

CHRISTOPHER WOOL

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART LOS ANGELES

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Confessions first: I am not a “pure” critic. I routinely purchase works of art with the money I earn by writing about them. In my youth, I actually owned a gallery and sold art for a living. As a consequence, I never stroll through an institutional exhibition, in my role as art critic, unaccompanied by my two unfashionable alter-egos: the low-end collector and the ex-art dealer. These guys usually feel marginalized on such occasions, since present fashion dictates that we look at art the way we listen to songs on the radio—looking for the two-minute stand—the short-attention-span bang of the single encounter. Collectors and dealers are always looking for a long-term relationship, for nuances in the shifting sociability of people and objects, and there is not much of that around.

Strolling through Christopher Wool’s midcareer survey, however, Herr Collector and Mister Dealer were happy as pigs in shit, and why not? Wool’s black-and-white, alkyd-on-aluminum paintings rank among the quintessential advanced “collector objects” of the previous decade. They are portable, presentable, serious, intelligent, and covertly congenial—replete with the attitudinal signifiers and no-look formalism that characterize this kind of work in our time. So Herr Collector and Mister Dealer got right to it. They wandered from room to room in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, deciding whether *this* painting would hold up better than *that* one, and why this was so. They checked out the labels (to see who bought what) and were not amazed to find that Wool’s best paintings reside in the best collections—thus betraying a clandestine discourse of taste nowhere alluded to in the verbiage that accompanies the exhibition. They had a lovely time, in other words, and I was happy for them.

Viewed from the perspective of Monsieur Art Critic, however, Wool’s exhibition is a singularly unprepossessing affair, and the artist is not well served by it. At

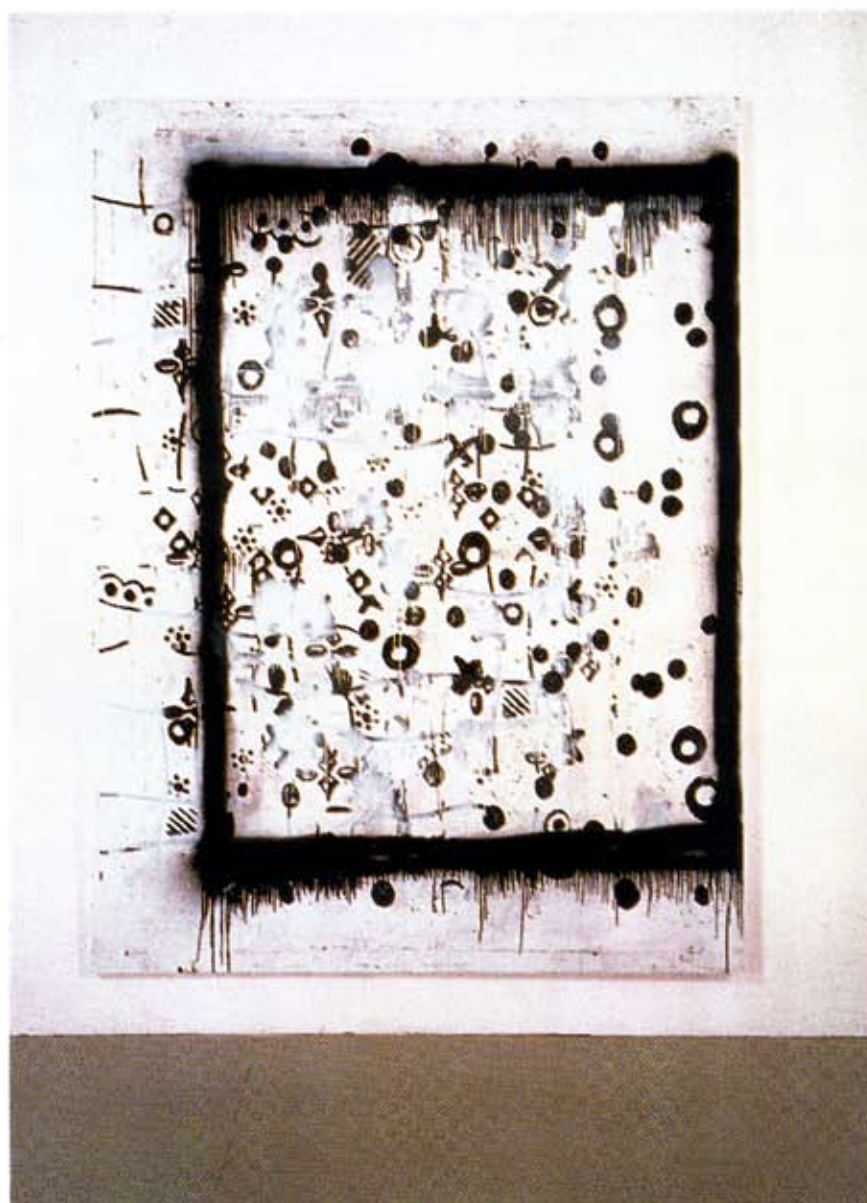
no point during my visit could I avoid the feeling that I was looking at the wrong art, in the wrong place, at the wrong time, and that it was being recommended to me for the wrong reasons. The problem of location is particularly daunting. Museum exhibitions, after all, must take place in museums, and unfortunately the heartless, colorless conceptual ambiance of the contemporary kunsthalle is precisely the "look" that Christopher Wool is marketing to private collectors in whose homes his simulacra of downtown, not-for-profit virtue look tough and elegant. They allow private citizens a little touch of Dia in the living room and the paintings truly thrive in these secular contexts. Actually hanging a painting by Christopher Wool in a museum, however, is like reprinting one of Andy's Marilyns in *Photoplay*. It seems at once redundant and oddly dissonant—like the weird tang of a chicken omelet—the kunsthalle being the chicken, in this case, and Wool's painting the egg.

The elegance of Wool's pictorial inversion is so powerful, however, that it is easy to overlook the fact that he is, over and above all else, a painter, one whose work is so deeply imbricated in the recent

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discourse of American and European practice that I can't think of a single major figure in the last forty years with whose work Wool's does not share some reference or resonance. Whether his work will have followers commensurate with its predecessors is another issue entirely. Speaking for myself, I rather doubt it. Wool's paintings constitute the absolute, refined, Protestant, *ne plus ultra* in a tradition of ornamental imagemaking that, in American art, runs from Pollock and Warhol to Wool, Philip Taaffe, Lari Pittman, and Jeff Koons. As the single Dissenter amidst Papish idolaters like Taaffe and Pittman, Wool employs the ambiance and iconography of the contemporary Congregationalist chapel, the kunsthalle, as the language of his devotion.

The interesting question is whether



Opposite page: "Christopher Wool." View of the exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1998. Photo: Brian Forrest. This page: Christopher Wool, *Untitled*, 1997, enamel on aluminum, 96 x 72".

Wool's pictorial appropriation of the Congregationalist kunsthalle actually constitutes an endorsement of its politics—its fervent commitment to "critique." For reasons too obvious to mention, I suspect not. The institutional supporting cast of his exhibition, however, seems to have proceeded on the unlikely assumption that representation is the sincerest form of flattery, thus fetishizing the virtuous "look" of Wool's work regardless of its context or function. This essentialist bias is nowhere more evident than in the exhibition's willfully *de trop* catalogue, which opts for the same sort of upscale, down-market ambiance as the exhibition. The book is

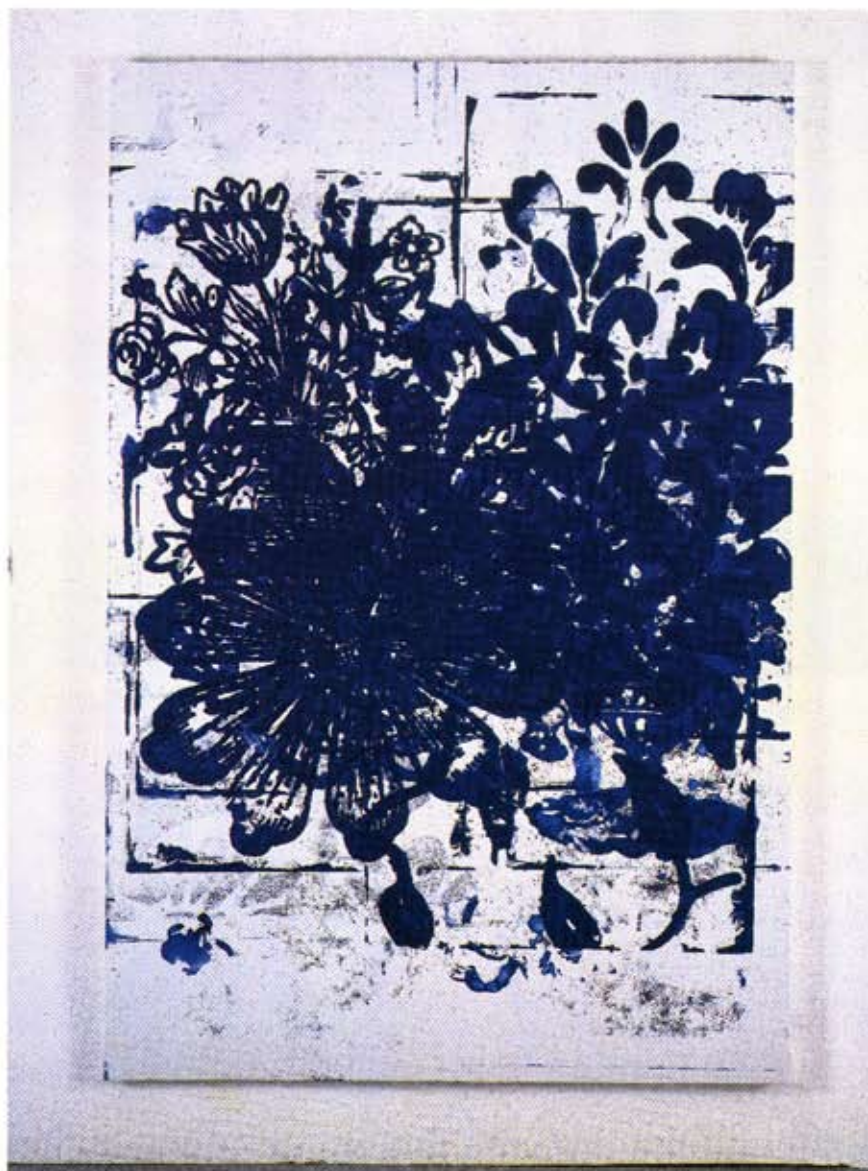
composed of 242 pages of black-and-white photographs of Wool's work in situ (captions in back), thirty-seven pages of unillustrated texts by Thomas Crow, Ann Goldstein, Madeleine Grynsztejn, Gary Indiana, and Jim Lewis, and no color.

The black-and-white photographs (of which there are, perhaps, a surfeit) reinforce the desired atmosphere of trendy negativity by neutralizing the relationship of Wool's work to its physical context. The essays, when they are not favoring us with local color and downtown anomie, seem wholly dedicated to confirming Wool's status as The Painter Least Offensive to Advocates of Eighties Conceptual-

ism while verbally transforming Wool's puritan aestheticism into an academically palatable brand of designer-punk agitprop. Taken as a whole, in fact, Ann Goldstein's curatorial and editorial strategies seem designed to obfuscate (as intellectually as possible) and to deny (as passionately as possible) the true occasion for this exhibition—which is nonetheless advertised on page 112 of the catalogue, where we are granted a privileged (and uncaptioned) peek at Wool's painting *Riot* hanging in the Beverly Hills home of one of the exhibition's benefactors.

And there is not a thing wrong with this! Purchasing a painting is not yet a felony in the people's republic, nor is private generosity. Over the last ten years, quite a few

wealthy, discerning citizens have purchased Christopher Wool's paintings at admirable prices and have installed them in their homes—and this *means* something. It's interesting, too. It says something about art, about the evolving culture that produces it, and about elite taste in the preceding decade, so why *shouldn't* a democratic institution borrow these objects for a couple of months? Why shouldn't they provide us lesser dudes with a glimpse at what the other half looks at while they're waiting for their *eau minérale*? And why can't this democratic institution simply show us these paintings, for this reason, without obfuscation, apology, or denial? A critical mass of private acquisitions is a perfectly decent excuse to mount an exhibi-



Left to right: This page: Christopher Wool, *Please Please Please*, 1994, enamel on aluminum, 90 x 60".
Christopher Wool, *Untitled*, 1990, enamel on aluminum, 108 x 72".

bition of paintings. It is certainly the most traditional one, and in the case of Christopher Wool's paintings in the present moment, very nearly the *only* one.

If we discount the private popularity of Wool's paintings, in fact, I can't imagine another pressing reason, beyond curatorial whim, to mount such an exhibition right now. Because Wool's paintings, for all their thoughtful virtues, are neither particularly trenchant nor particularly timely. They are just *ten-years-ago*—and, in the art world, ancient Greece is more adjacent to the present moment. With Wool's paintings, this is even more the case, since, during the decade of their private vogue, they have generated no aura of public enthusiasm or hostility; they have occasioned no significant body of critical discourse, nor have they had any meaningful visible impact on the work of the new young painters, who tend to regard Wool as the anxious vicar of '80s painting, obsessed with manners, morals, and dress codes to which they no longer give much credence.

Five years ago, this exhibition would have caught the wave as it shattered on the beach. Five years from now, it would provide us an interesting and illuminating reminder of the artistic and intellectual preoccupations of an older generation. Right now, it's just *ten years ago*, and thus, not surprisingly, the aspect of Wool's work that most bemuses younger painters (that makes his paintings seem quaint to them) is exactly the quality that recommends them to the curator of this exhibition and to the essayists in the catalogue: i.e., *their total deniability as paintings*. Wool's paintings look like paintings, of course. They hang where paintings hang and sell at painting prices, but they are not, it seems, *really* paintings, because they are not made of beaux-arts painting materials, nor painted the way beaux-arts paintings are supposedly supposed to be painted. Yeah, right.

Nor, it would seem, do Wool's paintings even have a *palette*, as paintings do. The flower paintings and the wallpaper paintings portray subjects that we *expect* to be in color, so the black-and-white reads not as color, but as signifier of its suppression. The black-and-white of Wool's stenciled text paintings is simply normative iconography. Supposedly, then, this condition of visual negativity renders the *content* of the images deniable, as well. The roll-on wallpaper paintings are not really roll-on wallpaper. The flower paintings are not really flower paintings, nor are the graffiti paintings really graffiti



(meaning: Wool takes no responsibility for the smug, *Miss Saigon* cynicism of the texts). The simple fact is that these paintings, as Jim Lewis implies in the best essay in the catalogue, are *pictures* of paintings. They aspire to signify the *absence* of their presence—a condition that makes them all the more welcome in homes that are about as likely to feature wallpaper, flower paintings, and graffiti as they are to sport a butter churn.

Beyond the efficacy of this total negation as a marketing strategy, however, I can't imagine what this rhetoric of denial might mean at the present. I suspect that it doesn't mean anything. Privative effects in art are notoriously local and ephemeral. Our response to what the artist is *not doing* in a work of art is absolutely dependent on our knowing which, of all the *zillions* of things the artist is not doing, he or she is not doing *purposefully*—and we can't be *told* this by some curator; we need to know it in our bodies. I remember seeing my first Don Judd box and feeling its reductive force in my solar plexus. Five years later, the positivity of the object had reasserted itself, and, although the piece remained handsome, it looked like designer office furniture. I also remember standing in Bob Zakanitch's studio on White Street in the early '70s. We were looking at one of Zakanitch's early wallpaper paintings—a painting that, in the artist's view, didn't quite work. "You know," Zakanitch said, "just because it looks like wallpaper, doesn't mean it's not." Words to live by. □

Dave Hickey's most recent book is *Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy* (Art Issues).