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A Celebrated Artist Finds Joy in a Return to New York

In his biggest exhibit since a 2013 retrospective at the Guggenheim, Christopher Wool has created his own show in a unique space.

Alix Strauss | April 24, 2024

The artist Christopher Wool was dressed in a black button-down shirt, matching pants and white sneakers. His long, wiry white hair — pulled back in a ponytail — contrasted nicely with his black-framed glasses.

He looked as if he could easily disappear into one of his signature black, brushstroke paintings hanging in the 18,000 square feet of raw, unfinished industrial space on the 19th floor of an uninhabited office in Manhattan’s Financial District. He rented the space last year in preparation for his biggest exhibit since his Guggenheim retrospective in 2013.

“See Stop Run,” a survey of Wool’s works created mostly over the past decade, opened on March 14 at 101 Greenwich Street, and runs through July 31. Seventy-four pieces are on view.

The unpolished, somewhat broken and exposed interior is a nontraditional setting purposely chosen for an equally nontraditional show.

“Galleries can be limiting; raw space is not,” said Wool, 68, as he stood among the calm chaos of his work. “The whole dilemma with the white cube gallery room is it’s neutral. It doesn’t give you anything. The characteristics of this space give something back.”

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“A wire sculpture that hangs in a space where other industrial things are hanging is interesting to me. You don’t get that in the gallery,” he said.

Here, he added, “You have architectural elements that one can play off of — an endless number of windows and natural light throughout. That’s visually exciting to me and creates a certain ambience for the painting.”

Touring the space with Wool is a thoughtful experience. He is a deliberate, shy and somewhat withdrawn talker. Rather than be vocal, he would prefer to let his art speak for him. And his work, in this almost abandoned space, speaks volumes.

Of the 74 works on display, nine of the 11 paintings are recent silk screens on linen depicting gestural, Rorschach-like brushstrokes in black; more than 30 are swirling, cloudlike, multilayered oil and inkjet works on paper; four are photographic series, one of which documents a fire in the building in Manhattan where he was working in 1996; 25 are copper-plated or barbed wire, scribble-like sculptures; and one a massive mosaic (11 by 16½ feet) that is being shown for the first time and is only the second one he has created.

The space, shaped like a large U, naturally creates different environments, each of which Wool has used to showcase the inspirations and iterations of his work.

“Despite the fact that I work in several mediums, they’re all tied to something central: composition, drawing, images, how multiple images make statements, how a book of photographs can be comparable to a sculpture, which can be comparable to a painting,” he explained. Aside from adding overhead lighting and sprinklers, the space has remained untouched and unenhanced.

“Imperfection is the goal. You get tension with imperfection and small amounts of chaos in these pieces, which is strengthened by how unfinished and raw the space is,” he said, standing in front of a purposely placed painting on a wall that shares many of the same colors and attributes in Wool’s art — tones in black, gray, white and pale salmon. “There are also heavy passages of white paint and blobs of white plaster on the wall, which enhances the painting and the art. This story is about the relationships between the different elements of work and the building itself.”

In 1972 at the age of 17, Wool, whose mother was a psychiatrist and whose father was a molecular biologist, moved to New York from Chicago. He received only two years of art education — one year at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville and another at the New York Studio School in Manhattan — before deciding to go at it on his own. In 1976, at 20, he rented his first studio in Chinatown, where he stayed for the next 25 years making art and immersing himself in the struggling artist’s lifestyle.

“I started young with a deficit in skill and experience. It took me longer than most to find myself. I didn’t have any natural skills,” he said.

While he was experimenting with text painting and silk screening, a talent was erupting.

From the 1980s through the late 1990s, Wool became largely associated with a postmodernist flavor of Neo-Expressionism, thanks to his arrangement of large, black-stenciled lettering of words from movie quotes and punklike graffiti spray-painted on canvas. He then experimented with the layering of paint, often using or recycling previous works to create new ones. Reproductions or different iterations of specific pieces followed, as did stencil work and big gestural, smeary paintings.

In 2007, Wool and his wife, Charline von Heyl, a German painter, bought a house in Marfa, Texas. He submersed himself in the open landscape, which “immediately led me to think about sculpture,” he said, speaking about the squiggly, disorganized mess of found, tangled barbed wire that was the inspiration for sculptures hanging from the ceiling in this space. He joined the board of the Chinati Foundation and continued making photography, prints, books (of which there are

The Guggenheim retrospective in 2013 highlighted his first sculpture. The show, which ran from Oct. 25, 2013, through Jan. 22, 2014, was a great success but left him depleted and unable to find inspiration and creativity for five years, he said. “It wasn’t just fatigue,” he explained, walking toward a wall of windows that beamed with natural light, adding a floating feeling to the space. “I worked slowly and without energy.”

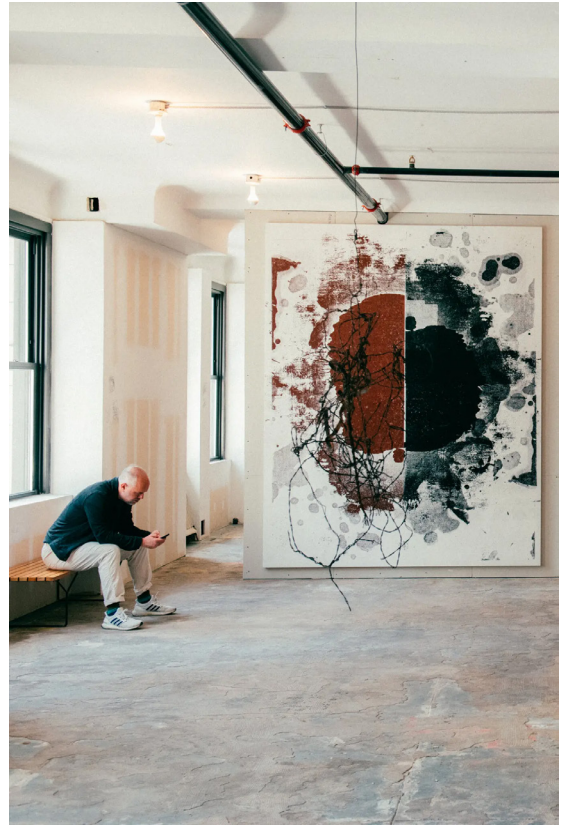
While prepping for the Guggenheim and the two years that followed, his work became highly sought after. A 1988 mash-up of typography titled “Apocalypse Now” and displaying the words “Sell the House, Sell the Car, Sell the Kids” sold at Christie’s in 2013 for more than \$26 million. Two years later, a 1990 enamel on aluminum print with the word “Riot” on

Those hoping to purchase Wool’s art at “See Stop Run” will be disappointed. No pieces will be sold. Despite the massive undertaking, building restrictions and zoning policies prohibit Wool from charging admission, dealing his work, or even selling a beverage.

Despite the immense amount of work, Wool said, almost cheerfully, that he has “enjoyed this process, which has been very creative. It’s felt like making art.”

And it had another, unexpected effect.

“Working in this building has reawakened my affection for New York, which I had lost,” said Wool, who added that he had “OD’d on the city, which can wear on you. But I’ve fallen in love with this 120-year-old building.”





Many of the works on display are swirling, multilayered oil and inkjet works on paper like this one, "Untitled 2020." Credit Hilary Swift for The New York Times



"Working in this building has reawakened my affection for New York, which I had lost," Wool said. "See Stop Run" is the artist's biggest exhibit since his Guggenheim retrospective 10 years ago. Credit...George Etheredge for The New York Times



"Untitled 2023," a huge mosaic, 11 feet by 16½ feet. Much of Wool's art shares the same colors — tones in black, gray, white and pale salmon. Credit...Hilary Swift for The New York Times