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Christopher Wool's, *Untitled*, 2007 Through an Urban Lens

Urban landscapes are known for cultivating a vibrant and enriching culture that inspires a powerful craving among its citizens to create and inspire others. New York City is a prime example of this profound impact of urban culture on city inhabitants. This concrete jungle has been the muse of countless artists and creatives' works. Perhaps one of the most inspiring aspects of New York City is the omnipresence of art. Postmodernist artist Christopher Wool serves as an example of an artist directly inspired by the city's art scene. After leaving Sarah Lawrence College, Wool enrolled in The New York Studio School in 1973 where he became immersed in the lively downtown art scene (Brinson 2013, 36). Curator and Wool expert, Katherine Brinson, describes how Wool was "exposed to the cacophony of the city, whether through the blaring incantations of billboards and commercial signage or the illicit interventions of graffiti artists" (Brinson 2013, 40). Wool's urban exposure has shaped the way he creates art, and as a result, his works capture the unique essence of New York City.

Perhaps one of the largest pieces in the Hill Art Foundation's vast Christopher Wool collection is *Untitled*, 2007, measuring at 125 x 96 inches. The Foundation's visitors are instantly attracted to the wiped away gray enamel paint and looping black spray paint inspired by the techniques of urban graffiti artists. Brinson perfectly captures the chaos radiating from each of Wool's canvases:

"Each new set of lines is smothered in hazy veils of wiped gray, with further layers sprayed on top, to the point where distinguishing between the various imbrications becomes impossible" (Brinson 2013, 47).

An interesting element of *Untitled*, 2007 is the dripping effect created through dark spray paint. It is evident that Wool oriented his painting in many different directions in order to

make the drippings travel up and down the canvas. A majority of these drippings creep upwards towards the top of the painting. While these drippings are small and thin in comparison to the large scale of the painting, they contrast starkly with the light gray background forming an interesting silhouette. This miniscule silhouette resembles a tight city skyline emblematic of New York City-- a place swelling with hungry artists craving inspiration.

Another key component of *Untitled, 2007* is the wiping away of Wool's own work. This erasure is a classic Wool technique that can be identified in many of his paintings. Wool achieves this effect by soaking a rag in turpentine and vigorously wiping away at his work. Similar to the effect of visible, small layered paint strokes, this aggressive method directly exposes the large gray swipes that he created with his rag. It allows one to envision Wool hunched over his linen canvas, gliding gray paint onto it only to suddenly and fiercely attempt to erase it. Perhaps this is what he desired, for viewers to visualize his technique and thus gain insight into the human mind and creation process. Often in art we only see the final product; we are not shown the painstaking steps followed in the process of creating the work. As a result, the painting illustrates an intimacy between Christopher Wool and the viewer that is typically not achieved.

In a way, *Untitled, 2007* also embodies the urban feel of NYC. These vigorous, gray marks of erasure evoke the fast-paced nature of crowded New York City streets. These lines visually call to mind the interwoven crowds of people as two groups file through each other after crossing a street. They resemble the gray blur of a subway as it pulls out of a station or a raindrop covered taxi cab window on a gloomy day swiftly racing down a street to make the light. These vigorous marks also evoke the feelings of impatience and frantic energy that characterize New Yorkers—they are moving so fast that still lines cannot capture their accelerated pace. While these lines

are overlapping, they are all individually identifiable much like the plethora of different city identities that coexist beautifully.

One can also interpret these seemingly fast-moving erasure marks as the forces of gentrification that have long plagued New York City neighborhoods. While gentrification is a relatively slow process, if one examines these neighborhoods before and after, it is as if these communities, stores and facades have been transformed mystically and rapidly much like these marks. They become both erased and replaced, like the overlapping swipes of paint. Just like Wool attempted to erase components of his work, citizens living in communities subject to the perils of gentrification are actively becoming erased from the places they call home.

Furthermore, there is violence inherent in this erasure of communities similar to the aggressive nature present in both the visual and processual essence of Wool's artwork. Yet this violent erasure technique drastically juxtaposes the intimate process of creating it. Gentrification can also be perceived as both violent and intimate due its rampant destruction of people's cherished homes and neighborhoods.

Overall, Wool's experiences in NYC have undoubtedly shaped the way in which he creates and perceives art. *Untitled, 2007* is a perfect example of a painting that embodies the vibrant, urban essence of New York City. He captures both the fast-paced nature of cities as well the underlying forces such as gentrification that displace masses of citizens. Through the use of urban graffiti and erasure techniques that provide an intimate glimpse into his creative process, Wool is able to craft his own skyline.

Bibliography

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