

Seeing Through

ANNE PONTÉGNIE ON CHRISTOPHER WOOL'S *UNTITLED*, 2012

ON OCTOBER 25, a major retrospective of the work of CHRISTOPHER WOOL opened at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, the artist's most comprehensive exhibition to date. But just last year, Wool completed a much quieter and more unusual project: a series of stained-glass windows for a Romanesque chapel in France's Loire Valley. *Artforum* invited curator ANNE PONTÉGNIE, who helped commission the work, to reflect on the windows' luminous realization and their relation to Wool's oeuvre—in a context equally digital and archaic, painterly and crafted, earthly and divine.

This page and opposite:
Christopher Wool, *Untitled* (detail),
2012, glass, lead. Installation
view, Chapelle capitulaire du
Prieuré de la Charité-sur-Loire,
France. Photos: André Morin.





CHRISTOPHER WOOL is not the first name that comes to mind for a church-window commission. Indeed, he is one of the few artists of his generation to have resolutely stayed in front of the earthbound plane of the easel: fighting, sweating, swearing, and bitching until he could find his own solution to the problem of what a painting—and an American, abstract one at that—can be today. He has become celebrated for infusing his abstraction with the rhythms and realities of our time, but also for stubbornly shutting out the very world whose spirit he is chasing.

So when Xavier Douroux, director of Le Consortium in Dijon, France, asked me if I thought Wool would be interested in making a series of windows for the chapel at La Charité-sur-Loire—a small town of medieval origin along the Loire River in southern France—I expressed serious doubt. The eleventh-century church is registered as a UNESCO world heritage site and was an important Cluniac center; the commission came under the auspices of the New Patrons, an innovative program that allows anyone to commission an artwork through a mediator. Douroux has, in Burgundy alone, overseen more than eighty such commissions. The process involves a long negotiation in which every participant—the commissioners, the municipality, the mediator, and

Below: Christopher Wool working on *Untitled*, 2012, Atelier Parot, Aiserey, France, October 4, 2010. Photo: Luc Jolivel.



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the artist—has a say. Nothing could seem more different from Wool's intensely focused relationship with the canvas. Yet the complexities of this commission did not so much lie in social relations, but in the necessity to engage and address a material context ranging from late-Romanesque architecture to the textures of lead and glass.

In fact, that very context managed to capture Wool's interest, and so—against all expectations—he decided to give it a try. I think that when he visited La Charité for the first time, he was touched by the bare brilliance of the architecture, by the golden daylight specific to the Loire Valley, and by the genuine respect, trust, and understanding coming from the commissioners and from Pierre-Alain Parot, the master glassmaker who would translate Wool's ideas into their final medium. The project was taking place in a context so remote that it offered a perfect break from art-world pressures. It had no deadline attached, would not enter the market, and would become part of a reality that had existed long before it—and might continue to exist for an even longer time together with it.

The next meetings, four long sessions over two years, were held in Parot's studio in a small village close to Dijon, where we were surrounded by bits and pieces of glass, from thirteenth-century fragments to elements for contemporary designs. Parot does not speak English, so I translated. At first, Wool struggled with the material's transparency. He tried to paint directly on glass but was surprised again and again by how contradictory it seemed to *add* matter onto a transparent background. He quickly understood that this would generate darkness where light was needed. At the time, Wool was also working on a series of computer-based drawings, which led him to switch his attention from the opacity of painting to the structural quality of line.

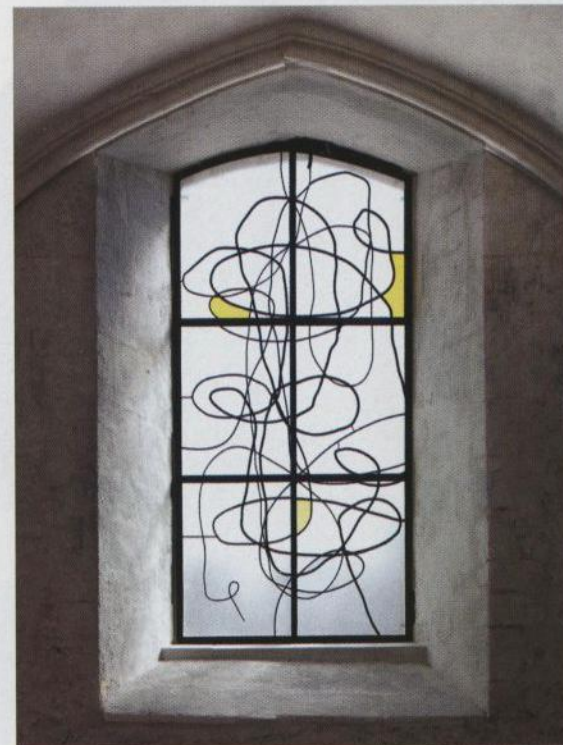
In glassmaking, lead is used as a border, a support to partition and hold together the glass segments. It is a structural constraint. But, characteristically, Wool decided to use that very constraint as a compositional device. He would use the lead—not paint—to reproduce the intricate vectors of a drawing. These

contours would both hold and define constituent areas of glass. And unlike in traditional stained-glass compositions, here the lead lines would sometimes fully demarcate but also sometimes stop short of forming continuous boundaries for the glass—ending abruptly, with no clear closure in sight. Parot immediately understood Wool's intention, and he worked hard to solve the technical difficulties and to make the design feasible, while the artist refined the composition of each window, following its shape and predetermined division into a grid of six partitions. Later, the artist would begin investigating the glass, its color and texture, and the relationship between the five windows.

The last decision—and the one it took Wool the longest to make—was whether to include colored glass. As we worked in Parot's studio, filled to the brim with magnificent samples of tinted glass, it became increasingly clear that the addition of color would instill the windows with life. After much deliberation, a bright yellow was chosen to lightly punctuate the compositions. Depending on the time of day, the color and glass would glow as if from within, or the looping lines would appear in all their starkness.

Once these decisions were made, Parot was left to manufacture the windows, and Wool would only see the finished pieces once they had been put in place—barely an hour before the entire city of La Charité could see as well. For an artist who stays so close to his work, the separation and temporary loss of control turned that moment of unveiling into an intense mix of expectation and anxiety, leading to deep relief as it soon became clear that Wool's instincts had been right and his intentions perfectly realized. It is hard to imagine a place further from the one that gave birth to Wool's abstraction. Yet while the chapel windows are unmistakably his, they do not function in contrast to their unlikely site but in natural adequation. Their beauty is the result of a close encounter, one that comes as still greater evidence of Wool's capacity to connect to the outside, and to use that porosity to grow and continually transform. □

ANNE PONTÉGNIE IS CODIRECTOR OF LE CONSORTIUM IN DIJON, FRANCE, AND CURATOR OF THE CRANFORD COLLECTION IN LONDON.



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