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Interpretive and Historical Analysis of *Untitled*, 1994



Christopher Wool's abstract paintings often bring the viewer to question what constitutes art. His paintings can be distinguished by their enigmatic and satirical nature, in which he takes an opposing stance to the norms set throughout art history. Similar to other post-modern artists, Wool's work contradicts the idea that a work of art must possess an inherent meaning (Gambino, 2011). In describing his work, Wool explains:

"I often want a painting to feel like it is the result of a certain process... a process that was not simply the painting/picturing process of putting together a formalistically successful painting. I've made paintings that were 'pictures' created merely by the act/process of painting over an image," (Wool et al. 2008).

Through his experimentation with various techniques and tools, he shifts the way in which art is traditionally reflected upon by placing emphasis on process. His work is an invitation to explore the concept of simultaneously questioning both "what to paint" and "how to paint," (Brinson, 38). In *Untitled*, 1994, Wool's use of stamping and layering highlights the contrast between

divergent time periods of art—Baroque and Pop Art. The composition of the piece serves as a satirical commentary on art history and interpretation.

Untitled, 1994 is an enamel on paper created through the process of rubber stamping. After experimenting with rollers in his work, Wool transitioned into using rubber stamps to continue exploring “the inextricable relationship between mechanical function and final form” (Brinson, 38). The stamps were created in large, rectangular units, which makes their form visible in the painting through the outline of paint along the edges (Brinson, 38). In this piece, each flower appears enclosed within a box, which further emphasizes the mechanical production process. Wool describes that the ability to configure geometric arrangements is unique to stamping, and it specifically gives these paintings a narrative quality (Brinson, 38).

The painting is entirely black and white and is comprised of three layers, each with an alternative depiction of a flower. The flowers in the background, most clearly observable in the left region of the painting, possess a playful quality reminiscent of pop art. While Andy Warhol’s playfulness in his 1964 series, *Flowers* can be attributed to the use of vibrant color schemes, Wool, with a lack of color, conveys this same sentiment with shape (Warhol, *Flowers*). In *Untitled, 1994*, the lines forming the petals are thick and rounded in an almost buoyant manner. The center of each flower is almost as large as its petals, and on each petal there are three lines stemming from the center protruding outwards, creating a youthfully exaggerated version of a flower. Conversely, the flowers in the middle ground are marked by antiquity. Most clearly observable in the lower region of the painting, these flowers take up more space and are composed of detached shapes. The nested composition of these thick shapes, consisting of petal-like forms, circles, and leaf-like concave curves, creates a floral design, as opposed to one

singular flower. The ornate style of these flowers seems to imitate the embellishments of frames during the Baroque era. In the center of the foreground of the painting is a singular flower, which occupies the largest amount of space. This flower is the most minimal, as its broad strokes are used only to depict the basic form of a flower. Although seemingly less visually appealing than the other two styles, the eye focuses on this flower first due to the concentration of darkness towards the center of the painting created by the thickness of the lines. This darkness evokes an almost uneasy feeling, which contrasts from the usual emotions of joy and delight brought on by flowers. Visible through its petals is the layering of the aforementioned flowers.

Not only do the stamps structurally clash with each other, but also so do the ideas constituting Pop Art and Baroque art. The Baroque style of art emerged during 16th century from the Catholic church's conscious effort to promote the Catholic faith to the public following the Protestant Reformation (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019). Often characterized by dramatically rendered pious images, art during this time period was used to evoke profound emotions (Encyclopedia Britannica 2019). There is no apparent connection to Pop Art, a style in which artists poured aspects of mass culture into their work, such as television, cartoon, and advertising and refrained from art as a display of expressive complexity. The juxtaposition of these two different styles of flowers is striking and plays to Wool's idea of using layering as a means of creating "pictorial discord" (Brinson 2013, 38). Perhaps Wool finds humor in the lack of correlation between the two periods, and there therefore is no significant meaning behind placing Baroque and pop art side by side. Thus, in *Untitled*, 1994, Wool reinforces the importance of viewing painting through the lens of process, as the painting's meaning is obscured without considering the ways in which it was created

Works Cited

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