



The Art Of Christopher Wool, By Glenn O'Orien

pop collage
and wall paper

Charlie Parker recorded "Now's the Time" in 1945 and it's still now. New is what works now. We may question modernism, but we still can't help looking for that thing that snaps us out of autopilot.

Christopher Wool's paintings do that kind of job now - conjuring new visions, flipping out fresh takes, constructing unheard of pictures that shock and thrill the curious and the jaded the way New York abstractionists did back in the boho 50s. But this is no rehash. Wool beautifully circumvents the big bad art-historical rules the way the pop art rebels did in the 60s. It's brand new - a hungry eye with a great rhythmic ear. It's a door to the grey area where the future comes from.

Christopher Wool is not an art movement. But his art is always moving, to the extent that it seems to change from viewing to viewing. And those with a good eye will see here a mode of departure that is strong and true.

From now on, when I say "pop art", I mean what people think about pop art today, and when I say "abstract expressionism", I mean what people think about abstract expressionism today. As Dick Higgins wrote in 1967, "Whatever the debt that others who are generally considered pop artists owe to Oldenburg... in my opinion Oldenburg belongs more properly to whatever movement Goya was a member of." We're in this for the long haul.

You can't look at the work of Christopher Wool without thinking of Jackson Pollock. Wool started his career with drip paintings, and he has progressed into ever more complex strategies of abstraction and the articulation of ephemeral concepts. He's done all this after the

nominal end of abstract expressionism, the perceived end of abstract art, and the declared end of painting. Quite a coup, and he's getting away with it beautifully.

Pollock and Wool are spectacularly different creatures. Pollock was loud, unsubtle, drunk, and by all accounts obnoxious. Wool is cool, dry, subtle, and quite pleasant. The connection is in the work. There's something important and umbilical though elusive there, and the more one looks at Wool's accomplishment the more one realises that we are beholding an extraordinary and important achievement. We're at ground zero again. So, what has Pollock, the anointed and martyred artist of introspection and high seriousness, to do with Wool, whose abstractions are made with the tools of a graffiti artist and whose titles come from James Brown and Funkadelic?

When Pollock's *Oldsmobile 88* went airborne, it was an act that couldn't be followed. So even though non-objective painting continued after Pollock, even though the best of it got better, art history moved on. It took pop to bring back shock and the new.

But then slowly and surely Christopher Wool has reinvented abstraction and partakes in the clarity and the heroism, but in a way that is shockingly novel and perhaps heretically casual. Wool makes it look easy, or at least painless. This is the cool clarity of a later time.

Wool has made his freewheeling pictures with a full understanding and appreciation of abstraction and of pop too. So then, what is his relation to the half-century old practice of the transcendental Jack the Dripper aside from their mutual thorough-

below *Apocalypse Now*, 1988
right Photographs from
East Broadway Breakdown, 2003

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going abstraction and a groundbreaking invisibility to the philistines of their time?

One could superficially interpret Wool's paintings as parodies of Pollock's seriousness, as a cynical re-enactment of action painting utilising an impoverished bag of tricks hijacked from vandalism. But then one would be missing the point. No, Wool embraces and engages action painting as his primary source and he then manipulates it, with the cool reflection of a pop artist or Dada collagist, creating art that is both intense and reflective, physical and mechanical, unconscious and considered, refined in technique yet redolent of street vernacular. But despite the many apparent contradictions, the work is singular, strong, organic, and as deep as it might appear shallow.

One of the subtitles in Harold Rosenberg's essay "The American Action Painters" from 1959 is "Apocalypse and Wallpaper." That makes a nice tag for what Wool is up to. There is a painting named *Apocalypse Now* - "Sell The House Sell The Car Sell The Kids" - and a series of paintings made with rubber rollers used to mimic wallpaper. That title sums up the ways in which Wool is a perfect bridge between the action painters championed by Rosenberg and the generations that followed. He is the pop/action painter, an action/reaction painter.

Harold Rosenberg created the term "action painting", in doing so promulgating an idea that changed the course of art. He wrote, "At a certain moment the canvas began to appear as an arena in which to act... What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event." Suddenly the artist was not the great craftsman as much as the great



actor or athlete, working in the moment. Wool works the way the action painters work, but that is only the first step in a process that involves considerable calculated manipulation, calculated action in reaction to the original strokes. Here the tools of the pop artist, like silkscreen, and the graphic designer, like Photoshop, meet the neo-primitive tools of the action painter.

Warhol mocked the abstract expressionists, admiring their achievements but smarting from their macho attitudes. Yet he himself only eliminated the token action drips on his first pop paintings when Emile de Antonio told him they were shit. According to Dave Hickey, the Warhol soup can was the artist's way of putting abstract expressionism (ie. the "soup") back into the can.

Wool makes the soup too, yes, he makes gestural paintings in a more or less traditionalist manner, then he makes the can, manipulating the gestures later with reproductive and collage techniques from the primitive, cutting and pasting by hand, to the state-of-the-art, using computers and graphic design programs. And, in the process, he manages to redeem painting from academic argument and decorum, bringing it back to life by inventing a sort of action/reaction painting that resolves more contradictions than you can shake a brush at.

Wool uses clip art and decorative rollers in the way he uses verbal cliches. He recycles base materials, signs of commercial kitsch and decorative banality, and the husks of devalued emotional triggers, transforming them through a sort of alchemical overkill into strangely beautiful compositions. Wool's compositions spring from the hungry spirit of the urban landscape, the weedy nature of the vacant lot. With Christopher Wool as with Richard Prince, or Paul McCarthy, the Playmate is Mother Nature, the girl next door is "the White Goddess". Boys will be boys is the law of the jungle.

Wool's work is funky, but it is high funk. It is consciously funky, from its appropriation of graffiti tactics to its urban povera aesthetic to its references to funk. "Why must I chase that cat..." "I can't stand myself when you touch me..." Like Maceo, he's taking it to the bridge. Wool spans abstract expressionism and pop, drama and comedy, funk and the sublime. The emblem of his advanced funkiness is his spray squiggle - with all the innocence of an amateur doodle, yet all the



left *Untitled*, 1994
right *Untitled*, 1997

Unlike the swaggering abstractionists of the 50s, the purist painters, Wool doesn't disassociate his paintings from a relationship to the world. There's a street-smart quality to his aesthetic. He's a cartographer of disorder. His photographs lay out a vision of apocalyptic entropy: graffiti on graffiti, vagrant dogs, wrecked chassis, scary spills, and the abstract expressionism of blood, urine, and motor oil, the gleam of trash in plastic bags, toxic stains, and demented detritus. But even absent of image, there's true grit in the substratum, in the sub-iconography of the work.

Wool's swirling squiggles ride the canvas with fraught exhilaration. Sometimes his knotted lines seem loopy and comic, other times they are furious or tense. When they accrete they look like cross outs, negations, but what they are crossing out is often blankness itself. They are crossing out nothing.

Wool begins with action painting, then he edits it. He doesn't just overpaint, he rearranges. He creates an archaeological dig on canvas. Under-painting is often an important part of abstract painting, but here it is a matter of interactive layering. Every painting is a history, and Wool's over-painting is a multi-purpose strategy that gives the work areas of discourse, areas of revelation, areas of concealment or metaphorical occultism. Overpainting can reflect a change of course, or it can be a strategy from the get-go. Every painting has a time signature, and sometimes Wool plays with this. What came first here?

We usually consider the consequences of the chain of transmission in the negative, as "transmission loss". For Wool, the process is not about loss but gain. As a copy is copied it becomes more original and something else emerges, something like the soul of the machine. The process itself is the picture. Warhol declared he wanted to be mechanical without feeling like a machine. But Wool figured out how to make the machine human.

In the pattern paintings, made with wallpaper rollers and lacy grids, Wool takes prettiness and jacks it up where the composition seems to swarm, gathered within the borders of the canvas as if by magnetic force or biological imperative. Wool achieves a kind of graphic atonality, hitting those sour keys like Thelonious Monk or laying down swirling tonal clouds like the late John Coltrane. To quote Monk, it's "Ugly Beauty". It's reinventing beauty for an age that has outlived it.

Apocalypse Now is more than a title. The original meaning of apocalypse has nothing to do with nukes or extinctions. It is simply revelation. Lifting the veil. It is revealing to the many what was known only by a few. Something is always being revealed, something is always ending and something is always beginning. At the beginning of abstraction, it was seen as the end of pictorial representation and thus as the end of humanistic art. The public was alienated and scandalised by what they saw. The abstractionist was a nihilist.

Maybe this is a pop apocalypse. Abstraction is nature now. Ultimately that's what Christopher Wool's work is about - about the abstraction of consciousness, perception and expression, about second nature becoming nature, about the wallpaper starting to swing.

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stealth of a master brush stroke. 50 years on, Pollock's paint splash looks very artistic, whereas in its day it was a shocker.

Graffiti is the human signature of the city. Graffiti is never abstract, but sometimes the lettering is very abstracted, pushing legibility to the limit. At the height of New York's "wild style" movement, with its heavily decorated letters (or armed letters, as Rammellzee would put it), readability was trumped by graphic spectacle. On the way into Philly there was a desolate post-industrial slum with fields of graffiti that seemed almost like an alien alphabet. I don't know what physical cues Wool provides himself when composing a sprayed line, but the results can be as strange and unsettling as those tags. Sometimes his line is easy and loopy and partakes of the innocence of childlike doodling, but other times it is uneasy, tense, and ill.

The word paintings are hard edge on the edge. It's painting with attitude. It is minimal in its self-defined context, painted words stripped down to the primer. It is abstraction of language itself, but it's also about the tension running along the thin line between mass production and the personal hand. It's about the aura of the stencil, about energy radiating and splashing from the confines of the character.

The chosen words and phrases are All-American mantras. Sometimes they are clichés that become knucklehead koans, idiot ideograms. They may be chunks of conventional wisdom or cultural default settings, but in every case, upon reflection, they open up to new shades of meaning. Their composition on an aluminium slab or piece of paper puts them under a philological microscope.

Sometimes, if you look at a word long enough, it stops making sense. And then you can start over again with it. Wool deconstructs words and de-contextualises phrases by stacking letters at faux random. The process generates calligraphic effects, acoustic reverberation, and a kind of Rubik's cubism of meaning. It's about the meeting point between formula and expression. There are no answers here, only good questions about how characters and words work. Or not.