CHRISTOPHER WOOL

Photographer: Oliver Abraham

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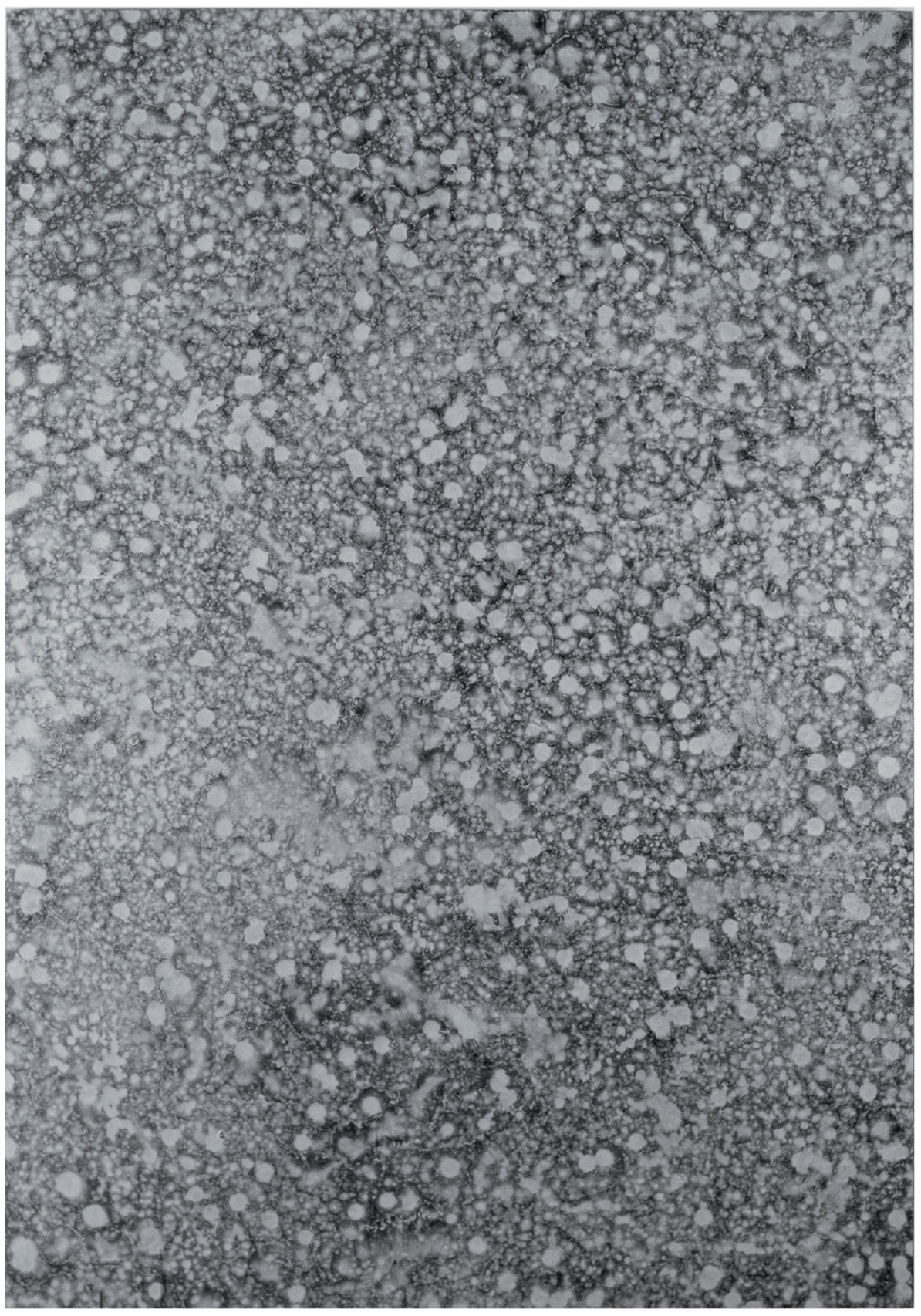
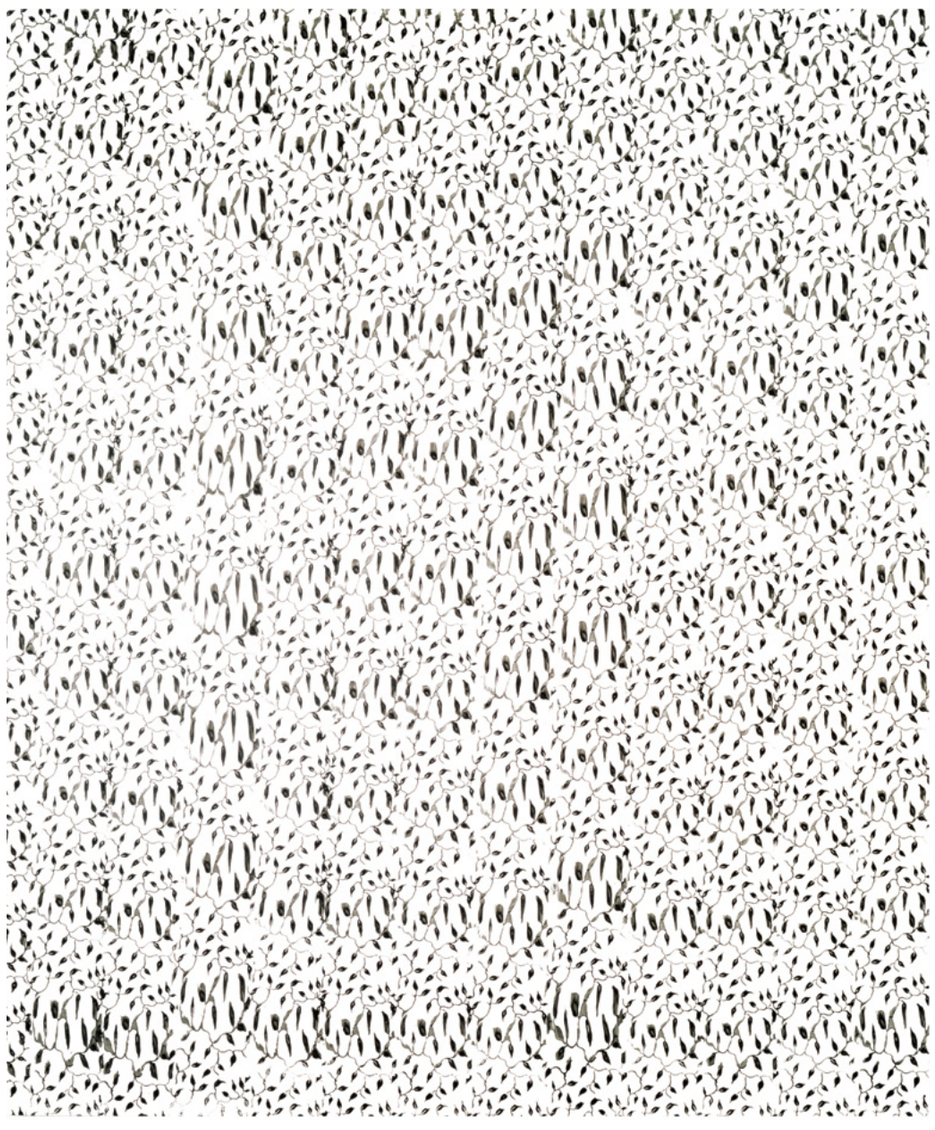
Christopher Wool was born in Chicago in 1955. In the early 1970s, he moved to New York and studied art with postwar abstract painters, including Richard Pousette-Dart at Sarah Lawrence College and Jack Tworkov and Harry Kramer at the Studio School. Later that decade, Wool became an active part of the city’s counter-culture movement, defined by hybridity and cross-pollination between art forms, developing an interest in photography, film, and music of the punk and No Wave scenes. He began exhibiting his work regularly in the mid-1980s, when painting’s validity as a medium was heavily debated. Wool’s practice expresses uncertainty about painting’s future while paradoxically pushing the medium forward into new visual territories.

For almost four decades, Wool has interrogated the traditional terms of painting—namely composition, gesture, and materials—through the gritty aesthetics of city life in New York, mechanical processes, and methods of repetition and reproduction. He has used decorative paint rollers, found text, stencils, stamps, silkscreens, clip-art, and even his own work as an image bank for generating paintings. Sometimes these sources appear directly, while other times they are layered or collaged. Often, the sources are repeated and recycled, accumulating or deteriorating on the surfaces of his works. Wool's action of repetition can lead to unintended visual incidents—a paint roller slips, leaving a streak; a stencil painted upright produces drips or imprecise edges; or images replicated through the silkscreen process appear like ghosts. These unintentional moments welcome improvisation and accident into Wool's practice, letting go of the romantic myth of an artist in control of their inspiration and capable of creating works of singular, isolated genius.

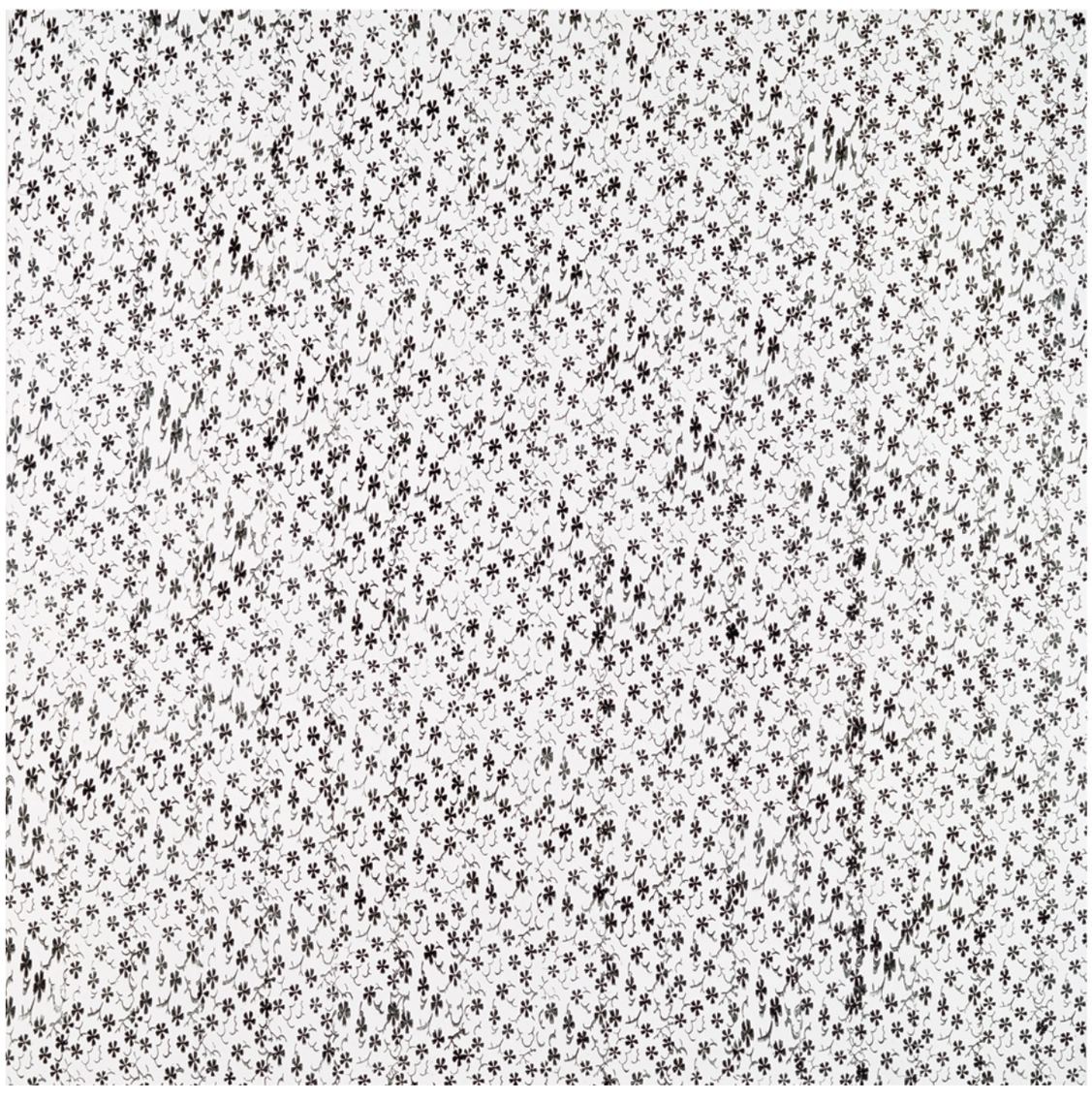


Untitled, 1985

Wool's early works often involve a painted surface that is covered in drips of chemicals. The reaction of the materials produces an all-over pattern that can be likened to a field of stars or naturally weathered or tarnished metal. At the time they were made, these paintings, and Wool's technique, were considered in the context of Jackson Pollock's paintings, recalling galaxies through networks of dripped paint. Wool's reference, however, is no mere homage. Instead, as curator Katherine Brinson describes the reception of the early work, the paintings were seen as "a détente between AbEx [Abstract Expressionism] energy and the deadpan cool of Pop." Wool's work is equally capable of referencing Andy Warhol's critique of Pollock—such as Warhol's mechanically produced painting and, more directly, his drip paintings created by urinating on a canvas covered in metal shavings. Warhol's Oxidation series or "piss paintings," as they were known, displayed a similar material reaction as Wool's works, satirizing and mocking Pollock's gestures with the intent of deflating the idea of an artist as an original, expressive genius.



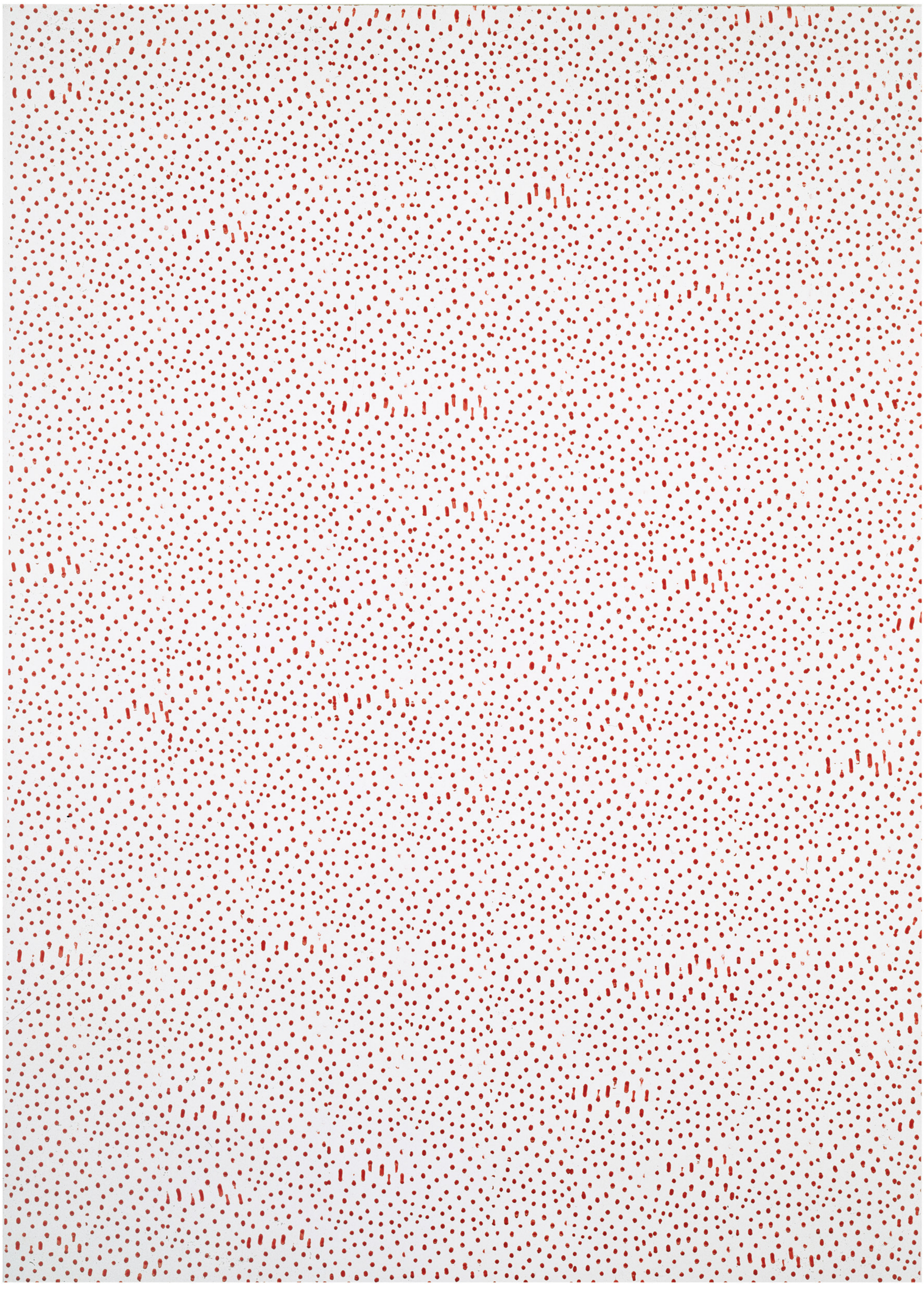
Untitled, 1988



Untitled, 1987

In the mid-1980s, Wool often used pattern paint rollers to produce his paintings. These rollers offered an inexpensive decorative replacement for wallpaper or other wall coverings, indicative of dwellings that were poorly remodeled with no intention toward craft or quality. Wool has said that he was interested in the "friction generated by putting forms that were supposed to be decorative in such severe terms." Wool's "severe terms" were the strict and mechanical deployments of patterns as paintings. While painting has long been the receiver of evolving standards of beauty, pattern was used by Wool as a surface for a cheaply made gesture toward decoration.

In these works, Wool's rollers slip in and out of efficiency, never quite cohering into clean patterns. The flowers, leaves, and dots of the roller echo, hiccup, and slide into streaks. Some commentators have described these works as expressions of broken systems, deterioration, and visual static. They can also be seen within the context of the long-standing tension between "fine art" and "decorative arts," a distinction heavily critiqued and virtually dissolved by the time that Wool made his roller paintings.

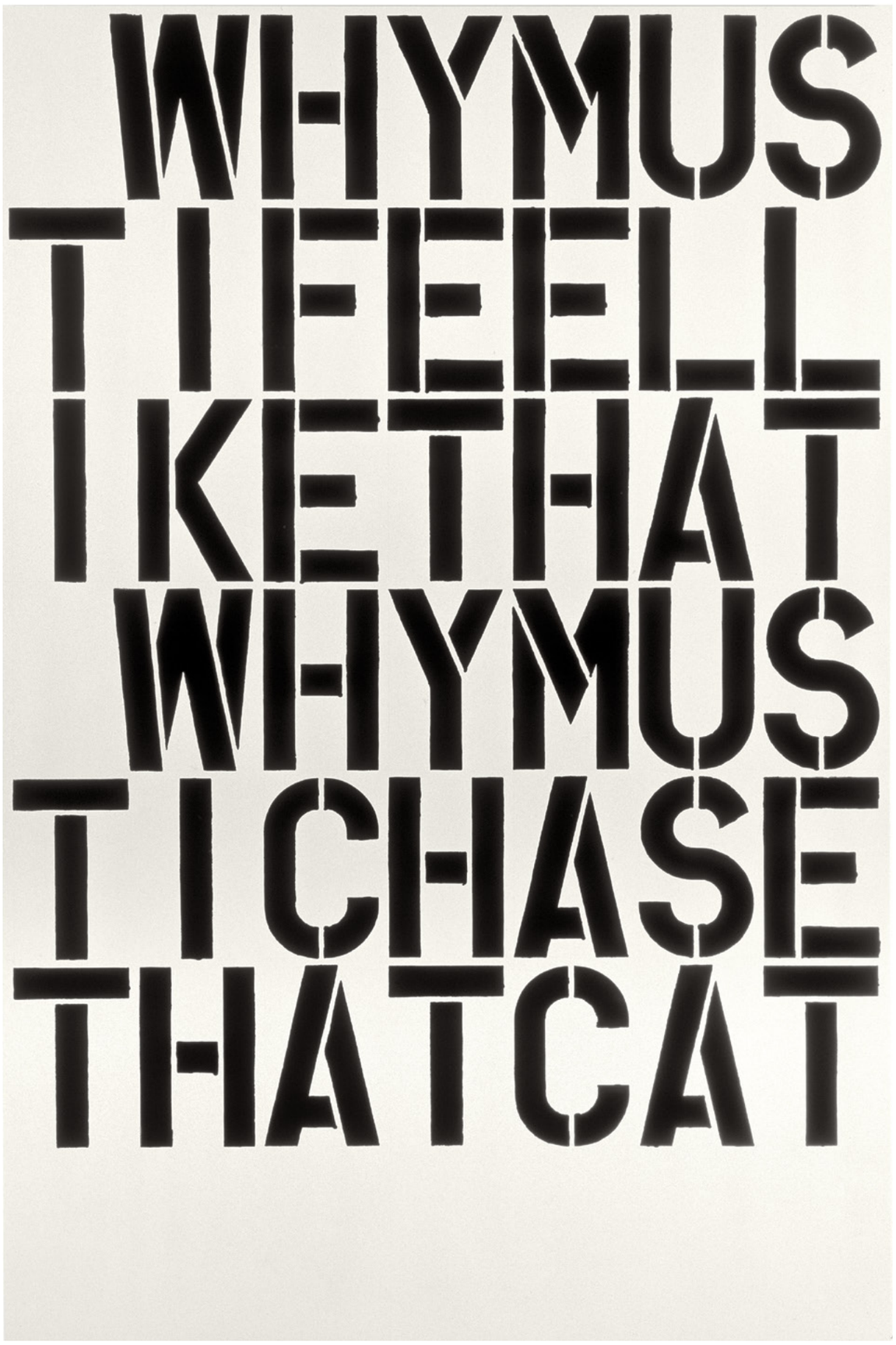


Untitled, 1989

Untitled, 1989

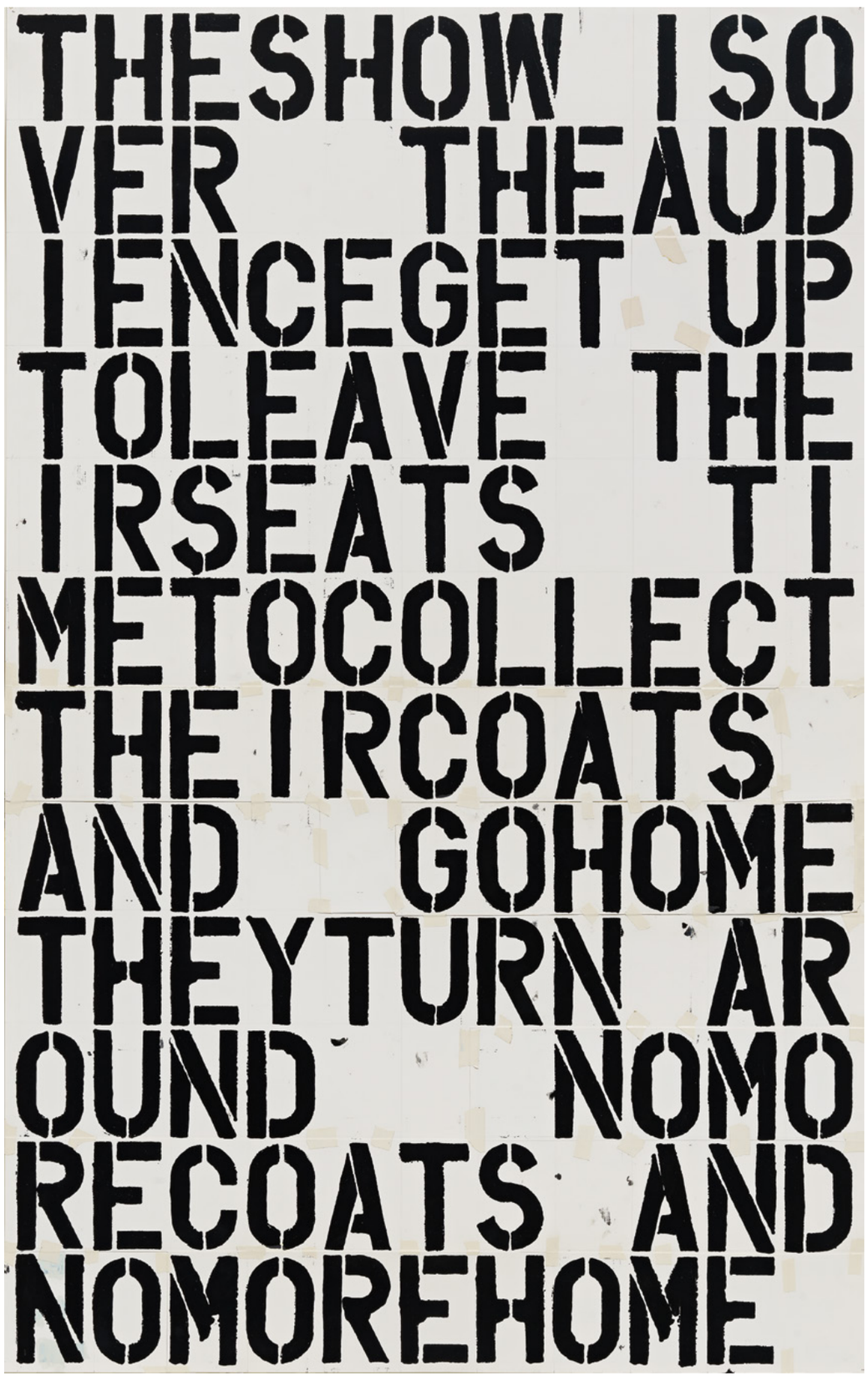
Untitled, 1991

Wool began to use stamps in his work while at the American Academy in Rome in 1989–90. He continued to employ the technique when he returned to New York. *Untitled*, 1989, features an image of a bird, simplified and squeezed of any visual depth like a symbol for a coat of arms. In the work, a bird is pressed, the stamp is presumably flipped over, then the reverse image is pressed again. Two columns form, with the birds looking at their mirror images across a visual gap. This basic activity—repetition, mirroring, doubling—gains in complexity in *Untitled*, 1991. The forms used here are adapted from one of Wool's roller patterns, which he enlarged and had made into rectangular stamps. Wool builds a design from these assorted stamps, repeating a series of vines. Residue from the edges of the stamps and slight discordant breaks in the overall pattern create a subtle grid.



Why?, 1990

In the late 1980s, Wool began incorporating text into his work. He was inspired by graffiti, specifically the words “sex” and “luv” that he saw spray-painted on a new truck. The paintings that followed are Wool’s most recognizable images, employing stencils of text from cultural idioms, song lyrics, movies, and books. Two of the word paintings on view here (*Why?*, 1990, and *Untitled*, 1991) have identifiable sources. Why? takes a line from George Clinton’s song “Atomic Dog,” and *Untitled* reproduces a quote from Situationist writer Raoul Vaneigem, which Wool found in *Lipstick Traces*, a book by rock-music critic Greil Marcus. Wool’s work uses the visual impact of words as paintings, creating tones and effects impossible to achieve through language or paint alone. Wool’s choices can be aggressive, fractured, awkward, and, at times, even appear as the visual equivalent of speech impediments. As a result, Wool’s word paintings present language in various forms of recognition, understanding, and legibility.



Untitled, 1991

Untitled, 1989

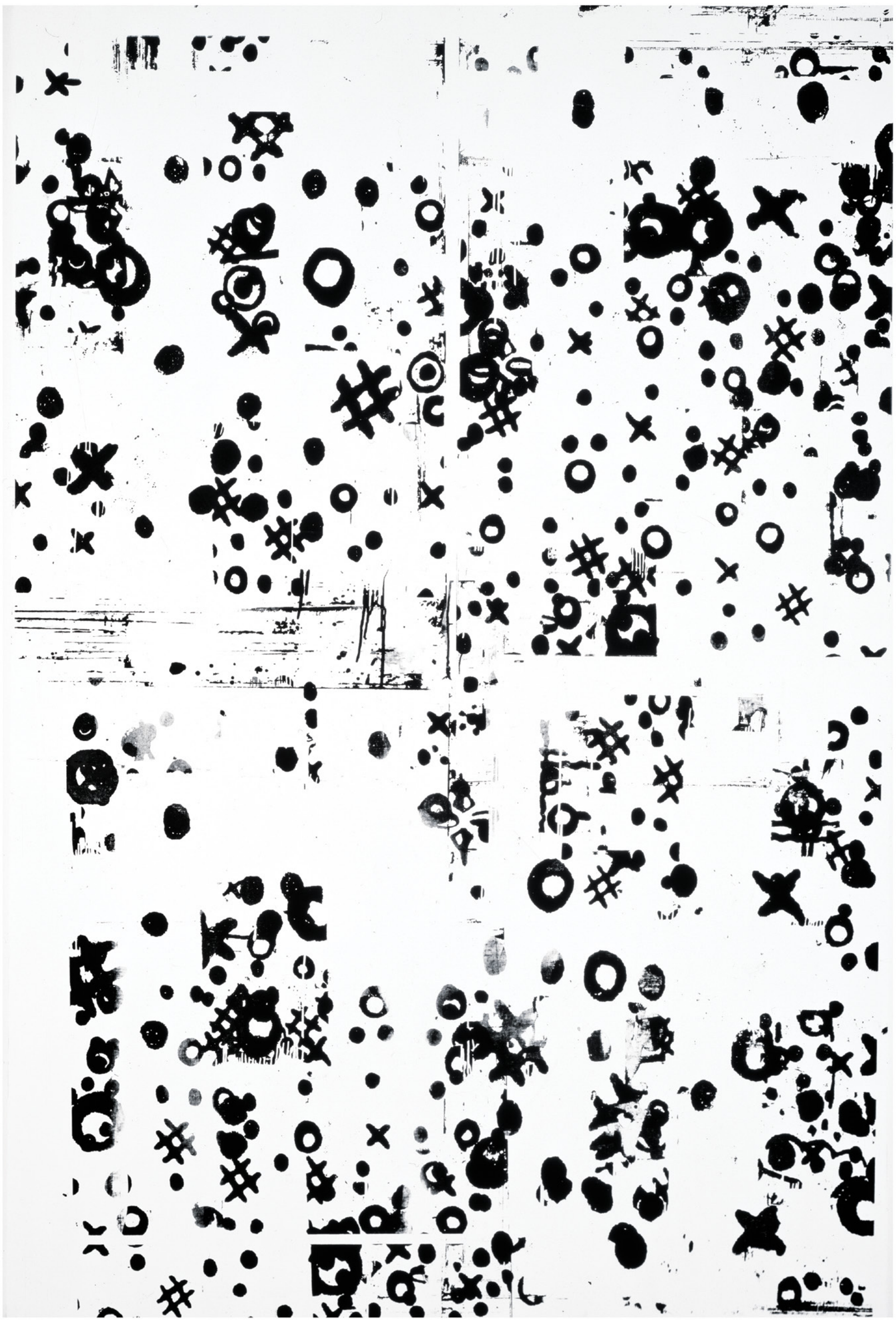
Untitled, 1989

Untitled, 1990

Untitled, 1990, features the phrase “Run Dog Run” printed across a series of nine aluminum panels. The expression comes from “See Spot run. Run dog run” in the classic learn-to-read book *Fun with Dick and Jane*. The words are repeated in a staccato fashion, clipped in half by line breaks imposed by Wool. The repetition of words, unconventional spacing, and intentionally clumsy rhythm give the sense that communication is a struggle. Wool does not specify the order of the panels; they can be installed in a new sequence each time the work is shown. Regardless of reading and comprehension level, viewers can take the position of the young reader, as if the text is working to become language while the reader is working to find meaning.

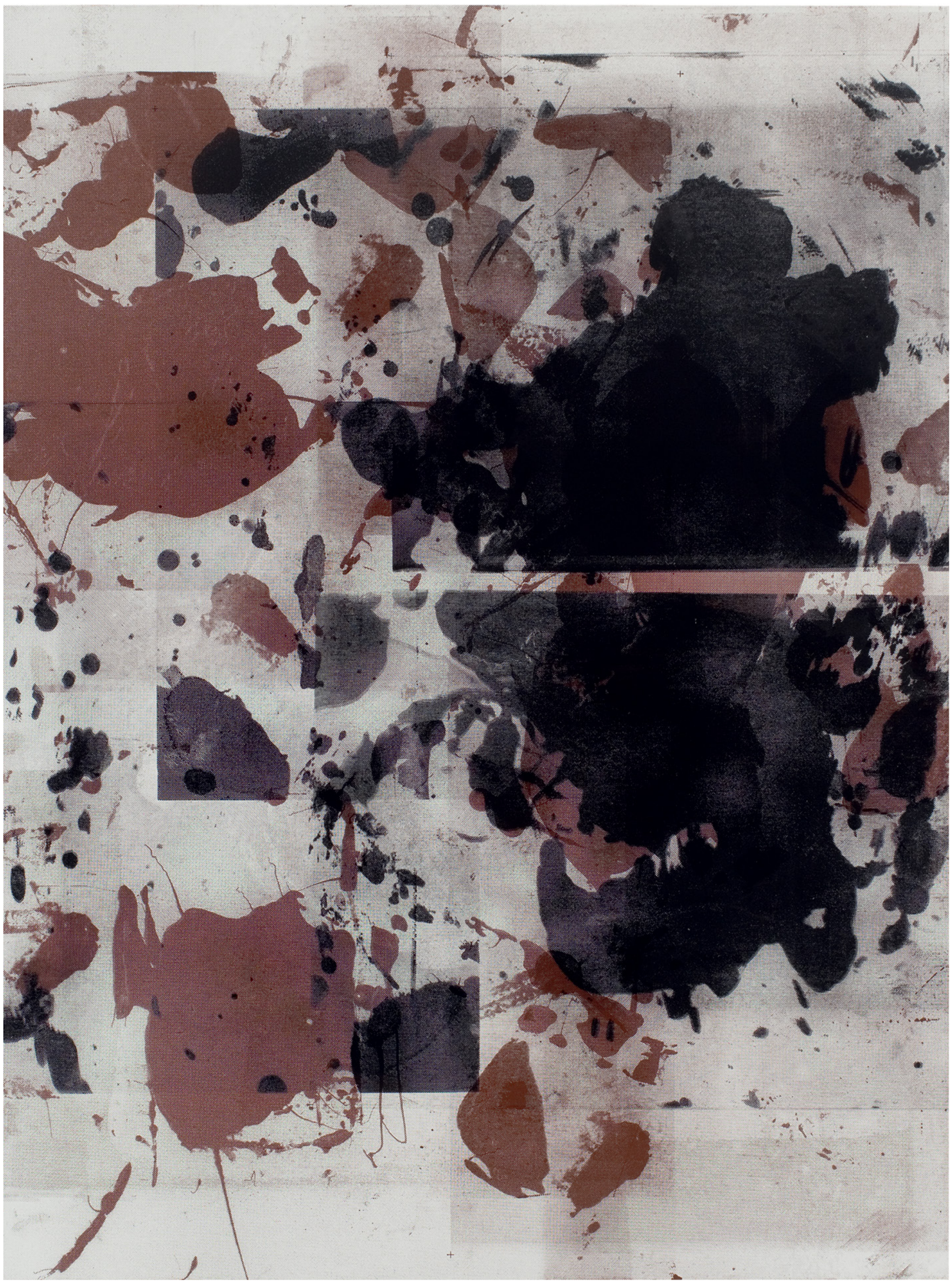
I Smell a Rat, 1994

In *I Smell a Rat*, 1994, Wool overlays images and creates a sense of shallow visual depth. At the base of the work is a 1989 painting by the artist with the words “Rat Rat Rat” in red. Silkscreened on top of the original composition is an enlarged vine motif from Wool’s earlier stamp paintings (see *Untitled*, 1991). He also silkscreens flowers from a book of clip-art and applies loose washes of white paint. This painting marks an important transition in Wool’s practice, in which he began recycling imagery from his past works. Soon after this, he started recreating entire paintings in silkscreen, using images of his older paintings to make new compositions in an internal feedback loop.



Untitled, 1999

In the mid-1990s, Wool began turning his own paintings into silkscreens that he subsequently used to make new works. The results are often described as ghosts of Wool's previous works, images whose integrity and effect break down through reconfiguration, repetition, and the silkscreen process itself. *Untitled*, 1999, is created through a series of overlapping silkscreens. Wool applies the screens in an uneven way so that their rough edges are legible. He also allows variance in the application of the ink, with some areas containing dark black inks and others lighter grays. The seemingly hand-drawn dots, crosses, stars, and hash marks featured here are cropped moments from Wool's paintings from a few years before *Untitled* was completed.



Untitled, 2005

In 2005, Wool began altering images of his earlier works in Photoshop before producing the silkscreens of them. Through this digital process, Wool's sourced imagery took on new complexities of scale, contrast, color, and effect. Wool's use of Photoshop makes it increasingly difficult to locate a previous painting in a later work. While many of Wool's works from 2000 to 2005 reuse visual elements from his drawing series 9th Street Rundown, *Untitled*, 2005, features so many layers, alterations, and interventions that its direct reference to the series, or to any other works by Wool, is challenging to discern.

She Smiles for the Camera IV, 2005

Untitled, 2008

At first glance, Wool's series of gray paintings appears in the tradition of abstraction. The works seem gestural and play with visual depth, engaging the classic negotiation of "push and pull" between foreground and background that defined painting for centuries (and which was central to Wool's early classes with Richard Pousette-Dart and Jack Tworkov). The series began in 2005, when Wool was at an impasse with a painting in progress and erased a section of it with a turpentine-soaked rag. To Wool, the resulting mark felt like both a positive and a negative gesture. While he continued to digitally alter his previous works, the use of turpentine became part of Wool's analog process along with silkscreen to produce new works with ghostly effect. In the gray paintings, it is difficult to determine which of Wool's marks are made by mechanical reproduction and which constitute a painterly gesture. Wool may make a mark with a rag, a spray can, or the click and drag of mouse.

Untitled, 2008

***Untitled*, 2015**

Untitled, 2015, directly declares its use of digital methods. Many of the visual elements of Wool's earlier paintings are present in the silkscreened work. Yet, here, these sources assume the visual language of digital design: clip-art flowers; letters in a variety of fonts, sizes, and distortions; and gestures rendered with a digital drawing tool. Wool builds a composition with these elements, overlapping and overlaying them to create a shallow visual depth. While the artist's process has evolved, this painting addresses the same concerns as its predecessors. Gestures are built up, copied, and engaged in multiple rounds of edits and redeployments until they reappear as excavations or ghosts of the originals.

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