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Investigating the Fabrication of Alternate Reality Through Christopher Wool's Photography

Christopher Wool is an American artist who is known for his paintings on large canvases, often employing black and white text. His art encompasses a wide range of styles, utilizing a multiplicity of techniques to produce works of art that are often layered -- displaying application and erasure almost simultaneously. Less known are Wool's photographic endeavors, which he has dabbled in as early as the 1980s. Photography is an art form that many painters and artists harness in order to get "in touch with the subtle and perhaps normally overlooked rhythms of their surroundings" (Knoblauch, 2017). Many of Christopher Wool's photobooks are "decidedly urban in their tone and attitude" (ibid., 2017). They feature images that reflect New York City's streets, buildings, and industrial landscapes in a grainy, bleak manner. However, some of his recent books of photography, including *Westtexaspsychosculpture* (2017) and *Yard* (2018) reflects the desolation of rural Marfa, Texas, where the artist now resides part time. The Hill Art Foundation holds a collection of prints from Wool's photo book *Yard*, published in 2018. Examining this series reveals the idea of fabricating an alternate reality in an unexpected environment. Wool achieves by layering, recontextualizing, and contrasting the subjects of the photographs.

Christopher Wool made these photographs in and around Marfa, which is located in Western Texas. Wool does not paint in Marfa, because it would be difficult to move his assistants and studio there. In Marfa, Wool has mostly taken photographs and created both large and small-scale sculptures. The landscape and the severity of Texas interests Wool the most. The description of the Christopher Wool exhibit, *Maybe, Maybe Not* on the Hill Art Foundation's website describes, "Employing a disarming convergence of exposures, *Yard* locates unexpected

sculptural vignettes in the ramshackle detritus surrounding semi-rural dwellings” (Hill Art Foundation). This supports how a close analysis of the visual elements of these images promotes the idea of a constructed reality, due to how Wool uses various techniques to re-contextualize and grapple with various rural landscapes.

One of the untitled images displays a trend across the series: industrial waste in the setting of a barren desert. There is an array of tires and a metal pole complex. Layered upon this is what appears to be the walls of a shipping container. These walls are most visible in what is most likely the sky in the alternate photograph. Wool seems to be playing with scale in this image, positioning this collection of objects as something large and looming. He appears to be finding an urban-appearing environment in the desolate expanses of Marfa. The shipping container walls add another layer of industrialization, suggesting the constant presence of material and construction. Another untitled photograph shows multiple images of houses, trees, and a metal gate layered upon one another. Similar to the previous photograph, Wool utilizes the layering technique to mesh the elements of the photograph together and creates a visual sculpture that is evocative of a cityscape.

Both of the photographs are extremely high contrast, which draws the viewer’s eyes to certain parts of the images, such as the bottom areas of the first image and the tree trunk in the second, which allows the viewer’s mind to play with scale. I believe that both of these images exemplify how Wool evokes the constructed, vastness, and magnitude of New York City, thus fabricating and sculpting an alternate reality out of the rural landscape of Marfa, Texas. All of the parts of the two images overlap and display connectedness, a stark contrast to the expanses of Texas. Overall, the photographs radiate with ideas of construction, urbanization, and connectivity, which feel completely opposite to what one would expect to find in rural Texas.

Therefore, these two images show how Wool utilizes process like layering, angles, and contrast to warp one visual reality into another one that the viewer can fabricate.

A description of Christopher Wool's photography book *Yard*, which includes these images, writes: "Two realities invade each other and their overlapping actualities collapse into an artistic reality beyond the moment caught by the artist's camera" (Printed Matter). This quote connects to how the pictures promote a re-contextualization of an environment, because it shows how Wool creates a tension between two realities. One might wonder if these scenes should be overlapped. Therefore, through his photographic processes, Wool fabricates a new reality out of a completely different one, evoking the urban in the rural. These ideas are also very present in many of Christopher Wool's paintings. Through layering and erasing, Wool creates a tension that the viewer can sense, making them have a strong emotional reaction. Overall, examining the themes of Christopher Wool's photography reveals how he incorporates his surroundings and familiar environments into his art no matter the media.

Citations:

Brensen, Catherine. 2019. *Maybe Maybe Not: Christopher Wool and the Hill Collection*, Hill Art Foundation Website

[Author Unknown], 2018, Christopher Wool: Yard, Printed Matter, Inc.

Loring Knoblauch, 2017, Christopher Wool, Westexaspsychosculpture