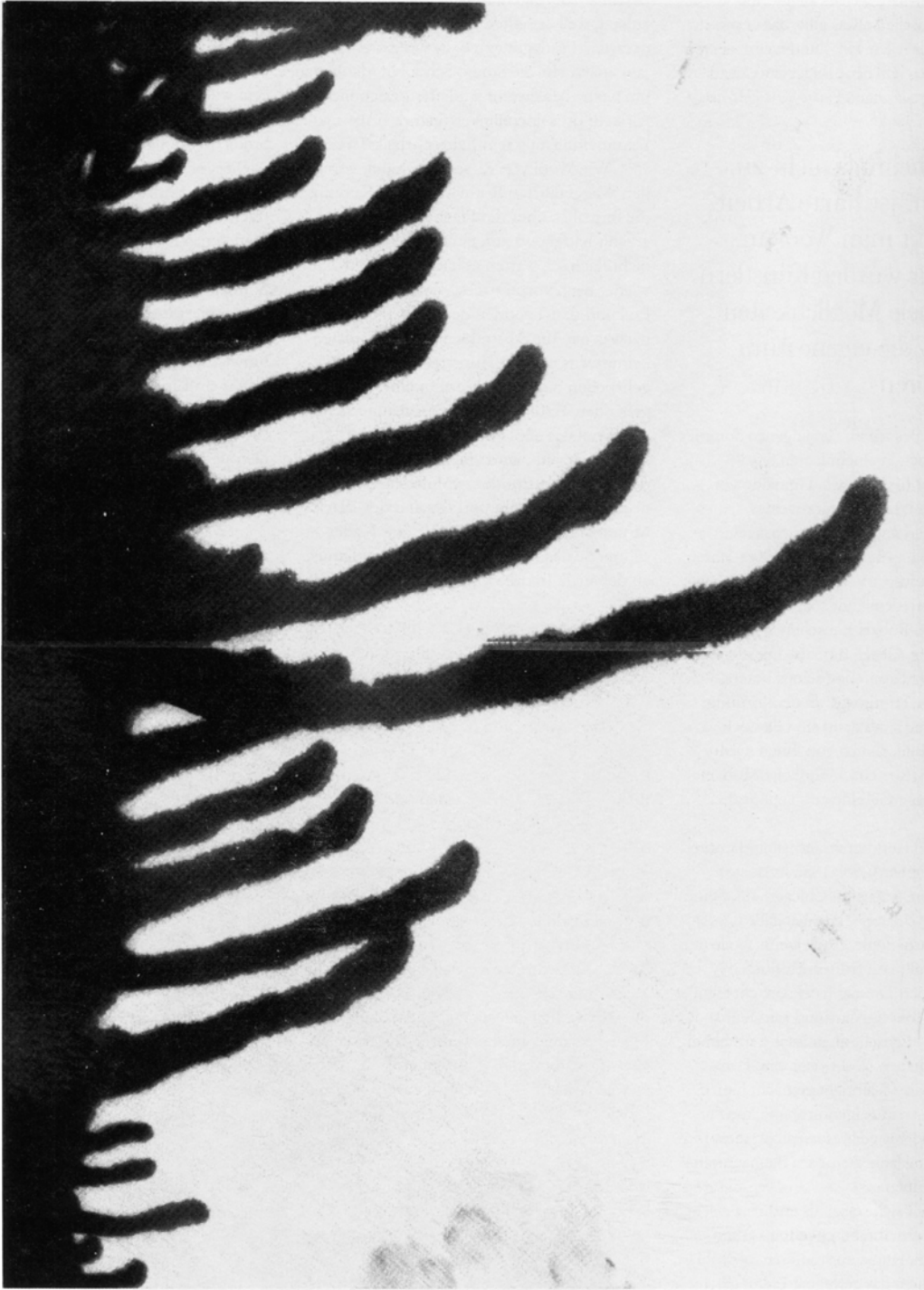
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two years and worked on film projects. He worked as an assistant to the sculptor Joel Shapiro, read a lot and went to exhibitions. He became a witness to how the Pictures Generation – which included Richard Prince with his re-photographed Marlboro men, and Cindy Sherman with her untitled film stills – experienced breakthroughs and heralded postmodern discourse into art.

Wool sees himself as a late bloomer. His work began when he was 30 years old. Everything from before then has been edited out,

And he saw Julian Schnabel and David Salle become stars overnight. There is one visit to a gallery that Wool remembers particularly vividly. In 1981, he spent a day with his father’s friend, Swiss artist Dieter Roth. The two of them visited Jean-Michel Basquiat’s first exhibition. Even before the opening, everyone downtown knew that Basquiat was a genius. The fact that even Dieter Roth left the gallery deeply impressed was striking to Wool. Basquiat was 20, Wool was six years older – the former seemed to have been born a great painter, the latter was an artist without a body of work.

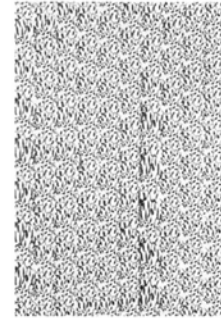
If one gives credence to the important catalogs, it began four years later, in 1985. Everything from before then has been edited out, all traces of it have been erased. How did the 30-year-old Wool enter the art world? With drip paintings, lacquer, and aluminum on metal ground. But whereas the allegedly uncontrolled swirls of color created an all-over composition in Jackson Pollock’s work, in Wool’s pieces the drips are meticulously controlled. After such action painting without the action, Wool created a series using a rubber roller, the kind you can buy in hardware stores. He developed large-scale paintings that imitate wallpaper patterns. The question they pose to the viewer is: “It this a painting or a process?” Essentially, in these paintings Wool rejected color, composition, and in fact everything that traditionally constitutes a painting. It was an attempt to make paint-

ings without the conceptual baggage from his teachers’ generation – an attempt that remained unsatisfactory. Were they mature works? Perhaps. But they still seemed to be a dead end.

And then Wool flipped on the turn signal and made a U-turn, and finally a new moment was written in the history of art. Wool, who had been collecting sentence fragments, individual words, and dialogues from films to use as titles for paintings, began to stencil the words directly onto his canvases. One of the first pieces with words is a work on paper, with the words “sex” and “luv” written above one another alternatingly, a combination of words that Wool had seen spray-painted onto a white truck. A little later, he created the painting *Apocalypse Now*, a large-scale piece reminiscent of billboards, which quotes a letter from Captain Colby in the eponymous film: “Sell the house, sell the car, sell the kids.” Other paintings use the letters “TRBL” and the words “Fuck em if they can’t take a joke.”

Why, he wonders, have the paintings from this series become icons? Christopher Wool returns the question. And when you explain how since at least Gerhard Richter there have been enough people who see no future for painting, and are wondering how to have the last word on the subject; how radical Wool’s paintings appear in this context and how there is something nearly masochistic in taking them in, letting oneself be commanded by them and surrendering to them, when you explain this all to him, Christopher Wool only gives a tired smile. It’s ridiculous to believe that someone could have the last word, all that you need is enough interest in painting to move on to the next image. For his part, Wool never seemed to have attached much importance to his word paintings. Some of them succeeded, others less so – pictorially he was completely under-challenged, and he soon ran out of text as well. End of story: fuck ‘em if they pay 26 million! This morning, Christopher Wool is comparing his early work to children’s drawings, only then to describe two of his most prominent series as more or less unsatisfactory, which is why he discontinued them. Or is he playing the cool strategist, a man who discounts the work that has made him famous so that he won’t be tied to it, in order to increase the value of what is next to come?

**CHRISTOPHER WOOL:
AN EVOLUTION IN SIX
PAINTINGS**



UNTITLED, 1987

Christopher Wool made his first appearance in the art world with his meticulously controlled drip paintings, as well as paintings using rubber rollers, the kind you find in hardware stores, to imitate wallpaper patterns.



APOCALYPSE NOW, 1988

Wool would collect words and sentences for painting titles. Then he decided to stencil the words directly onto aluminum panels. *Apocalypse Now* is a quote from a letter of Captain Colby’s from the eponymous film, a painting that sold at auction in 2013 for \$26.8 million.



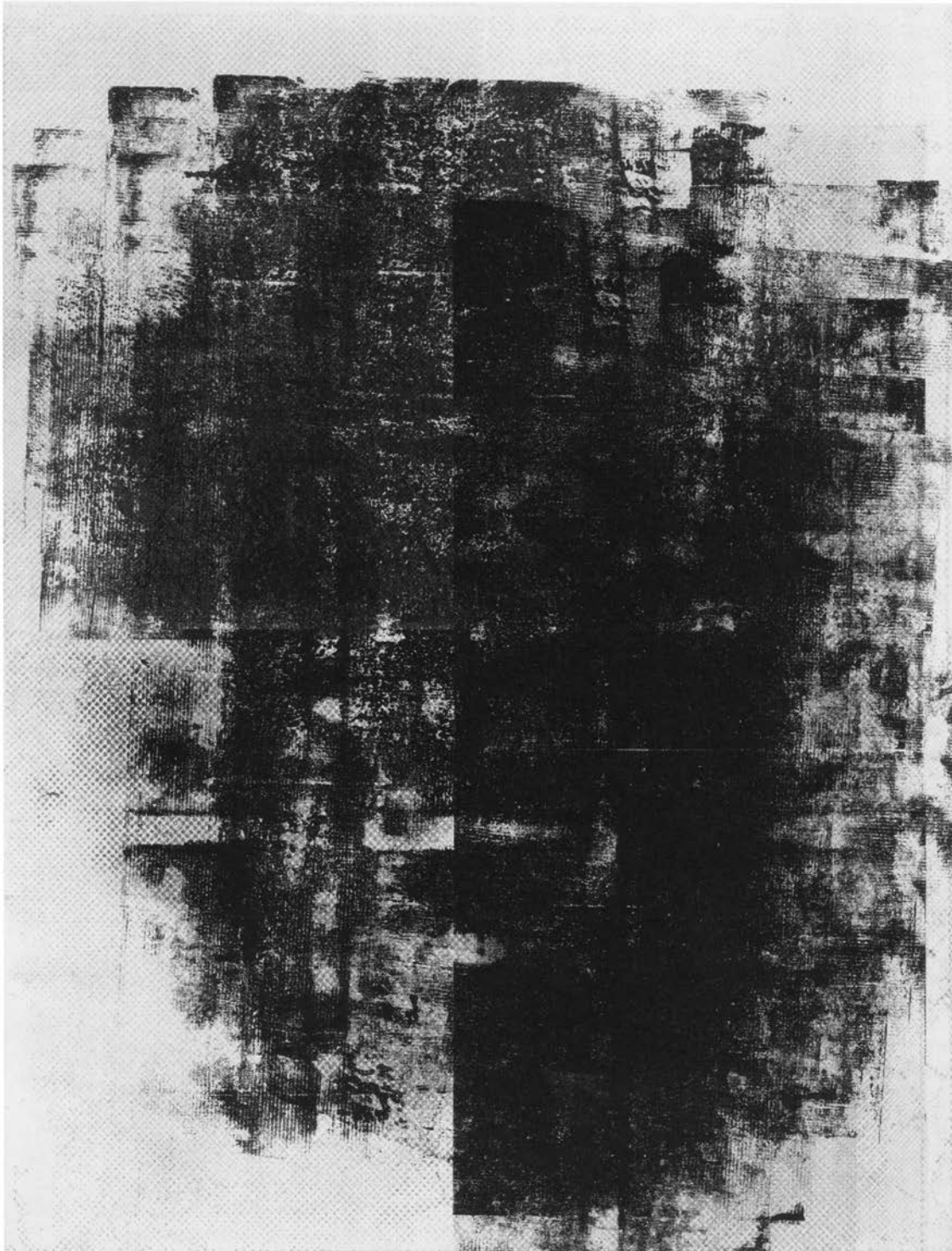
UNTITLED, 1993

At the beginning of the 90s, Wool began to experiment with composition and perspective. His flower paintings represented a new beginning in his painting.

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Siebdrucktüte auf Leinen, 320 × 244 cm

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UNTITLED, 2015
Bronze, Kupfer und Stahl, 314 × 145 × 138 cm

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UNTITLED, 1995

And suddenly, these gestures. In 1995, Wool began to experiment with spray paint. Ten years previously, he would have rejected these paintings’ free gestures. Twenty years later, he would create sculptures that are reminiscent of these images.



MINOR MISHAP 2001

The basis for this Minor Mishap was a brown spot on paper, which Wool blew up to a monumental size, and then silkscreened onto canvas in red. At the same time, he was taking pictures at night on the Lower East Side for his book *East Broadway Breakdown*, which would in turn influence his paintings. Puddles, pools of blood, street dogs: New York was a first-rate abandoned crime scene.



UNTITLED, 2007

Wool sprays, Wool wipes, Wool sprays again. Construct, dissolve, re-construct. He was never more painterly than in the late 2000s: A post-modern painter standing at eye-level with the heroes of abstract expressionism.

What is a post-modern painter to do when his concepts and method begin to bore him? He may find sympathy in the discourse from and about the Pictures Generation; Wool has worked collaboratively with Richard Prince, and has befriended Jeff Koons. But he avoids any references to pop. Painting remains his profession – it is just which kind that remains the question. American stars of Neo-Expressionism were not exactly sources of inspiration. And for all Wool’s determination to go his own way, he seems to be a little out of context.

And then Cologne: By Wool’s standards, he becomes almost emphatic when talking about his first trip to Germany at the end of the 80s. His gallery, Luhring Augustine, had begun a collaboration with Cologne artist Max Hetzler. Wool had just met Georg Herold in New York, Kippenberger was gaining fame, and Albert Oehlen was still just another name for him. What Wool found in Cologne he describes retrospectively as revelatory. He befriended Kippenberger, Gisela Capitain offered him his first exhibition at a German gallery, and Albert Oehlen explained to him how he wanted to make paintings that caused eye cancer. The entire concept of Bad Painting impressed him, not least because the New York artists closest to Wool were focused on photography instead. Committing patricide in the father’s medium however, that must have been powerful stuff for a painter who at 20 was still studying Clement Greenberg. Whereas Greenberg demanded masterpieces from his favorite painters, Oehlen wanted to create the worst paintings conceivable. It was a difficult undertaking that Oehlen – as Wool recalls – broke off with at some point, because the results too closely resembled the works of the Berlin Neo-Expressionists. Wool witnessed Oehlen’s departure further and further away from figuration, saw Oehlen’s “FN” paintings – which his German friend showed at Luhring Augustine in New York in 1990 – and saw Oehlen’s first computer paintings. As hesitant as Wool is to disclose his influences, he is equally open in his praise for colleagues. According to Wool, Oehlen’s work always opened new possibilities for Wool’s own painting. Oehlen then, as well as a long stay in Rome, under the spell of Borromini’s perspectival architecture. When one asks Christopher Wool when the period of work began that gave him the

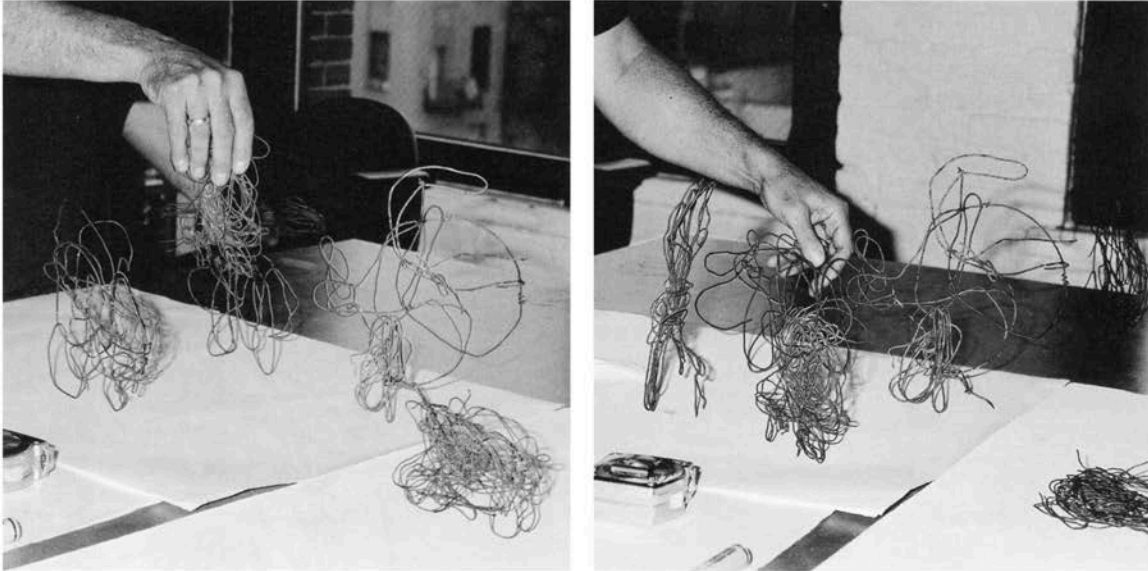
opportunity to prove himself as a painter, Wool picks up the Guggenheim catalog, opens up to page 109, and points to one of the what he calls his flower paintings: *Untitled*, 1993.

At that point, Wool was nearly 40 years old, and was beginning to play with composition in a way that his teachers at the Studio School would have approved. Inspired by Warhol, Wool integrated silkscreen techniques into his painting, but where Warhol kept the image flat, Wool gave it depth by layering, over-painting, and reinvigorating the pictorial composition. The push and pull that Hans Hofmann had defined as the yin and yang of Abstract Expressionism returned in a post-modern, broken form. With his grey, expressive spray paint images from the 2000s, in which he repeatedly dissolved and broke up the paint with solvents, Wool created precisely what he had rejected with his paintings 20 years previous: gestural painting. It is painting that Clement Greenberg would have celebrated in its cool, abstract splendor – great American abstracts on par with works in MoMA’s hall of fame.

Does he recognize the story’s irony? The fact that a post-modern anti-painter has in the end taken up the legacy of Willem de Kooning? Nevertheless, the “post” in his kind of relationship with modernism doesn’t remove Wool from it. Post-modern is not anti-modern; the Post-Impressionists did not want to destroy Impressionism. What he is doing exists in relation to the kind of work his teachers advocated, such as the painting of the Baroque to the Renaissance – it is an extension, not an opposition.

It is already noon, and his assistant has ordered salad and soup. We are still sitting in his office – a wall separates us from his new paintings, and one floor up even more await us. Could we take a look before lunch? Suddenly Wool stands up, shorter than one had imagined him to be amidst such large, confident paintings. Part of their confidence is that any other artist would have been afraid that they could be dismissed as new versions of Andy Warhol’s Rorschach paintings. The point of departure for the new series are works on paper from 1984, work which he made the same summer that Warhol made the Rorschach paintings. That following spring, recalls Wool, he read an article

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SCRAPS OF WIRE THAT WOOL FOUND ON HIS PROPERTY IN TEXAS ARE THE STARTING POINT FOR HIS NEW SCULPTURES. HERE WOOL SHOWS SOME OF THE MODELS.

about Warhol’s exhibition of the work, and realized that they had both been working very similar projects at the same time.

Wool has now silkscreened his 30-year-old DIN-A4-works onto large-scale canvases, painted over or printed over some, and left others largely untouched. When one compliments him on one of the simplest motifs – a half Rorschach, with the painter’s proportionately enlarged fingerprints on the lower border – Wool merely shrugs. If one already knew that a motif would function like a painting, it is not surprising when it actually does. He finds his new paintings more exciting, in which he combines two different motifs – the Rorschachs with his nearly sculptural typographic images. Is he nervous to show his new paintings after an interval of more than three years? Does it already feel like a comeback? For a brief moment, Wool appears indignant. It has nothing to do with a sabbatical or a comeback: Initially, Wool only stopped painting because he wanted to recuperate after a flood of museum exhibitions. Then he wasn’t painting because his studio got a new elevator and could not be used. Then he wasn’t painting because Hurricane Sandy flooded his storage

space, and there was so much to clean up. Then there was the preparation needed for his Guggenheim retrospective. Is he sure that his break wasn’t an unconscious reaction to an overheated market, to the tens of millions that hedge fund managers are paying for his paintings today? No. The business side has become increasingly unpleasant. But that would be the last thing to keep him from working. And he did continue to work, not just on the sculptures that are now in the foundry. He shows me a number of small models prepared from the same wire that Texan farmers use to fence their herds in – wire that he found on his property in Marfa. They seem like 3D versions of his spray-painted works. Other models are made from the copper sheets that farmers use as troughs for their cattle. Wool shows me a photo from the foundry – over four meters tall, the sheets resemble free-standing brush strokes, a group of old friends who have met at a market and are conferring with their heads together. Time for salad. Wool has been speaking for nearly three hours. He has patiently answered my questions, opening up books again and again in order to illustrate his points. He only nods when I tell him that before we met, I had been expecting a man as aggressive as his work. As long as his

his images speak in a loud, clear voice, Wool can afford to be quiet. Outside in front of the elevator, there is an old poster that reads, “If you can’t take a joke, you can get the fuck out of my house.” The funny thing is, Christopher Wool isn’t joking.

CHRISTOPHER WOOL’S NEW WORKS ARE ON EXHIBIT FROM MAY 2 AT LUHRING AUGUSTINE IN NEW YORK.



ALWAYS A COUPLE OF CANS OF SOLVENT HANDY: WOOL IN THE SILKSCREEN ROOM