

If the point of Wool's exhibition is to remind the public—not just his collectors—that his work is always evolving, then the mosaics may be a hint of what's to come. *Courtesy of Christopher Wool/Galerie Max Hetzler*

## Wool Beyond Words

An unconventionally staged show of Christopher Wool's work may reset the market for the artist and better frame his career in the contemporary marketplace.

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All throughout the spring, and especially as the art tribes converged in New York for the May auctions and gallery shows, a steady stream of pilgrims made their way to an unremarkable office building in Lower Manhattan to view what was perhaps the most important show of the season: **Christopher Wool's *See Stop Run***.

Wool, of course, is best known for his word paintings, those confusing sign-like images of giant letters stenciled on white backgrounds that test our perception of whatever art looks like. Originally inspired by the words “Sex” and “Luv” painted on a white delivery truck, Wool’s paintings evolved into a complex exploration of language, imagery, and composition. They also soared in value, commensurate with Wool’s fame; just after his 2013 Guggenheim retrospective, which drove demand to unsustainable levels, a 9-foot-tall Wool canvas with the word “riot” sold for nearly \$30 million at auction.

A decade ago, I recall standing at a Sotheby’s preview with an Impressionist and Modern art specialist who asked me sheepishly how one was supposed to discriminate between a good and a better word painting. I later put a similar question to a powerful art advisor to hedge fund managers, after a giant, 6-foot-tall Wool featuring the word “Hypocrite” failed to find a buyer at auction. “C’mon, Marion,” he responded. “Who wants to look at *that* every day?!”

Ten years later, the *See Stop Run* show offers a decidedly more complex and considered snapshot of the 68-year-old artist, beyond the gritty work that first made him famous. In fact, you won’t find a single word painting on the 19th floor at [101 Greenwich Street](#). Wool stopped making those decades ago, and this is a show of his recent work. Moreover, the show’s purpose isn’t to sell art: It’s to recenter the popular image of Wool as an artist. A bulk of what’s on view are sculptures that Wool has made over the last decade, often inspired by objects he finds in the desert landscape near his home in Marfa, Texas.

The Lower Manhattan show will be familiar to anyone who saw Wool’s work on display at **Xavier Hufkens**’s gallery in Brussels, during the summer of 2022, but takes a step forward by presenting the art in an “urban,” non-gallery setting. Much has been made, often by the artist himself, of the choice to take a floor in one of the city’s more antiquated office buildings, in a raw space that highlights Wool’s

distinctive sculptures, photographs, and art works—especially as they rely so heavily on the idea of transposing imagery from one medium to another.

“The show is in an unusual space,” Wool agreed in an email. “That is what the show is about, in part. Much of the work is new and mostly unseen, so the main idea was to find a space that was somehow a more ‘real’ environment than the generic gallery or museum spaces in order to have something for the work to play off.”

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## Wool's Worth

*See Stop Run* is an important moment to reassess Wool's legacy, and may revitalize the market for his work, as well. For all of the money and attention his word paintings have attracted, they also had the effect of limiting the public's understanding of Wool's interests and talents. One of the original post-punk artists who came out of the East Village of the 1970s and '80s, Wool was prominently featured in **Morley Safer**'s infamous *60 Minutes* attack on Contemporary art, wherein Safer rolled his eyes at Wool's *Rat Rat Rat* selling for five figures. As it turned out, Safer was inadvertently prescient when he joked, in 1993, that \$30,000 was a bargain for the painting. Just last year, an untitled painting with the words “Please Please Please” was sold for nearly \$8.4 million.

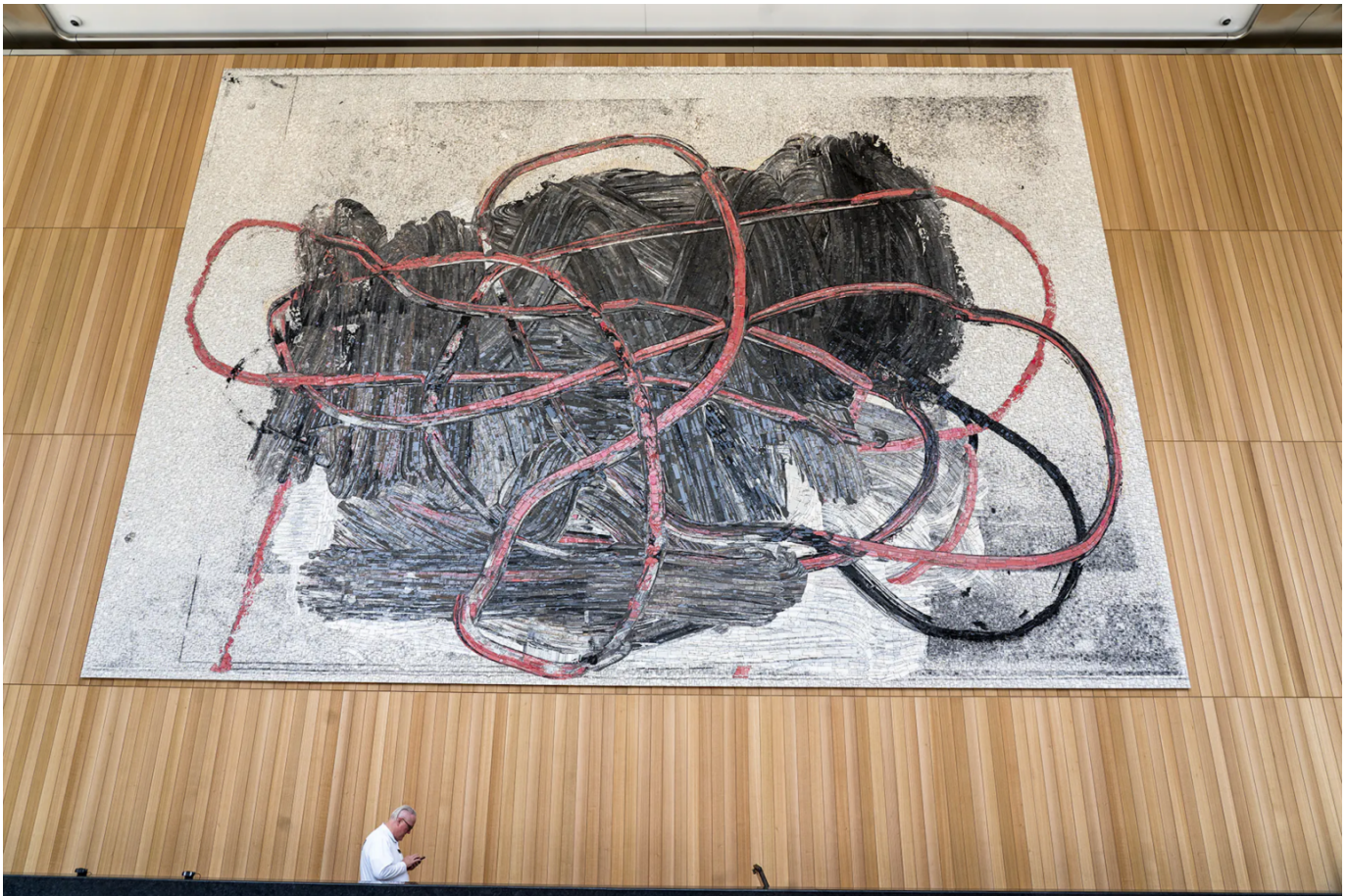
The frenzy didn't make Wool very happy. “It sometimes feels not only like you're in a car that you're not driving,” Wool told *The New York Times* in 2022. “It feels as if you're tied up in the back of the car and no one is even telling you where you're going.”

The new gallery show at 101 Greenwich is a departure from all that. In addition to his large-scale silkscreen paintings, which continue to explore his interest in

transposition, there are also smaller, more intimate works on paper that highlight *erasure* as a way of making marks on an abstract composition. Messing with the viewer's head a little more, there's a very large mosaic on display that replicates those erasures in a way that would scarcely have seemed plausible without seeing it.

The mosaic work in *See Stop Run* is, in fact, an entirely new medium for the artist, only the second example since the rare public commission, *Crosstown Traffic* (2023), that Wool undertook for Brookfield properties, an enormous work that currently dominates the lobby of Two Manhattan West, their development behind Moynihan Train Hall at Penn Station. "I knew from the start that I could not produce a painting that large in my studio nor on site," Wool told me in an email. "A mosaic made sense because of the way the image can be reduced to a dot pattern and enlarged. I've been able to change the scale in my paintings by working with silk screen, where the image is similarly reduced to a dot matrix. I had a sense that mosaic could work this way as well."





Christopher Wool, *Crosstown Traffic* (2023)

The impressive 28-by-39-foot mosaic on Ninth Avenue, like the Wool show in Lower Manhattan, is worth the trek. It is large enough to be seen across the street—Wool thinks of the work as public art for that reason—but is best appreciated up close (or, at least, as close as one can get from the reception desk). There, one can see how the mosaic fabricators were able to replicate elements of Wool’s distinctive smearing. “The fabricators were quite excited to work on this for that very reason,” he told me. “The brushstrokes really let them strut their stuff.”

If the point of Wool’s exhibition is to remind the public—not just his collectors—that his work is always evolving, then the mosaics may be a hint of what’s to come. “I’m not yet on to new work,” Wool wrote to me recently, “but I feel I’ve only had a small taste of what mosaic can offer.”