The New York Times

October 24, 2013

Painting's Endgame, Rendered Graphically

By ROBERTA SMITH

Christopher Wool is one of many painters who have experimented with bringing their medium to extinction. They strip it of familiar attributes like imagery, brushwork or flatness, often ending up with some kind of monochrome that suggests the last painting that could possibly be made.

Again and again, these works make viewers ask, in effect: Are you kidding me? That's a painting?

In the postwar years at least, these endgame artists have made their supposedly last paintings and then done one of three things. Some, including most first-generation Conceptual artists, move on to other mediums (although some have circled back). Others, like Robert Ryman, with his endlessly varied white paintings, or Daniel Buren, with his repurposed striped awning canvas, stay put, finding plenty to do despite the seemingly reduced circumstances. Still others work their way back from the brink, toward complexity; a prime example is Frank Stella.

Like many of his predecessors, Mr. Wool, now 58, flirted with extinction at the beginning of his career, initially making thin-skinned paintings using rubber stamps and house-painting rollers, following the hands-off tradition initiated by Jackson Pollock's dripped canvases and Andy Warhol's silk-screen images. But then he did something slightly different, keeping his work narrow while expanding it with a few carefully-arrived-at techniques and motifs used in increasingly complex combinations. That circumscribed expansion is basically the plotline of Mr. Wool's handsome, challenging survey of paintings, works on paper and photographs at the Guggenheim Museum.

His bold, often graphic works, which are predominantly black and white, belong to that amorphous category of art that looks great in Frank Lloyd Wright's spiral rotunda. Yet the show is not without problems. It can seem padded, especially with three series of dark, grainy photographs that make the gritty urban sensibility behind the work explicit but don't need five bays of wall space to do so.

Worse still, there is no sign of Mr. Wool's brief span of early work, namely vaguely neo-Expressionist cream-and-black figurative work and monochromes he exhibited in

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New York in his first two solo shows at the Cable Gallery on lower Broadway in 1984 and 1986.

This gives his art a sprung-from-the-head-of-Zeus suddenness that shortchanges everyone — Mr. Wool, the viewer and especially younger artists, who always learn from a glimpse of first steps.

Generally, however, this exhibition is an elegant experiential treat, one that can teach a lot about pictorial power, the act of looking as exploration and the simple physical innovations that are basic to painting's evolution. With Mr. Wool, the recurring question becomes not only "Is that a painting?" but also "Is that actually painted?" And the answer often is: No, not strictly speaking.

In recent years, he has made paintings of the no-hands variety, using both silk-screen and digital printing, often of images of previous paintings. He warns us right up front about this possibility with a large painting of a big Abstract Expressionist splash of loud pink that hangs alone on the ground level of the rotunda. It is actually a silk-screen of a much-enlarged splash of enamel printed on four sheets of paper that were then glued to a canvas. (The seams are quite visible.)

Mr. Wool made his name in the late 1980s, when the excesses of Neo-Expressionist painting were waning and a more satirical, hard-edge, commodity-conscious kind of art called Neo Geo was ascendant. By then, he had switched from oil on canvas to enamel, usually black, on aluminum panels painted stark white. Borrowing from Neo Geo hardness and Conceptual attitude, he eliminated painterly touch and emphasized randomness and a dystopian vision. At the time, these works looked unremittingly Minimalist, and skeptical in a way that painting hadn't looked for a while.

Some feature banal patterns of vines or trellises applied with either the rubber stamps or the rollers incised with repeating motifs, used by house painters to simulate wallpaper cheaply. (They can resemble refrigerator doors that someone tried to decorate.) Other paintings from this period are more confrontational, freighted with harsh language and potentially explosive emotions. Their images are simply big stenciled capital letters that resolve into compressed words and phrases that Mr. Wool had been collecting, mostly from movies and record-album notes, with no particular goal in mind.

These paintings conflate the act of seeing, reading and even speaking as you tease and sound out the meanings of their run-on or awkwardly broken words. Best known is "Apocalypse Now" (1988), which starkly announces, "Sell the House, Sell the Car, Sell the Kids," a line from Francis Ford Coppola's movie of the same name. (It is represented here by a small study, since its owner, a former hedge-fund manager and Guggenheim

trustee, has decided that now is a good time to put it up for auction.)

Sometimes the phrasing is deliberately enigmatic, as with a later word painting that says, "The Harder You Look, the Harder You Look." Sometimes, letters are missing. One early painting here is the 1989 "Trouble," which renders its title as a very big four-letter word: TRBL, arranged in letters stacked two over two. As with many endgame paintings, these made you wonder what Mr. Wool might do next.

His solutions unwind up the ramp in fairly strict chronological order, gaining strength as they go. Works from different decades are mixed together only at the very beginning, in the museum's High Gallery, and at the very end, in the gallery off the sixth level of the ramp, forming short summations of his range. Throughout, we see an artist who has picked sparingly from the art around him, not only from Minimalist painting and Conceptual art, but appropriation art and street graffiti, too.

In the mid-1990s, the word and rollered paintings were followed by cheerful found images of flowers, enlarged and silk-screened in increasingly complex layers, sometimes canceled with swaths of black or white only to be silk-screened again. The buildups yielded messy clotted centers and telling details at the margins: stems, petals and flowerpots but also bits of the rollered patterns.

In the late 1990s, Mr. Wool guardedly reintroduced overt hand making in the form of looping lines of black applied with a spray gun. With these, he further defaced the flower paintings while also making paintings of the tangled loops alone, suggesting a freshman graffiti artist. Soon he was making digital prints of these tangles and gluing them to canvas, and then realized that all his previous paintings were fodder for future work.

He also began wiping away the spray-gunned lines with rags and then brushes soaked with turpentine, creating atmospheric shades of gray with black lines lashing in and out. The works that result from this process, found at the top of the ramp, often have a tremendous scale and an unexpected exuberance. They hark back to Abstract Expressionism airily, without angst.

Mr. Wool and Katherine Brinson, the Guggenheim curator responsible for the show, have taken care to juggle works in ways that encourage us to see distinctions among them, juxtaposing the same motifs in printed and painted form that stand alone or are buried between layers of other patterns and images. Some works are all hands, others are no hands, some are both. Figuring out which is which and what difference it makes is up to us.

In many ways, Mr. Wool has rendered moot the distinction between original and copy

where painting is concerned without sacrificing complexity. His primary aid has been transparency: the ease with which we comprehend the layers of deliberation and chance that give visual life to his surfaces. How a painting is made has long been part of its content — before Pollock for sure, and even before Manet. Mr. Wool contributes to that continuum.

"Christopher Wool" is on view through Jan. 22 at the Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, at 89th Street; (212) 423-3500, guggenheim.org.