Christopher Wool
Minor Mishap, 2001. Silkscreen ink on linen, 108 x 72 in.

CHRISTOPHER WOOL

NEW YORK

Christopher Wool

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AT THE BASE of the museum's majestic rotunda, Richard Armstrong introduced Christopher Wool's retrospective to the press by proclaiming the painter "one of the last non-ironic artists." The Guggenheim director evoked Wool's arc of self-doubt and triumph in broad strokes, sketching a narrative that led the painter from coy appropriation to a kind of edgy language poetry to gestural abstraction and, finally, to heroic monochromes. That interpretation, however, is deeply flawed. For how can one describe an artist who came of age during New York's punk heyday, who made a lifelong project of cannibalizing expressive motifs, whose text-only stencil paintings rendered everyday language both heartbreaking and devastatingly funny, and who arrived at a terminus of creating fields of gray, as anything but ironic?

Armstrong's remark is worth noting not out of institutional spite but, rather, as a way of raising important questions around Wool's endgame project and its historicization. Raised in Chicago, Wool moved to New York in 1973 and immediately embarked on a course consistent with the trajectory—if not exactly the style—of his post-Conceptual and appropriationist peers. Wool's early works reconfigured painting as labor, as he imperfectly rolled decorative stencils of vines and flowers onto steel plates. The later '80s and '90s saw the artist working with all-text paintings employing templates of the kind used for street signs. His breakthrough came in a 1987 drawing of a quote from Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*: "Sell the house. Sell the car. Sell the kids." For fans like me of Wool's text pieces, this survey proves immensely satisfying. Dozens of such works come together, from *Trouble*, 1992—depicting the four consonants in the title stacked in two rows—to the *Untitled (Black Book Drawings)* of 1989, a series of 22 insults leveled at artists, like "terrorist," "hypocrite," "assassin," and "celebrity," all fractured into three equal lines. Wool's muscular use of language retains a gritty sensibility throughout.

By the mid '90s, Wool began to pillage flower motifs and gestures, specifically the inkblotlike smudge and the doodle, for his rabid recycling. With restive energy, Wool has incorporated analog and digital technologies in the creation of his compositions, a method that has elevated him to the status of both critical darling and market superstar. His example has also spawned a new generation of ironic, commercially successful painters subjecting expression to scrutiny through copying and pasting—former studio assistant Josh Smith among them.

The exhibition's careful chronological presentation offers moments of revelatory connection. And there are unexpected works, too, like Wool's collaboration with Robert Gober, a melancholy photo from 1988 of a dress sewn by the latter, printed with a pattern by the former, hanging from a tree. (The rest of Wool's black-and-white photographs, of grungy sites in New York and European cities, unfortunately don't hold up as well.)

If the exhibition has any weak spots, they lie in the default traditional genius treatment that emphasizes Wool's facture and innovation while giving short shrift to history and context. Such omissions could reduce postmodernism like Wool's to a series of mannerist moves. This strategy further marginalizes artists who work outside carefully policed boundaries. The final irony is that the aesthetic leveling that artists like Wool worked so hard to achieve only serves as the new benchmark, his cleverness reifying traditional categories and methods of working.

—Wendy Vogel