

VULTURE

ENCOUNTER | FEB. 26, 2024

Christopher Wool's Punk-Rock Art Show in a Fidi Tower The blue-chip artist is over museums, galleries — and pretty much everything else.

By Rachel Corbett, an author and journalist specializing in the art world



Photo: Hugo Yu

When I arrive at the 1907 Beaux Arts office building a few blocks south of the World Trade Center, a guard in the slickly renovated lobby of 101 Greenwich swipes me through the security turnstiles to an elevator that takes me to the 19th floor. The doors open to a sunny, 18,000-square-foot raw office space, cords dangling from the ceiling, with a wall of windows overlooking the Trinity Church spire and various skyscrapers. Not so long ago, this floor was home to Daniel Libeskind's architecture practice, but now, like a number of other floors in this building and many more throughout the post-pandemic city, it sits empty.

This desolation seems to delight the artist Christopher Wool, who has rented the space to put on a show of his recent paintings and sculptures. "Nothing could be better," he says, pointing to a crumbling pink column with globs of construction adhesive stuck to it. Chunks of stone are missing from the floor. On another column across the room, someone had crudely spray-painted a penis. "I could live here," he says.

Wool is there finalizing the installation for the show's March 14 opening. He has chunky black glasses and a white ponytail that mark him still as the trailblazing 1980s and '90s artist he was, hanging out at the Mudd Club, partying with Nan Goldin, and admiring Jean-Michel Basquiat's graffiti, Richard Hell's punk poetry, and Jamie Nares's Super 8 films. His austere paint-rollered, stenciled, and screen-printed canvases in many ways reflect the seedy, anti-Establishment New York he was then working in and inspired by.

At some point, certainly by the time of his career retrospective at the Guggenheim in 2013, he became admitted to the contemporary-art canon and, thanks to the interest of big-shot collectors, including the hedge-funders Robert Soros and J. Tomilson Hill, his works became trophies (his record was set in 2015, when a stencil of the word RIOT sold for almost \$30 million at Sotheby's). Even if his market has cooled a bit since then, Wool could have his pick of galleries. But instead he's doing it himself, here.

"I just wanted to do it the way I wanted to do it," he says. The show will be free and open to the public, no appointments necessary, and nothing is for sale. His gallery of 38 years, Luhring Augustine, is fine with it, he says. "It's not their project. It's mine."

At 68 years old, Wool is over museums, over the white cubes. "I've probably done more museum shows than most artists my age. It lost its appeal." What does excite him is a patch of peeling plaster he spots near a floorboard. He kneels to marvel at the exposed wires and piping below: "See all this history?"



ens March 14 and runs Thursday through Sunday until July 31. Photo: Dan Duray

If you're familiar with Wool's art, it's not hard to see what he likes about the place. It looks as if it were abandoned in the middle of a renovation and now hovers in an unresolved, in-progress, imperfect state, much like Wool's work. Its walls bear the marks of construction processes the same way Wool leaves welding seams visible on his barbed-wire sculptures or layers canvases with glitches and blotches of ink and oil, earlier errors visible underneath. (When installing the show, his team had to avoid too-obvious echoes between his work, which includes wire sculptures and spray-painted paintings, and actual wires and spray-painted walls.)

"We were lucky," Wool says. He had sent the members of his team out looking for possible venues — with instructions to avoid Chelsea and Tribeca, the gallery neighborhoods — when they stumbled upon the building. There was a FOR RENT sign out front, so they called the number and, within minutes, were upstairs touring the empty floors. (According to the building's website, this is one of seven full floors for lease.)

Wool grew up in Chicago and had settled in Manhattan — for a while in a Chinatown loft — by 1976. He has claimed that he lacks any innate painterly talent and found his niche among a generation of DIY artists living in what was then a city in decline; parts were verging on ruin. Artists took advantage of this cheap real estate to live and work and put on shows. Wool invented a visual language that collectors came to love (black and white, dramatic, dispassionate, gritty but in a chic way) and that, in the end, looked great in a minimalist loft. Among his most coveted works are his stenciled-word paintings, where black blocky letters spell out drolly loaded messages such as SELL THE HOUSE SELL THE CAR SELL THE KIDS and FOOL.

Wool put away his stencils decades ago, and none of those works appear in the new show. He says that people tended to read the paintings solely in terms of their textual meanings when, “believe it or not, they were also compositional. They were meant to be seen in terms of, I hate to say it, but easel painting.” Misunderstood or not, their values rose along with that of work by other artists of his generation, like Richard Prince and Jeff Koons. But ask him about it and he gets a bit cranky. “We’ve gotten to a place where the art market is the art world. It’s a little unfortunate,” he says. Two years ago, after his auction prices had surged and then sustained a correction, he told the New York *Times*, “It sometimes feels not only like you’re in a car that you’re not driving. It feels as if you’re tied up in the back of the car and no one is even telling you where you’re going.”

When I ask him if staging this show independently has anything to do with wresting back some of that control over his career, he balks. “I think it says something about the whole art world in general that that question comes up. It kind of surprises me,” he says. “Doing a show the way you want to do it — that just seems normal to me.”

I realize at this point how much he dislikes people reading too much into his actions (which if I were to read into, I might note that his mother was a psychiatrist).

Wool instead cites the late minimalist sculptor Donald Judd, who moved to the desert town of Marfa, Texas, where Wool too now lives much of the year with his wife, the painter Charline von Heyl. Judd’s “concept was that galleries and museums were not adequate spaces for his work and that he needed to consider the space along with the work,” Wool says.

This seems like an idea that would appeal to someone who doesn’t have anything left to prove and is finished, at this stage of his life, with compromise. He doesn’t seem especially old, but he is keenly aware of aging. “I like quiet in my studio,” he says at one point. “I think it’s age.” At another, struggling to remember what year he made a certain work, he compares himself to Joe Biden. He also complains about how much the world has changed, and not to his liking. In addition to being done with museums, he says he’s moved on from listening to music, watching movies, and reading criticism. He recalls how in the 1980s he and his friends would eagerly wait for the latest reviews to come out in the papers. “Everybody read the *Times* on Friday and *The Village Voice* on Wednesdays or Thursdays. Everybody wanted to know what Roberta Smith was writing about and what Gary Indiana or Peter Schjeldahl was writing.” Now, he says, “I stopped reading any of those.”

Our conversation meanders toward the inspirations for the show and how they connect back to his photographs, which depict peopleless landscapes and sculptural objects. Then he changes the subject to the Super Bowl, which he had watched the night before my visit.

“I don’t recognize our culture,” he says. I can’t tell if he’s responding to my point, wants to talk football, or is making some other observation, but then he offers as good an explanation as any: “I don’t think the art world is so different from the rest of our culture. It all sucks.”

Thank you for subscribing and supporting our journalism. If you prefer to read in print, you can also find this article in the February 26, 2024, issue of New York Magazine.