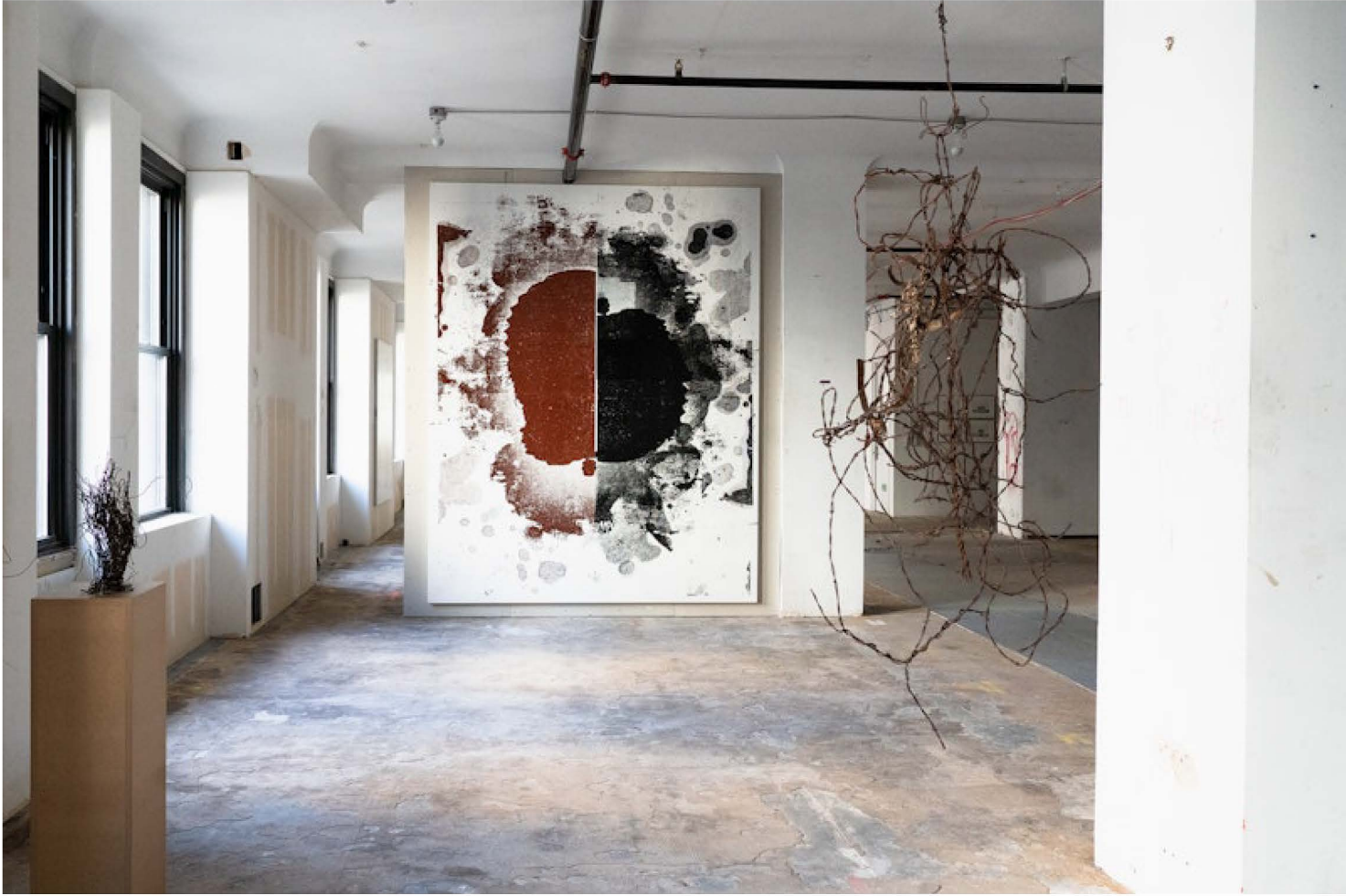


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Christopher Wool: *See Stop Run*

By Richard Hell



Installation view: *Christopher Wool: See Stop Run*, 101 Greenwich Street, New York. Courtesy the artist.

New York

101 Greenwich

See Stop Run

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Christopher Wool could be said to have had three periods as an artist so far. First was the New York City era (circa 1985–99) of the austere/sloppy/funny/aggressive black-and-white word and pattern paintings, mostly in glossy enamel paint and/or silkscreen ink on aluminum or linen or paper, along with a separate continuing series of rough, unpeopled, hazy but high-contrast urban street-photographs and/or photobooks.

Then, around 2000, Wool began making large “gray paintings” of ultra-sophisticated semi-improvised composition, still limited to black-and-white pigment, but now dramatically—if also with overt calculation—mixed in loops and smears and layers of silkscreen, paintbrush, spray can, solvent-soaked rag. These paintings are as visually complex and subtle as the pattern and word



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paintings were plain and surface. In retrospect their style was better predicted by the eighties and nineties nighttime vacant filthy street scenes he shot with a glaring flash and had developed by drugstores than by prior paintings. That the gray paintings and the stark mechanical black-and-white ones came from the same hand was satisfyingly enlightening. It's as if they proceeded from the integration of de Kooning and Warhol.

Then, in the mid-2000s, Wool and his wife, Promethean painter Charline von Heyl, bought a house on the outskirts of Marfa, TX, and began spending most of the year there. An immediate result was the tabletop sculpture he started toying with when he found that the ubiquitous clumps of discarded fencing wire in the desert reminded him of his own drawing line. His first large bronze sculpture, scaled up from the wire with computer assistance, was completed just in time to be installed outside the Guggenheim in New York for his 2013 retrospective there.

Now New York gets an exhibition of period three, the work completed since the Guggenheim show (with a grab or two from earlier days). It includes oil abstractions, a first for him, smallish ones on screen-printed paper that also include the near-unprecedented incorporation of color, usually pink. He's also produced several series of photos and corresponding photobooks—*Westtexaspsychosculpture*, *Road*, *Yard*, and *Swamp*—that are not only as interesting in their sensibility as the earlier urban photo series, but, again, enlightening in their relationship to them: the new photographs are still of his local surroundings (few, if any, include people), except now that means desert and mountain roads, stray yard storage, and construction materials. They also differ from the earlier pictures in being perfectly focused and crisp. They're largely about composition and the careful manipulations of the image in Photoshop (including superimpositions) to achieve a quality of image that is bordering on abstract while still an exact representation. The subjects of these images are places that tend to be commonly disregarded to the point of invisibility because of their apparent insignificance.



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This tendency of Wool's to foreground the background, to focus on the peripheral, could also be said to underlie the sculptures of manipulated (or not) swarms of found wire, and the enlarged versions of them which dot the exhibition space, either mounted on simple plywood bases or hanging from above. (My one real regret regarding the show is that there wasn't the headroom to hold the larger bronze sculptures of this type. They can get up to sixteen feet tall!)

Wool continues to use prior works as the bases for new ones, painting over existing screenprints, combining previously used images, mixing both images and mediums of image-making grandly and nonchalantly, with wit: regally and disruptively in the astounding giant mosaic version in small shards and rectangles of stone and glass, reaching floor to ceiling, of a pre-existing multi-colored (black, white, pink, gray) oil-on-screenprint abstraction. This is placed by the artist and his inspired curator Anne Pontégnie on the back wall of the furthest extent of the U-shaped space. It's like the patient monarch ensconced in his chamber while out in the castle halls petitioning upright paint and metal courtiers teem, awaiting an audience.

The news hook regarding the current show is its setting and unconventional purpose. Wool, as most readers will know, got his start in the DIY and radically provocative street-oriented art surge following punk in New York in the eighties, but is now one of the more extravagantly collected artists. These decades of crazy high-end prices for new art, largely enabled by tax cuts for the wealthy, have changed the culture of artmaking in many ways. My feeling is that art-critical focus on it is boring. All interesting artists are different from each other and anyway their relationship to money isn't one of the more interesting things about them or their work. A large proportion of great art has been created for the satisfaction of patrons. It benefits artists that the wealthy will buy their works for status. There are direct downsides to the situation for the artists too, mostly that it's boring! They end up having to operate like corporate executives running systems. The easy thing is to succumb to it and start seeing yourself as a factory (sometimes it's even the fun thing).

My sense is that Wool was simply fed up with feeling like a gameboard piece in the art business. Yes, he's rich now and influential—so that can be the means to DIY on a larger scale. The new departure of making the sculptures has also caused the artist to focus on the importance of setting. When he heard about all the vacant office space created by lockdown, it occurred to him that maybe he could do a show where he was responsible for all aspects of presentation, while also temporarily dispensing with the profit equation. Nothing is for sale and the exhibition space is a very large, abandoned, stripped-raw office deep in the Financial District. It's a derelict, grungy, lightly graffitied, semi-unpainted vacancy on the nineteenth floor, alive with light from countless large windows looking out in three directions over the New York Harbor and some of the most historically significant land in the city. It's like being a kid again. The show is fantastic.

Richard Hell