

## ▼ Art

# What're You Lookin' At?

Christopher Wool spells it out **BY R.C. BAKER**

**C**hristopher Wool had the good fortune to begin painting at a time when painting was dead. Again.

In the mid-1970s, Wool had a studio at the butt-end of the Bowery. During that rowdy and ragged epoch, artists were forming punk bands, making DIY films, and cranking out zines. In 1981, curator Douglas Crimp published “The End of Painting,” an essay asserting that the medium had been on life support throughout the modern era. Crimp, a champion of photography, wrote that painting’s claim to timeless universality — stretching seamlessly from Paleolithic cave murals to Pollock’s passionate drips — was a grandiose illusion. Look, part of his argument went, at how canvases first executed as altarpieces or royal portraits were wrenched out of historical context and entombed in museums.

Wool, for his part, eschewed the market-driven slatherings of the era’s Neo-Expressionist painting and searched for strategies that might give the medium new vitality; by the late ’80s, he found himself dumpster-diving in the chasm between art and language. He avoided the trouble of originating subject matter by painting words in stacks of black block letters, such as “SEX” atop “LOVE,” or “PLEASE” repeated five times. Similar to Warhol’s cribbing of newspaper photos of car crashes for his “Disaster” paintings,

Wool appropriated phrases from pop culture’s darker reaches, including

SELL THE  
HOUSE S  
ELL THE C  
AR SELL  
THE KIDS

Images © Christopher Wool

from *Apocalypse Now*.

He once read a Raymond Chandler excerpt at an art opening — “It is not funny that a man should be killed, but it is sometimes funny that he should be killed for so little” — and, like Chandler’s tales of hard-boiled dicks, Wool’s own work is laced with sardonic wit. A 1988 panel reads — or rather, misreads — “HEL/TER/HEL/TER,” the wall label noting that the painting refers to both the Beatles raver “Helter Skelter” and its appropriation by Charles Manson as the theme song for an apocalyptic race war. What the museum’s explanation leaves out is that when Manson’s murderous minions scrawled the phrase

on a refrigerator in their victims’ blood, they got it wrong as well: “HEALTER SKELTER.”

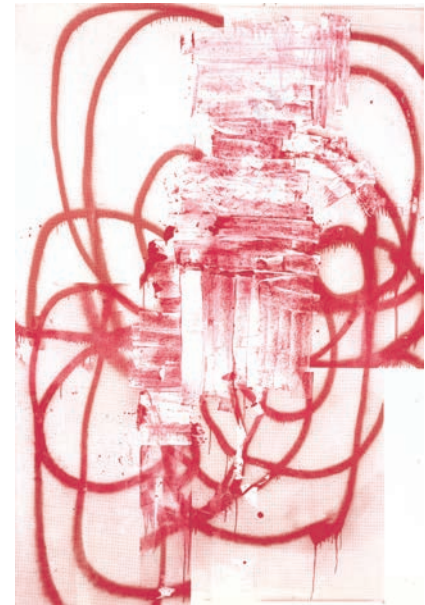
Wool’s herky-jerky spacing — like type defaulting in a printer — and overpainted letters interrupt quick readings and force the brain to slow down to absorb the often lush subtleties of his surfaces. Clement Greenberg could have been talking about these nuanced images of words when he said, about Barnett Newman’s stripes in 1958, “All pictures of quality ask to be looked at rather than read.”

In fact, Wool goes hammer and tongs not just at Pop Art but also at Abstract Expressionism; his more recent work dispenses with text altogether and instead filters abstraction through various mechanical printing processes. But unlike Roy Lichtenstein, who simultaneously enlarged Ab-Ex brushstrokes while diminishing them through inert compositions, Wool expands on the grave abandon of postwar abstraction while continuing to roil concepts of language. The abstract black snarls in the nine-foot-tall *He Said She Said* (2001) actually comprise four different, sloppily aligned silkscreens derived from an earlier orange spray painting. These formal ruptures get at the heart of the title phrase, fraught as it is with intimations of misunderstanding and flayed emotion.

In an untitled work from that same year, Wool again screenprinted pictures of an earlier spray painting onto linen. This time

**Christopher Wool**

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum  
1071 Fifth Avenue  
212-423-3500, guggenheim.org  
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Left: *Apocalypse Now*, 1988;  
above: *Untitled*, 2001

he used rich red ink, which he hacked at with a palette knife as it dried, leavening energetic gestures into the mechanically rendered dots — themselves representations of the body’s movements — and landing the image somewhere between de Kooning-like grace and graffiti aggression.

Along with tactile beauty, narrative sensation, and anthropomorphic presence (some of the painting attributes that Crimp found “reactionary” in 1981), these works emit a belligerent buoyancy. Maybe the next time a critic pontificates on the death of Wool’s obviously beloved medium, the riposte will come in a 10-foot-tall slab of letters spelling out something like:

**PAIN T I  
NGSPITS  
O N YOU  
R GRAVE**