

# Christopher Wool

## ***Skowhegan Medal for Painting***

*by Jim Lewis*

I assume most of you know Christopher Wool's work, and I won't describe it directly here. Instead I want to say something about Wool himself, which I realized after decades of knowing him well, and which I believe explains much about his work, though in a way that's hard to describe directly. It is this: He is the most naturally and effortlessly democratic artist I know.

Now, I have to explain what I mean by "democratic". I do not, of course, mean anything related to American political parties, not really. Nor do I mean that he's a Man of the People, a Regular Guy, a slinger of sincerities, a leveler of the unlevelable. He's none of those things, and we can be grateful for that. No, what I mean can perhaps be best expressed, albeit obliquely, in a note Emerson made in his journals in 1868. "Culture is one thing," he said, "and varnish another.[...] With the truly cultivated man, the maiden, the orphan, the poor man, and the hunted slave feel safe."

Well, as I say, that was in 1868, when one could make claims like that without coming across as somewhat sentimental, but the spirit of the remark, as opposed to its details, still strikes me as exactly right, and if we add ideas and techniques and sights to Emerson's cast of outcasts, the words are especially right as a description of Wool. I have never seen him dismiss a person or an idea out of hand. I have never seen him be lazy in his thoughts, or thoughtless in his actions. The entire world and everything in it comes to him with a single recommendation: "This could be interesting, and if it isn't, that could be interesting, too."

He has found things to appreciate, and sometimes to appropriate, in Pontormo paintings and punk rock songs, store-bought stencils and stained glass for an 11th century French church, neighborhood kids and academics, maidens and orphans and poor men, too, along with books of photographs, Philip Guston, free jazz, and a thousand other things, from the palace to the gutter, including, I might add, the work of his friends, which regularly engages him, and about which he's invariably supportive.

An artist always begins as a fan: if they are very lucky, or very diligent, or very honest, they remain fans throughout their career. Wool's fandom is 360 degrees and radical, and heartening as well: Because he gives everything, and everyone, the same chance. – Not the same place, of course: that would be merely indiscriminate. The same chance: and that is democracy.