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## Saltz: Christopher Wool's Stenciled Words Speak Loudly—and Not Everyone Wants to Listen

By Jerry Saltz



Christopher Wool's *Trouble* (1989). Photo: Christopher Wool/Courtesy of the Guggenheim Museum of Art, New York

In the catalogue accompanying Christopher Wool's impressive retrospective now at the Guggenheim, the artist Richard Prince writes of this artist's multiple uses of "spray-painted swirls ... transfer drips, splatters, puddles, and 'by-the-by' patterns," and how they "taught an old dog new tricks." The "old dog" here is painting; the "new tricks" are the ways in which Wool's greasy-looking, commanding surfaces, the narrow formal confines he set for himself, and his ambiguous polycentric spaces create alchemical cyclotrons. Wool's paintings of blocky letters, words, and phrases; abstract graphic fields filled with erasures; and boxy geometries implausibly synthesize the gesturalism of mid-century Modernism—now out of style, semi-forbidden—with cooler art from the age of mechanical reproduction. Think of his paintings as places where Warhol's disaster, flower, and Rorschach paintings meet Pollock's and de Kooning's, all done in black mucoid goo. The results have made Wool, 58, among the most influential mid-career American painters.

Wool's work can grate, be hard to like, easy to hate. And when it's hated, it's hated hard. He's a risky subject for the Guggenheim, one that might alienate wide audiences and critics alike. Many of these blunt scribble-and-smear paintings can leave lay audiences shaking their heads at yet another art-star strutting his disaffected noir-ness. Moreover, the show is simultaneously too long and not comprehensive enough. I dig his gritty black-and-white pictures of New York, but there are just too many of them for most visitors to take. Yet there's no pre-1987 painting here—work that would explain how Wool emerged in the years when painting was going through another one of its nervous breakdowns. So was his work. No matter: I'm such a 30-year fan that I walked up the Guggenheim's ramp thinking I'd take any one of these home.

Not everyone would. Brilliant critics, especially the male ones, have lambasted Wool. Dave Hickey deemed his work "trendy negativity ... academically palatable brand of designer-punk agitprop." The L.A. Times's Christopher Knight dismissed it as "banal," "impoverished," and "startlingly conservative." LA Weekly's Doug Harvey seethed that "shtick-crippled" Wool's paintings are "pedantic crap." The Guardian's Adrian Searle tweeted recently: "He. Is. Just. Not. That. Good." These guys don't like that Wool's art isn't "beautiful" in traditional painterly ways and isn't dryly conceptual or pop. I think it splits the difference and arrives at something electric and generative. Just last week, my pal Peter Schjeldahl came right out and wrote that he does "fondly wish ... for a champion whose art is richer in beauty and charm." For me, Wool's work has a lot of both.

So be it if Wool's art is something some people cross the street to avoid. The show begins with a typically twisted bang in the gallery off the entry ramp. On your left is a large word painting in navy enamel on a stark white-aluminum ground. Like all of Wool's paintings, it looks like an abstract X-ray. Generic, stenciled, gridded-out letters run almost edge to edge. There's no punctuation; all the letters are the same size; everything forms an enormously long run-on sentence. Then it decays into babble, executing a nifty Cézanne-ish trick: When you stop trying to read it

straight, arrangements, orders, and compositions appear. (The writer Jim Lewis describes it this way: “When you multiply misunderstanding ... meaning emerges.”) Finally, you make out the first words of the painting: THE SHOW IS OVER. They’re from Greil Marcus’s classic punk-rock text, *Lipstick Traces*, and are a perfect metaphor for the artistic dilemma Wool, his in-between generation, and painting itself found themselves in, in the eighties. Starting an exhibition by saying THE SHOW IS OVER—much as *Apocalypse Now* begins, with Jim Morrison singing “This is the end”—adds paradoxical layers.

As you make your way up the ramp, other paintings of single words like PLEASE, RIOT, and FOOL turn up, as do phrases like YOU MAKE ME and THE HARDER YOU LOOK. It’s like moving through the city and hearing it talk back to you: “Do not block driveway,” “No pets,” “Valid I.D. required.” Glenn O’Brien once called Wool’s work “sign-painting with feedback,” and that feedback goes almost infinite in my favorite Wool painting—the one that quotes words never spoken, only seen, in *Apocalypse Now*: SELL THE HOUSE SELL THE CAR SELL THE KIDS. The moment I first saw this painting in 1988, I gleaned a different kind of border-to-border abstraction, the simple dense expression of complex thought. The painting became an epic three-line novel. The Guggenheim wisely decided not to show this magnum opus, presumably because its owner has chosen next week to sell it at Christie’s, where the estimate is \$15 million to \$20 million. Maybe the painting gets the last laugh, as Wool’s own work often taunts such opportunists. The painting taunts such foul hysteria.

Higher up on the ramp, we move beyond word paintings—they are in the minority here—and we instead see Wool continually recycling abstract gestures, motifs, marks, and meandering lines; exploring glutted matte surfaces, uneven blocked-out areas, fragmented overlaps of screened images, faint traces of Benday dots. There are works with repeating flowers. There’s little all-out color. A few blocks of spattered yellow; a couple of paintings have sashes of a rust-colored cinnamon. Some deep blues read as solid black. There are paintings that look like they’ve been wiped down and almost blotted out. Other times, there are rolled-on areas of splotchy whites, stamped marks, oblong flecks. For me, Wool captures the ways New York looks, sounds, and smells in our time, much as Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings embody the city’s texture in the fifties. I see Wool creating new order out of all this chaos. I see little epiphanies and glean the same clashing, gritty, seemingly haphazard, abrasive, bludgeoning beauty that all of us who live in and love New York can’t live without.