Reconciling the painterly bravura of Abstract Expressionism with the use of language and other technologies such as silkscreen of other late 20th-century traditions like Pop Art and Conceptual Art, all on one surface, has made Christopher Wool one of the most respected and influential painters of his generation. In a homecoming of sorts for the Chicago-born-and-raised artist, the Art Institute of Chicago will present the most comprehensive examination to date of Wool’s work from February 23 through May 11, 2014. Approximately 90 paintings, photographs, and works on paper will extend far beyond his iconic word paintings to explore developments from across the artist’s career, including appropriation of patterns and text to more recent works that utilize collage, erasure, and digital manipulation. The Art Institute is the final venue of the exhibition, which premiered at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Works unique to the Art Institute’s presentation include several drawn from the museum’s permanent collection as well as the painting Apocalypse Now (1988), recognizable for its use of words from the Francis Ford Coppola film of the same name. Visitors to the exhibition will note the innovative non-didactic, non-linear presentation specific to its Chicago showing.
Christopher Wool (b. 1955) was born and raised in Chicago and moved to New York City when he turned 18. Downtown New York at the time, filled with the anarchic energy of the punk and No Wave scenes, was a defining influence on his creative development; his works from the 1980s are often stark, monochrome compositions formed with commercial tools and imagery plucked from mass culture. Wool’s oft-recognized stenciled “word paintings” with letter elisions, such as Trouble (1989), create form from language. His use of stamps and rollers to transfer patterns in severe black and red onto a white plane convey a restless urgency, formal systems disrupted with glitches, blurred text, and fitful spacing. The same tensions between order and disorder animate Wool’s pieces from the 1990s, often utilizing silkscreen as a tool. The harsh urban environment of alienation and blight and its visual language—overpainting, graffiti-like scrawls, and cartoonish forms like bouquets of spray-painted flowers—show Wool’s dialogue with the tumultuous city outside his studio, a point emphatically illustrated in works such as Maggie’s Brain (1995). The artist’s photographs, often in black-and-white and small in scale, indicate a deliberate degradation in subject and in process, referencing Wool’s painting practice and the experience of the urban street. A selection of Wool’s photographs, including works from his photobook series such as Incident on 9th Street (1997), will line a central corridor in the Chicago presentation.

From the early 2000s, Wool’s work has concentrated primarily on abstracted forms through strategies of digital manipulation, erasure, and replication. Doubt and questioning, themes the artist has explored throughout his career, are indicated in his large-scale “gray paintings,” which are shaped by cycles of addition and subtraction, tangled black lines faded by repeated washes. Over the last several years, Wool has continued to interrogate the original gesture of painting by using digital processes to distort his painted marks before screenprinting the images to new canvases, sometimes resulting in uncanny iterations and others times ghostly traces mixed with other elements. Through repeated
composition and loss, Wool's works probe the potency of doubt as a creative force and try to understand the possibilities of large-format abstract painting without the "heat" of expressionist models.

A richly illustrated catalogue with a cover specially designed by the artist accompanies Christopher Wool. The catalogue will feature a critical overview of the artist's career and the most authoritative exhibition history and bibliography of Wool's career yet compiled. In addition, the catalogue will include scholarly essays by Suzanne Hudson, Assistant Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art at the University of Southern California, and James Rondeau, Dittmer Chair and Curator, Department of Contemporary Art at the Art Institute of Chicago, as well as a text by the artist Richard Prince. A hardcover edition priced at $55 will be available at the Art Institute's Museum Shop.


Christopher Wool is organized by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York. The exhibition is curated by Katherine Brinson, associate curator, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. At the Art Institute, the exhibition is overseen by James Rondeau, Dittmer Chair and Curator, Department of Contemporary Art. Lead sponsorship for Christopher Wool has been generously provided by Liz and Eric Lefkofsky. Major support has been provided by Marilyn and Larry Fields with additional funds from The Aaron I. Fleischman Foundation. Annual support for Art Institute exhibitions is provided by the Exhibitions Trust; Goldman Sachs, Kenneth and Anne Griffin, Thomas and Margot Pritzker, the Earl and Brenda Shapiro Foundation, the Trott Family Foundation, and the Woman's Board of the Art Institute of Chicago.