

## In Dialogue with Tom Hill

Endie Hwang and Brittany Torres are Teen Curators at the Hill Art Foundation. They spoke with Tom Hill, Founder of Hill Art Foundation.

**Location:** Hill Art Foundation, New York City

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**Endie:** Hello listeners! I'm Endie Hwang and I'm Brittany Torres and we're interviewing Tom Hill, the founder of Hill Art Foundation, on behalf of the Teen Curators at Hill Art Foundation. This exhibition space, free to the public, is only a few months old and is currently showing selected works by Christopher Wool.

So, I'm interested to know what drew you into the art world. So, from the outside, it seems that an average person would consider you completely separate from art. You were a high school athlete, you studied completely unrelated topics to art in college, and pursued an incredibly successful career in hedge fund management. What drew you to the art world, what was your catalyst?

**Tom Hill:** Well it started with my family. My mother was an artist. She was really talented. She would take me to museums. My dad also had an interest in art and would come with us. My sister never really had an opportunity to fully develop her career as an artist because she taught art. And so, running through the Hill family was this idea that you can actually have amazing experiences looking at a sculpture and a drawing, and it was something we did as a family. So, I always viewed looking at art as not only a social event but something that we did as a family.

**Endie:** And on that note I understand that due to the nature of your job, you're used to making certain high-risk decisions and thinking about profit and depreciation. For that matter, is there a more practical reason for you collecting art? Or is it just about appreciating the art itself?

**Tom Hill:** Well everyone asks, why is that you what you buy usually -- if not always -- goes up in value? And I said I have no idea, because I'm not buying it for that reason. I'm buying it because first, I'm attracted to the image or to the specific work. Second, I've tried to put the work in the context of the history of art. So I'm trying to understand what the artist was trying to accomplish when they did a given work. And lastly, I'm trying to say, how is the world going to view that work of art five years, ten years, twenty years from now? And you, if you study art, you know there's an evolution that certain artists are popular at a moment in time and they lose favor. And one of the questions I always ask myself is: is this work of art and is a given artist going to have a

sustainable career? and Then, in the future, as the next generation of viewers and artists look back, are they going to say that this was an artist who made a difference?

**Endie:** And on that same token about your job, I believe -- if I'm understanding it correctly -- it requires a lot of linear thought, and since you're focusing on contemporary works that tend to be more abstract, do you think that the demands of your job reflect your choice in art?

**Tom Hill:** Well I always used to like to play checkers, but then I said playing chess is even more interesting because it's multi-dimensional. And, when you think about a work of art, it's often three dimensional. It often has aspects of drawing you in, pushing you out. And, as I thought about what really turns me on in the art world it's almost how do I react, how do I respond, not just to the work of art today but projecting a year from now or five years from now, how am I going to be reacting to that work of art? And then to the extent that I want to have works of art in a context either in our foundation on display or in our home. How did the works of art work together in a context, tell a story? do they make sense? Sometimes you work so hard to put work together and they clash, and it really doesn't work. So I'm always asking the question: how can this work of art fit into some broader context? (5:00) and I think it's very similar in my business where I'm always trying to solve a problem. In some instances, it'll be an investment problem, in some instances it'll be, how does this particular company fit into a broader context? The last thing you want is to own a company that becomes obsolete. I mean just look at Eastman Kodak. You probably don't know the company. But when I grew up in the 50s, film was essentially the mode of taking photography. When the Digital Revolution came Eastman Kodak went out of business. It was one of the largest US companies and it didn't survive simply because it didn't see the Digital Revolution coming; it didn't see the ability to take photographs using digital as opposed to film. And what I'm trying to do in the art is to be one step ahead and avoid the problem of an Eastman Kodak but in this heavily commercialized Market.

**Endie:** You'll probably be a good chess player as I'm hearing.

**Tom Hill:** Haha, are you a chess player?

**Endie:** No, I'm really bad at chess.

**Tom Hill:** (laughs)

**Endie:** You have said you have an issue with the monetization of art. But you participate in this heavily commercialized market. Does this idea ever cause you any sort of discomfort?

**Tom Hill:** Yes! When I want to buy something and it's at a price that I can't afford, I don't like that. And one of the questions that I always get asked is: "Tom why are you showing your art to the public? Because what you're doing is letting them in on your secret. Why don't you just try to buy all these works of art without actually talking about what your interests are because there may be other people who see what you've done and then want to buy those works of art and then in the future you're going to have to pay more." I haven't really thought about that. One thing I *do* want to accomplish is education. And to the extent last spring I could have a number of our Christopher Wool Works in Hong Kong and over a three-week period, we had literally thousands and thousands of visitors every day. I was actually thrilled that a number of people from mainland China and also from broader Asian Pacific regions who were in Hong Kong for Hong Kong Fossil could actually see Wool in kind of a Museum context where the works are not for sale, and it was an education for these people. And a number of people said, "Well Tom you realize that you're educating people and they are likely to be competitors of yours in the future when you're buying your next Wool." And I said, "Well that's a price I'm willing to pay." So the fact that a work of art has gone up has actually created more problems: I have to pay more for the insurance, I have to worry about protecting it in terms of conservation if it's worth more, and I always lend works of art. And it's a challenge because often exhibitions that I wanna lend a work to that requested it or having trouble in today's environment paying for the insurance to actually protect the work of art and so it's actually become somewhat of a liability.

**Brittany:** And now speaking about the collection, I feel like the million-dollar question that the world is dying to hear is: why did you choose to open the Hill Art Foundation with a Christopher Wool exhibition?

(10:00)

**Tom Hill:** Well we plan to have two exhibitions a year, so the fact that I chose Christopher Wool isn't intended to signal that I have necessarily favorites. It's a little bit like somebody gets asked a question: do you have a favorite work of art? And, the answer to that is: no, I don't have a favorite work of art. I like them all equally and for different reasons. But I started the foundation opening with Christopher Wool because, first, I have more of his works than any other artist. Second, I've gotten to know him, and he is somebody on a personal level I have come to respect. Third, he collaborated with another artist that I collect in depth, Robert Gober, Rob Gober. And in fact, downstairs on the third floor is a Gober sculpture. Fourth, I wanted to actually show the range of Christopher's work from photography, to works on paper, to etchings, to lithographs, to paintings, and to sculptures. And you know we have a large bronze sculpture that we have installed as part of the exhibition, But I wanted the world to see the variety of output coming from Christopher. I've always thought that from my standpoint, one of the most interesting aspects of an artist is their ability to work in many dimensions. If you look at Picasso; Picasso knew how to draw, how to paint, was an amazing sculptor, he did etchings. And same thing with

Matisse, and there are number of artists, like Francis Bacon, who didn't do sculpture -- there's an argument if he even did drawings -- but he was an amazing painter. But I've always been attracted to artists who have multi dimensions. De Kooning, for instance, could draw, he was an *amazing* painter, extraordinary sculptor, and would work in small, medium-size, and large sculptures. So it all came together and it started with the Hong Kong exhibition where, because I did an initial show of Christopher's work in Hong Kong, we're going to have another bite with the apple with Christopher maybe three or four years from now. We'll do another show that we didn't show this time around.

**Brittany:** Since I know that you have a personal relationship with Christopher Wool, how can having a friendship with the artist change your perspective on a particular piece of art or how you engage with it?

**Tom Hill:** Well, I think one of the hardest jobs you can imagine is being an artist. Just think about waking up in the morning and saying, "Okay, I have to create something today and I'm going to be the judge of whether it's good or bad." If you're in business, the marketplace is the judge, the *customer* is the judge. But, it's *extremely* varied -- the audience -- and it's not that difficult, in business, to please somebody so you can create a product that people will buy and that they'll like. Now, if you want to create a really excellent product, you'd have to be kind of extraordinary around the edges. By in large, you don't have the difficulty that an individual who is creating something faces everyday with they themselves as the judge of whether the work of art is good or not. You don't have to say, "Oh my goodness, I think it's now ready to be shown. Is it good enough?" I just couldn't imagine how an artist feels when looking at their works and the sensitivity because they've made the decision that it's good enough to be seen by others, but somebody may not like it. And that may hurt their feelings.

(15:00)

With Christopher I am extremely sensitive to what I think are casual comments that people make who don't understand the complexity and the difficulty in making works of art. I always ask Christopher how he thinks about a given work. Sometimes he'll say and sometimes he won't say. But I think that when you are dealing with something as private as a personal creation, you have to be *enormously* respectful of not just the sanctity of the process, but just how difficult it is to do great works of art and also the sensitivity an artist inherently has about -- I don't want to say rejection, because Christopher's past that. He's been widely accepted, in abstract expressionism, as the final statement of the movement that Jackson Pollock started. Christopher's kind of viewed as the exclamation point around finishing one aspect of abstract expressionism. But he probably wouldn't see it that way -- that's a direct quote from Richard

Armstrong, who's the director of the Guggenheim, and who knows Christopher's work better than probably any other director.

**Brittany:** So, in most cases art collectors usually try to tell a story through their collections. Do you see your collection as a cohesive whole? If so, what message do you want to convey through your collection?

**Tom Hill:** I'm not that interested in narratives because I really want other people to decide how they feel about a work of art. I can place two works of art next to each other. I can place The Gober sculpture next to the stamp drawing--it was the basis for the dress pattern on a photograph that Bob Gober did -- but I want other people to actually connect the dots and to say *this* has meaning for them. I think a lot of scholars and a lot of people make a mistake by being didactic. By saying, "Oh, I have something really important to say so listen." Either I'm telling a story, or I have something profound to say about why these two works of art should be together. I want other people to make judgments and to say it works for them or doesn't work for them, or I don't get it. That's what makes this whole dialogue fun. Everyone gets a point-of-view, everyone has the opportunity to, at least in our art foundation here, to express that point of view, and they are healthy debates. One of the fun things about collecting with my wife is that often we would have debates. Astrid, my daughter, who's very involved in the Foundation, would also get into debates about what a given work of art means to her versus what it means to me, and that's the fun thing -- that's the dialogue and it's the ability to actually have different points of view. I'm the farthest away from thinking that I have something to say. It's more that the art speaks for itself and *you* as a viewer have to make up your own mind about how you feel about it and what it says to you.

(20:00)

**Brittany:** Is there one of Christopher Wool's art piece currently on display that sticks out to you?

**Tom Hill:** On any given day I would say I see something different in a work of art. I'm sitting in front of this flower picture now and when the sun is -- we're facing now East, but when the Sun is coming up in the morning and this room is filled with light, this picture looks very different than when the sun is setting in the West. There's not the light that's coming in. I'm seeing something in this picture--in this passage on the lower right--that there's this flower I've never seen before. Every time I look at a work of art, I'm hoping for something different, or I'm in a different mood, so it elicits a different kind of reaction.

**Brittany:** How do you pick pieces for your collection? Or do they inspire you in any way? Why did you decide to display *Untitled*, 2014?

**Tom Hill:** I think when I see a work of art and I can't get it out of my head, that's usually both a good sign and a bad sign -- a bad sign for my pocketbook -- because if I can't get it out of my head I probably say, "Well, is there an opportunity to own it?" But the first thing is, when you look at something and it sticks in your head. I've certainly told Astrid, my daughter, this story. The first time I really came into contact with a very strong Christopher Wool painting was in the mid 90s when I was on the board of the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington. The deputy director, Neal Benezra, was presenting a Christopher Wallflower painting to be acquired by the Hirshhorn. Joe Hirshhorn, who gave his entire collection to the nation, insisted in the charter and bylaws that every board member had to vote on a work of art that came into the collection. It was an *amazing* flower picture that was *so* rough and tough, and it just knocked me for a loop when I saw it. Initially, I'm not sure I liked it, but I couldn't take my eyes off it. During that day I kept coming back -- I voted in favor of it because Neal Benezra, our curator and deputy director, know more about Wool than I did, and I trusted his judgement. I *couldn't* take my eyes off of it and so, I said any work of art that has that impact on me where it's like getting punched in the stomach, getting my breath knocked out of me. Do I like it? Well I'm not sure. But do I respect it? And what are the thoughts that are going on in my head around why I can't take my eyes off of it. And then you'd asked me about the series, and I think that those are the monotypes that are right there on the wall. Those usually are in a house that we have out at Easthampton, and they are in the hallway on the way into our bedroom. When I saw those four, it's a series of four that I saw together, I said these are so strong. Their combination of splotches like Rorschach -- do you know the Warhol Rorschach series -- and the use of some red, some black were striking.  
(25:00)

This was in an exhibition where I saw these, and I said I wanna buy these four. They weren't in a series where I had to buy -- I could have bought just one -- but the way they were being displayed as a foursome, I said this is really cool. When I gave Christopher Wool the chance to choose those works of art that were going to be on display at the Foundation, I gave him everything we owned, and he chose those four. Only in the two-day period when he was installing the show did he decide to only have three and not the fourth. And so, I said, "Christopher, we have room on the wall. Why don't you want the fourth?" His answer was, "Everything I do, I want it to be lean. I want it to be spare, and I want it to be minimal so that people can *actually* absorb all three. If I had a fourth it's not essentially saying that, "Well you know that it you've added one to a denominator of three, so you have now four." So, you've got now that percentage increase in the impact. He said, "I think you're going to be losing impact by adding the fourth." And so, I said, "it's your call Christopher, you're the artist. Just like you wanted to have your photographs from Marfa, both the *Yard* series and the *Road* series represented. And I said, "I think that's a brilliant idea and because the photographs that you've done -- whether in the 90s or ones you're doing today -- are very formative and very important to your whole body of work. You're going to have those photographs in the show; how *you* choose to display where you have just the three and not

the four -- that's your call." And I think it looks amazing and he was right. But, at the time, I didn't understand that message. I thought, well, four is better than three. But it turns out three is better than four in this context, in this space.

**Endie:** You've alluded to Jackson Pollock being the head, so to speak, of the Abstract Expressionist movement.

**Tom Hill:** He was *really* the seminal, and I would say the most important initial mover. Then you add sorts of others -- Barnett Newman, de Kooning, Clyfford Still -- throughout the fifties. But it was Pollock that rocked the world with Abstract Expressionism.

**Endie:** You believe that Christopher Wool is the successor --

**Tom Hill:** I think he has internalized the disciplines of Abstract Expressionism. Even when Christopher is doing a word painting, or a text painting, it's an abstraction. People get hung up on the word or the meaning. The meaning has relevance, but it's actually how the letter is arrayed in the piece of paper and the innuendo and nuance of the word. For instance, he has a drawing: TRBL, and its T R B L. Four letters. You know what that spells, well, it doesn't spell anything. As you put the letters together it sounds trouble. T R B L. So, he's playing games with your mind, but it's how the letters array in the canvas, aluminum, or drawing.

**Brittany:** Thank you so much for making the time for this interview. We really appreciate it, and hopefully you enjoyed it. If you listeners have the time, please visit Hill Art Foundation located at 10th Avenue and 24th Street. It has truly amazing work on display.

(30:00)