

When critics clash: Artist Christopher Wool sparks a provocative difference of opinion

CHRISTOPHER WOOL
Luhring Augustine
531 West 24th Street
Through December 23

HARD ATTACK

BY JERRY SALTZ



Photograph by Robin Holland

Christopher Wool is the New York painter West Coast critics love to hate—and I mean *hate*. This became clear to me while I was boning up to write on Wool's current Luhring Augustine show. Wool was the subject, or more accurately the victim, of one of the most brilliantly damning negative reviews in recent memory—a two-page carpet bombing

of a Wool survey at L.A. MOCA by Dave Hickey in the October 1998 *Artforum*. I never saw the show, but the review stuck with me. It whacked Wool's work as "the wrong art, in the wrong place, at the wrong time," reprimanded him for "marketing trendy negativity . . . and an academically palatable brand of designer-punk-agitprop . . . to collectors," and leveled the ultimate insider's attack at Wool, calling him "so ten-years-ago."

It turns out that Hickey did not act alone. Two other West Coasters have been just as nasty about his work. The usually reliable *L.A. Times* critic Christopher Knight lambasted Wool's survey as "the most forlorn exhibition MOCA has offered to date," and called Wool's work "banal," "impoverished," and "startlingly conservative." Shortly thereafter *LA Weekly* critic Doug Harvey got in on the act, writing, "Wool's work benumbs with rote repetition," and is "marked by its intellectual and sensual niggardliness." Two months ago, reviewing an exhibition Wool wasn't even in, Harvey struck again, calling his work "pedantic crap" and "shtick crippled."

I've been a big Wool fan, on and off, since 1988, when, in a breakthrough move, he painted the phrase "Sell the House. Sell the Car. Sell the Kids" in black blocky letters on a stark white ground (the words are from *Apocalypse Now*). His work has always been a disconcerting but alluring combination of resistance, intelligence, and graphic flair. Paintings can look alike and lend themselves to icky academic clichés like "They're about gesture *and* reproduction." Even so, I relish the way Wool stakes everything on a painting being so totally in the present that it is eternally what it was the first instant you saw it: starkly declarative and *always on*. I also like the complex ways Wool does by undoing, as well as the ways he unpacks the problems of modern painting without being negative, decorative, or arch. Nearly every time I see a

Everything out in the open: The Wool installation at Luhring Augustine

Wool I'm hit with a bracingly specific retinal buzz, something brash and beautiful. Even when I don't care for a piece, far from seeming "so ten-years-ago," it retains a vampiric Warholian aliveness.

Wool's current solo consists of 38 so-so splotchy drawings and 18 paintings, four of which hang on two temporary partition walls. Skeptics will accuse him of "marketing." I think he's simply done to installation what he's always done with painting: state something then undermine it, make a proposition then reject it, embrace the whole and explode the parts. The partitions are open on the sides so you can see what they're made of and how they're made. Just as his paintings disallow illusionistic space, Wool is foregrounding the delivery mechanism of the paintings. He likes everything out in the open. There's always this confrontational but defensive, personal-impersonal psychodrama going on with him.

In these new, typically prickly paintings there are ghosts of spray-painted graffiti marks, but no words. Wool's word paintings, which his critics call "smug," allowed you to slip into the twilight zone between thinking and writing and occasionally glean what Lou Reed might have meant by the line "Between thought and expression lies a lifetime." The painterly but mechanical letters set up minimalist "deductive structures" whereby the dimensions of a painting could be inferred from the proportions of the letters. A dialectical mirror was created where reading, structure, sign, and physicality collapsed into one another.

Wool always works in series. Like Agnes Martin or Robert Mangold, he sets up very

narrow parameters, then explores them doggedly. His tools are often only marginally associated with painting: Xerox machines, grainy photographs, paint rollers, stamps, stencils, and whatnot. These new paintings, which are as implacably abstract as a Reinhardt or a Ryman, and look like Richters without the soul, are composed of blotted and blurred shapes, offset lithos and copies of previous paintings, spray-painted lines, stains, smears, drips, rolled-on enamel, and erasures. Because Wool only makes a couple of passes at a painting, his surfaces are silky, only slightly raised, and never labored. These pictures are a combination of Warhol's "Most Wanted" series and his "Rorschach" paintings by way of Franz Kline. Imagery is florid yet obdurate, titles are petulant and punchy, e.g., *All Talk*, *King Walk*, *Eurotrash*, and . . . *Stupid Rabbit*. Wool is as unique as ever, although there are always echoes of other artists in his work. At the moment there are enticing ones of his wife Charline von Heyl's edgy paintings and bygone 10th Street abstraction, as well as his usual dialogue with Richter, Warhol, Richard Prince, Rudolph Stingel, and his gallerymate, Albert Oehlen.

For me, Wool is a very pure version of something dissonant and poignant. His all-or-nothing, caustic-cerebral, ambivalent-belligerent gambit is riveting and even a little thrilling. It's what makes him one of the more optically alive painters out there.