

"The Manhattan Art Review"

3/28/2024

Christopher Wool - See Stop Run - See Stop Run - ****

In the texts available on the exhibition's website there's a review from Two Coats of Paint that starts with an anecdote from Wool's student days where Philip Guston visited and shrugged off Wool's paintings, saying that sort of all-over work should be shown to Larry Poons instead of him. The review notes the irony that both artists have in common a bucking of then-contemporary orthodoxies, but what's even more relevant is that many of the paintings here literally recall Guston's fat, cartoonish line, and even his use of pink paint, only the lines inhabit a non-space that bends a few degrees past figures without going far enough to become properly abstract. They look a lot like painted copies of the sculptures composed of found wire, as well as their corresponding enlargements in cast bronze that have been painted pink, but that puts the cart before the horse; he was drawn to the tumbleweeds of wire he found in Marfa because they looked like his drawings. In this we already have the essence of his practice, namely the entropy of the material world and a similarly physical approach to the process of making. A squiggle is one thing, or, more particularly, not very much of a thing. But when those squiggles are juxtaposed with coils of wire, Rorschach test drawings on paper that are painted over or enlarged on canvas and covered by monotypes, photos of desolate dirt roads and his fire-damaged studio, photos of small wire squiggles in the proximity of their cast enlargements with the welding points left visible, a smaller version of stone mural commissioned for a skyscraper lobby near Hudson Yards (the choice of his first ever mural prompted by the logistics of how to get such a large work into the building), let alone the space of a hollowed-out office space on the 19th floor of an office building just off Wall Street, then the persistent not-muchness of the squiggles starts to take on a logic greater than itself. The space has led to some complaints that the work just looks really good in an unfinished building, and while it's true that I'd probably be less convinced by his work in a white cube, it's also just a canny idea, not a cheap trick. Taking work outside of a gallery puts pressure on it to respond to its environment, and it can very easily be smothered or degraded by the setting instead of improved. Here in particular the bleeding of the art and the space into one another is almost staggering, with the workman's graffiti and cracked floors transitioning contiguously into the art on display, and even a few pink pillars with white polka dots that pass as artworks in your peripheral vision. His artworks are contextually so concerned with their own materiality that they become something like the residual traces of a process, which mirrors exactly what's at work in the accumulated layers of history that are revealed in an unfinished office building. He moves his procedural logic through various formats to develop them by a process of accrual, mutually informing and reinforcing one another, and in this sense the setting is just as much a component of his paintings as are his photographs. This extreme mode of what could be called formalism, if only for lack of a better word, has a strangely organic quality, again like entropy but also like the problem of how to move while standing still, development not in a consciously linear fashion but more the way a tree can develop into a forest without "doing anything." And yes, none of the work is for sale, he got the place himself, etc. etc., which is great, but it should be less romanticized than appreciated for the baseline of generosity and authenticity that one should expect from an artist towards their own work. That should be a lower bar than it is, but in this climate it stands out as a sadly exceptional gesture because artists like Wool have to go to such great lengths to come up for air outside of the dank mines of the art world. That's not to say that I don't generally admire him for doing this, only that I've tried to avoid being swayed in my judgments by idealizing it.