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Christopher Wool on What Brought a ‘Sunday Painter’ Back to Life

“I had been on the treadmill for so long. And then suddenly I felt like I could just be an artist again,” he says. His long obsession with photo books has now taken full flight.

By Randy Kennedy

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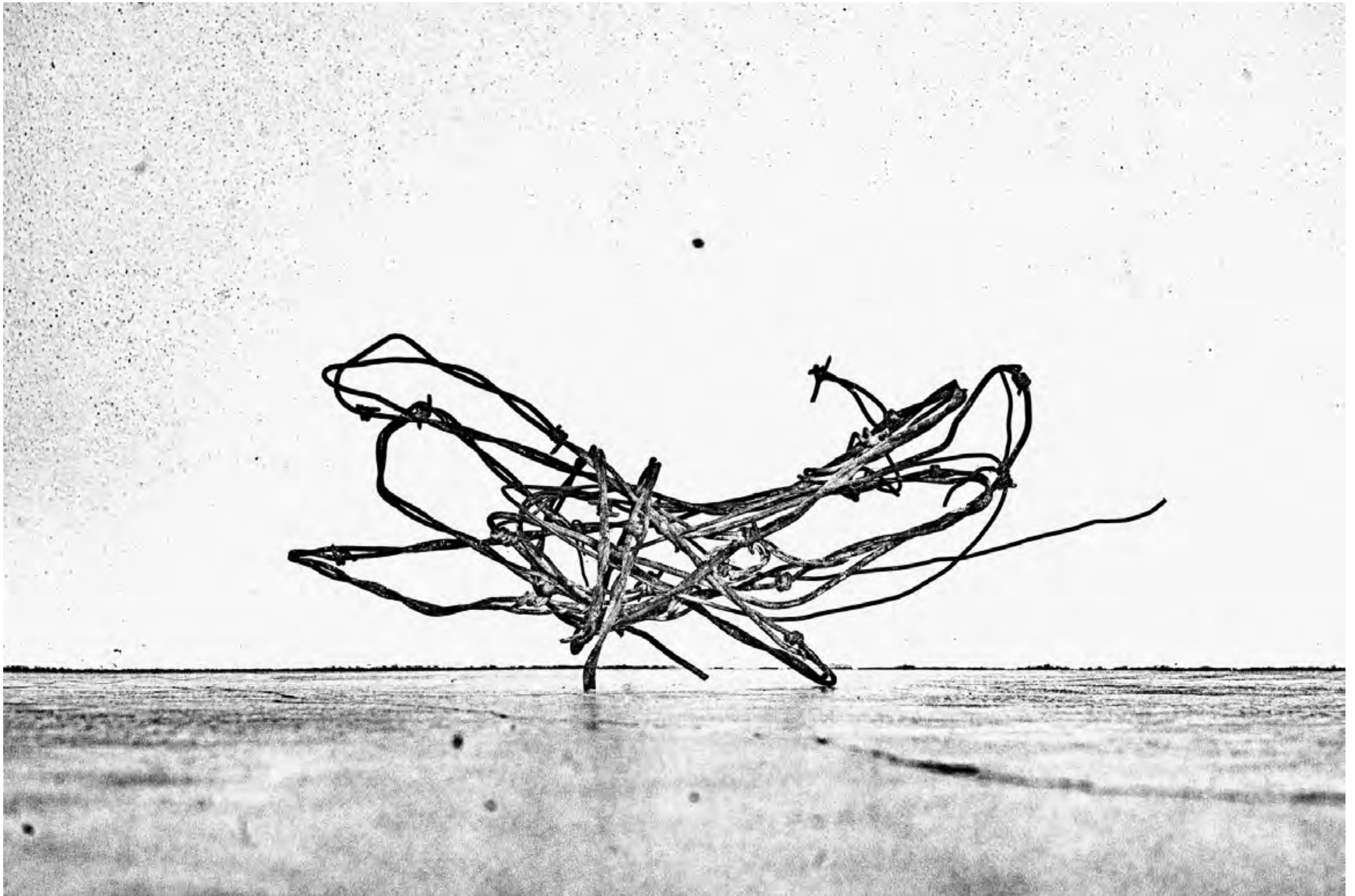
When the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum organized a retrospective of the paintings and photographs of Christopher Wool in 2013, the artist was to be found some months beforehand not making new work or poring over exhibition models. Instead, he had decamped from New York entirely to live near a small printer in Verona, Italy, spending 12 hours a day on press for two weeks to ensure that the book for the show achieved the precise feel that he wanted.

“No other artist I’ve worked with has done something like that for a museum catalog,” said Katherine Brinson, the show’s curator. “In fact, I’ve never heard of another artist doing something like that.”

The other day at Wool’s rambling studio, in the East Village of Manhattan, half filled with new paintings and other pieces bound for a major exhibition opening June 2 at Xavier Hufkens gallery in Brussels, Wool was eager to show off some of the new work, much of it made over the last two years in a concentrated period of pandemic isolation. But he was more excited to reveal something on a table that was not quite a work for the show but then again, to his thinking, not *not* a work, either — his latest book.

Punk-comically titled “Bad Rabbit,” it is the fifth in a series of volumes of Wool’s deadpan black-and-white photographs that he has published over the last five years, a project that has come to consume a larger share of his obsessive energy. More than any other primarily abstract artist of his generation, Wool has fed his painting with ideas from his photographs and the books he has made of them — photos of the world around him, photos of his own paintings, photos of other photos and photos that blur all of the above, in sometimes baroque ways.

Pages from Wool’s punk-comedically titled book, “Bad Rabbit,” depicting sculptures made from found wire. Christopher Wool



It’s the fifth volume of black-and-white photographs he has published in five years. Christopher Wool

As he moves into the later stages of a celebrated career, he seems intent on stressing that the three endeavors — photography, bookmaking and painting — are inextricable in ways not yet fully grasped by an art world that chiefly prizes his painting (and, lately, it seems, painting above all else).

“I think of all of it as repeating layers: this on top of this on top of that,” he said. “The books also are about memorializing a group, keeping it together. Paintings go out into the world by themselves, to be seen in isolation, but they also should be seen together, in the way they were made, in series.”

Over the last decade the reception of Wool’s work, along with that of several of his peers, has been conditioned by the stratospheric prices his paintings have commanded in the hard-charging market — in 2015 one sold for almost $30 million at Sotheby’s, and even with a recent cooling in his auction standing, as figuration has taken center stage, major paintings still change hands for multiple millions. Wool, 67, mostly demurs on questions about the effect market machinations can have on an artist’s life and work, saying that addressing it inevitably risks making one sound disingenuously ungrateful for success.

But he adds: “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.” For that reason and others, he said, the pandemic — which he and his wife, the painter Charline von Heyl, spent mostly by themselves in Marfa, Texas, where they began living and working off and on in 2007 — ended up being a pivotal reset.

“I used to joke that I was a Sunday painter because I’d gotten so busy with career stuff that Sunday became the only time I actually had time to paint,” he said. “I was really at my wit’s end at the beginning of the pandemic. I had been on the treadmill for so long. And then suddenly I felt like I could just be an artist again. I just made work.”

Christopher Wool, "Untitled" (2020), oil and inkjet on paper. Christopher Wool

Raised in Chicago, the son of a psychiatrist (his mother) and a molecular biologist (his father), Wool moved to New York in 1973 to attend the Studio School, coming into his own by the late 1980s as Neo-Expressionism was giving way to more speculative forms of painting. Over the years, he has agreed to relatively few interviews, partly because of a deep suspicion about the ability of language to get at what art does in ways that don't sound mortifying. (His friend, the writer and musician Richard Hell, once, in lieu of talking with him, wrote a magazine article titled "What I Would Say If I Were Christopher Wool.")

But over the course of a long afternoon studio visit in April, wearing a pearl-snap Levi's shirt and a long, graying ponytail that he grew out during the pandemic, he was guardedly talkative about himself and his work and intensely engaged when explaining the labyrinthine process of its making.

The time to himself in Marfa, he said, partly concerned deepening a relatively recent foray into sculpture that began with his first trips to West Texas; walking around the ranch land and high-desert scrub he took to scavenging small tangles of discarded fencing wire that struck him as ready-made three-dimensional scribbles of the sort he made in two dimensions. Some scraps he left untouched ("I couldn't see any way to improve on them"). But most others he manipulated to make small frenetic sculptures, several of which he has enlarged over the years by casting them and having them produced in bronze and copper-plated steel.

The next imperative turn in thinking about the sculpture, he said, was to photograph it and make a book. "Bad Rabbit" — its title was inspired by West Texas's wily jack rabbits and Wool's memory of hearing about a C.I.A. operation by that name — consists solely of 92 high-contrast, deadpan portraits of the tiny wire sculptures, posed on the rough wooden floor of an old Marfa house and shot straight and low, as if from the vantage point of a passing mouse.

For any critic (and there have been a few) who complains that Wool's work is too chilly and austere, offering what The Los Angeles Times critic Christopher Knight once called "unrelieved dullness," the sculpture pictures will likely settle the case. But, if only through sheer compulsiveness, the book sharply elucidates the now-considerable arc of Wool's engagement with photography for its own sake and for catalyzing the rest of his work, a process recalling the riddling line E.M. Forster once quoted with approval about writing: "How can I tell what I think till I see what I say?"

"Untitled" (2018). Wool has enlarged some of his sculptures over the years by casting them and having them produced in bronze and copper-plated steel. Christopher Wool

In 1993, Wool published his first book of photographs, “Absent Without Leave,” heavily grainy shots of urban scenes in Europe and other places where he had traveled, the photos run through a photocopier to fuzz many almost to illegibility.

This was followed a decade later by “East Broadway Breakdown,” culled from thousands of mostly unpeopled photographs Wool had taken between 1994 and 1995 of that Lower East Side street and environs, at night, on walks between his studio and his home in Chinatown. In their seeming abjection and haphazardness they exhibited affinities with postwar Japanese photography. But they were highly individual and showed how deeply Wool’s urban visual landscape of New York in the 1990s — spills, stains, black trash bags, glaring headlights, chain-link fences, graffiti scrawl, stenciled words — suffused the painting.

“Chicago, where I grew up, had some of that look, but New York was, especially back then, just a gritty, gritty place, and I was interested visually in all of it,” he said.

The curator Anne Pontégnie, who has organized the Brussels show and was the first to show Wool’s photographs extensively alongside his paintings in 2002, told me: “In the more than 30 years I’ve known him, I’ve found photography at every level of what he’s doing. His abstraction is never purely formal. It’s an abstraction that speaks a lot about his life.”

She added: “His devotion to books, I think, does two things. It puts a greater distance between making the art and looking at the art; every gesture becomes highly processed. It is also a way for him to keep control over what he does and retain some feeling of possession. Books are a very democratic way for the work to circulate in the world outside the market’s circuits.”

Leo Fitzpatrick, who runs the gallery Public Access on Henry Street on the Lower East Side, recently organized a show of dozens of the photographs from “East Broadway Breakdown” shown not as photographic prints, but as book pages; Fitzpatrick simply carefully dismembered a copy of the book and pinned the pages to the walls, which he said he felt was the ideal way to show the work.

Photographs from Wool’s “East Broadway Breakdown,” taken between 1994 and 1995 on the Lower East Side. Christopher Wool

“New York was, especially back then, just a gritty, gritty place,” Wool said, “and I was interested visually in all of it.” Christopher Wool

“To me it always seemed like his photography influenced a lot of people who came after him, younger photographers who were paying attention to it when maybe not many others were in the ’90s, Dash Snow for example,” Fitzpatrick said, referring to the American artist who died in 2009. “I think his photos stand alone.”

Hell, whose music and look with the bands Television, the Heartbreakers and Richard Hell and the Voidoids helped define a pivotal era of downtown New York aesthetic life, argues that Wool’s photographs of the city accomplished something more than documenting the streets and supplying grist for painting.

“I don’t think those streets looked like that before Christopher,” said Hell, who collaborated on a 2008 book, “Psychopts,” with Wool. “What he got at was everything that we consciously or unconsciously find beneath notice or even contempt and edit out. It’s by his pictures that we’re made aware of it, the way we think of it now.”

Since beginning to spend much of his time in the empty reaches of West Texas, Wool has had to shift his primarily urban aesthetic fascinations. But in a sense he has simply brought those fascinations to bear on different topography, traveling much further to photograph landscapes and the things humans do in them and to them: piles of ruined tires, cinder blocks, junked cars, overgrown weeds and plastic patio furniture, along with a particularly forlorn cow viewed from the posterior and a tumbleweed tumbling down a rain-soaked street.

A selection of Wool's sculptures from 2019 to 2022, arranged at the Luhring Augustine gallery in Brooklyn before being shipped to Europe. Erik Tanner for The New York Times

"I don't know where I'll go next with the sculpture," he said. "I mean, I've pretty much fished out all of the found wire that's possible for me to find in West Texas. It might not continue to provide me with new ideas, so maybe I'll have to start working in a completely new vein."

But one vein will continue to be mined, at disorienting depth. Looking over brand-new works in his studio that consist of sinuous oil paintings Wool created directly on top of old book pages which themselves feature images of already complex abstractions, he smiled and said: "Now I'll have to photograph these and make another book — of course."