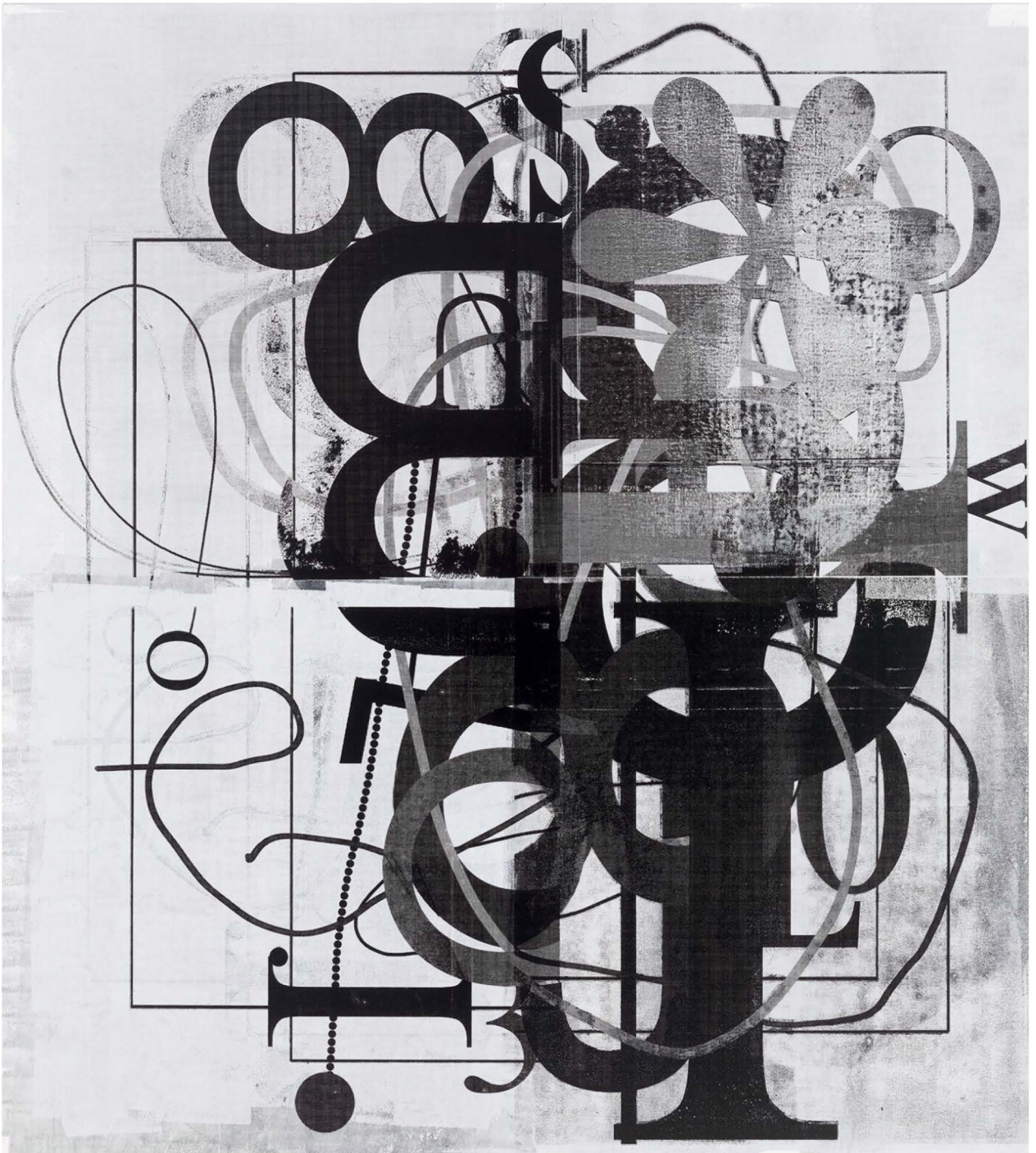


INTERVIEW

Christopher Wool by Paul Stephens

Art that opens up new and old questions.

JULY 22, 2024



Christopher Wool, *Untitled*, 2014, silkscreen ink and enamel on linen, 108 x 78 inches. Photo by Tim Nighswander/IMAGING4ART.

© Christopher Wool.

See Stop Run (<https://www.seestoprun.com>), a survey of Christopher Wool's works of the past decade, takes place on the entire nineteenth floor of an unoccupied space in the heart of New York City's financial district. The artist has chosen an independent venue in order to escape the presumed neutrality of the "white cube" as an idealized context. The city permeates the exhibition through windows that wrap around the full 18,000-square-foot installation.

Curated with Anne Pontégnie, *See Stop Run* situates Wool's work within a specific context, where the art and its environment interact. The exhibition emphasizes Wool's complex image-making process and the interconnectivity between mediums: painting, sculpture, photography, and mosaic. This is the artist's largest exhibition since 2014 and runs until the end of July.

Paul Stephens

You must be pleased with how the show at 101 Greenwich has turned out?

Christopher Wool

There's something going on at 101 Greenwich that puts people in a good mood. A week before we opened, we had no idea if anyone was going to come. This idea that people spend time there and are relaxed, I'm touched by it. I'm there a lot. Artists never sit in their own exhibitions; it would be very awkward. But I spend time there, and strangers come up and talk to me. My sense is, and I could be wrong, that people are hungry for it somehow, which may not just be the art world; it could easily be the pandemic as well. It's been a trip.

PS

There are no text works in the show. You recently did illustrations for Richard Hell's book *What Just Happened* (<https://www.wintereditions.net/product/what-just-happened/>), and those works are in a digital mode and feature some text, but no color and no brush work; it's all done on the computer. Did you make a conscious choice to move away from text, or was it a gradual evolution?

CW

It's been thirty years since I did the text paintings. I remember the language part became frustrating as an abstract painter. I also remember thinking I would like to find a way of doing it abstractly, and it may have taken twenty years. This work with typeface came out of a previous project with Richard Hell that we had also collaborated on: the artist's book *Psychopts*.

PS

There's really no semantic content in the illustrations for Hell's *What Just Happened*? Or am I missing something?

CW

No, you're definitely not missing something. I think there's meaning here, but the texts are abstract.



Christopher Wool, *Untitled (Billboard)*, 1992, *Steirischer Herbst*, Graz. © Christopher Wool.

PS

Were these new works a kind of reaction to the stencil paintings? You're typecast as having done them, but a central feature of them is that although they're stenciled, they're artful in their spacing, letter count, and arrangement. But it's not necessarily a gestural practice?

CW

I think it is, in fact. They should be repeatable, but they're not because of all of those painterly issues. There was a painting, *RIOT* (1990), and it got badly damaged—destroyed, really—and they asked me to make another one, which normally I wouldn't, but I was kind of curious if it were possible. And it was really a disaster. It just didn't have any magic. I could kind of sense it, but I wasn't smart enough. The collector got the painting and didn't like it, so even he could see the difference, though what that difference was is hard to describe. You would think a stenciled, four-letter painting would be repeatable, but it's not. If you were to look at one of those paintings in person, you would realize just how gestural they were. They may have pushed the notion of what "gesture" could be, but they were not simply type on a page. But again, I felt quickly frustrated working with things that needed to have literal meaning as opposed to the openness of abstraction. The new prints I suppose are in a small way a reaction against those frustrations.

How this ties back to the text paintings was not something I was thinking about all that much because the whole thing with the text paintings is that they had to linguistically say something, and, as an abstract painter, I found that confining. Once I would print them or paint them, there was very little I could do to work with them. I would work the layout in advance very carefully just doing things on paper. There wasn't room to change the layout. In the end, there wasn't a lot of painting involved. I lost interest pretty quickly.



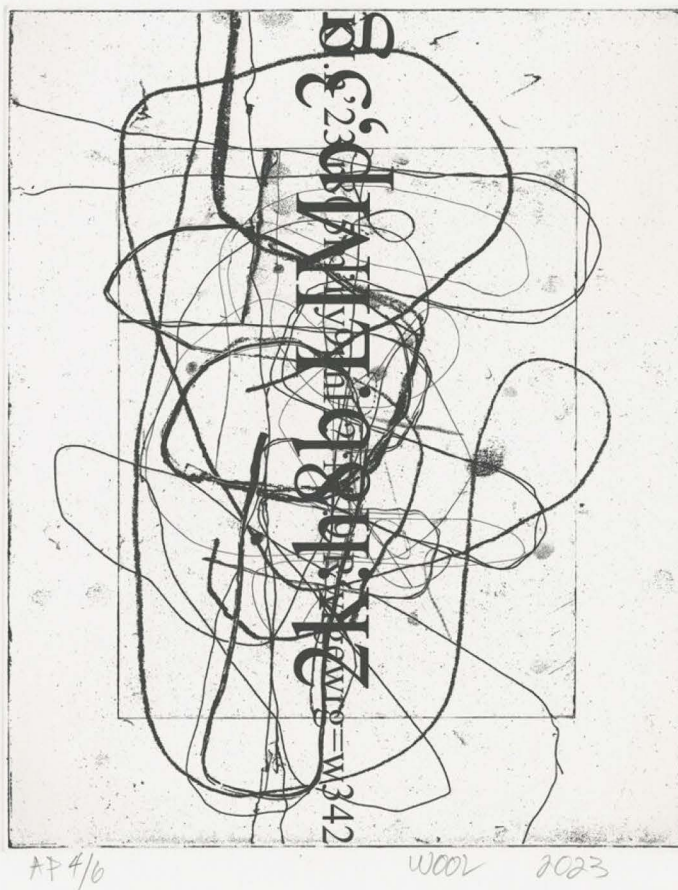
Installation view of *Christopher Wool: See Stop Run*, 2024. 101 Greenwich Street. Courtesy of Christopher Wool. © Christopher Wool.

PS

It feels like there are many happy accidents in how this show came together. Have you thought about the ghost of Herman Melville? The show looks down on the Customs House, where he worked for twenty years after finishing *Moby-Dick*. And he was born just a few blocks from here on Pearl Street.

CW

I didn't know that. Do you know the Reginald Marsh paintings there? He was commissioned to do those at the Customs House. They're frescos. He had done two for the US Post Office main headquarters in DC. He spent two years sketching at the harbor, and all the boats are from real sketches. He worked in the basement across the street. And this was before we discovered the space. I've known about those paintings forever. The building was built in nineteen-oh-something. When was Melville alive? It must not have been that same building.



Christopher Wool, *Defenestration Suite #5*, 2023, photogravure, 18 x 15 inches. © Christopher Wool.

PS

From 1819 to 1891. It might have been on the same site, but it must have been a different building. I think he worked dawn until dusk at a patronage job. He might not have worked all that hard, but he didn't want to be there. Bartleby of course stops writing text altogether, which can be taken as a kind of allegory for Melville's frustration with his lack of success. But your move beyond text, as you say, makes sense in the context of being an abstract painter. And I suppose the fusion of stenciled text and abstract painting is there from Jasper Johns forward, so maybe not that much of interest to you?

CW

There's Ed Ruscha, and Jenny Holzer, and maybe more importantly Jean-Michel Basquiat, whose work I knew well. At some point in the '80s, I told my friend Adam Simon that there was no way you could make a good painting with text in it. I told him that it was simply a no-no. I had forgotten I said it.

PS

It's interesting that there isn't handwritten or scriptive text in your work.

CW

When I did the text paintings, I was very consciously taking my hand out of most of what I was doing. I was using stencils and printing techniques. It took quite a long time to get comfortable with my own hand, and I still almost always have something between the hand and the artwork. The computer is just another brush in a way. Or if you use it in that way.

PS

Richard Prince has written that you don't "give much information." Possibly your work doesn't lend itself to explanation in a question-and-answer format?

CW

Part of why interviews have been hard for me is that I work with ideas that aren't easily put to words, which can be frustrating. My fear always was that if I say this is about that, then people will think that's all it's about. Whereas painting can function under so many valences. For a painter to say, "I believe in this" — suddenly the opposite becomes a possibility. I think I've evolved a little bit, but those were my original problems with doing interviews. I don't want to say what something's about if it's going to mean it's not about something else. Richard Prince is great at it because he can treat it as fiction, and it just becomes part of the work. He can do an interview in the same spirit as his work by fictionalizing it or turning it into literature or whatever. He's really good at it, I think, and a great writer.

"Part of why interviews have been hard for me is that I work with ideas that aren't easily put to words."

— Christopher Wool

PS

It would also make sense that interviews are difficult for you if the interview is a promotional form or if it's giving a rubric for a career, or form, or mode. Instead, there are continuities in your work, a layering throughout, where it's not an abrupt shift or an exceptional biography of events that happened to you.

CW

No, it's not that kind of work. I didn't have a lot of stories to tell. I'm not like Marsh. Those paintings are almost unknown. I asked Alex Katz, who's in his mid-nineties, if he wanted to go see the Marsh paintings, but he said, "No, I don't do input anymore." We all assume input is so important.

In a way, that's a good description of how we put the exhibition together. There are many interconnected parts creating multiple storylines, which I think is much more how most artists work or at least how I work. Interviews are more about answers, and art is at its most interesting when it's opening up new and old questions.

Christopher Wool: See *Stop Run* (<https://www.seestoprunk.com>) is on view at 101 Greenwich Street in New York City until July 31.

Paul Stephens is the author of *Absence of Clutter: Minimal Writing as Art and Literature* (MIT Press, 2020) and the editor of N. H. Pritchard's *The Mundus: A Novel with Voices* (forthcoming from Primary Information).