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, nor 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.

Estrellita and Daniel Brodsky

Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney Award
for Outstanding Patronage of the Arts
by Alan Wanzenberg

By honoring Daniel and Estrellita Brodsky, we celebrate a visionary couple whose dedication to New York City expands cultural participation, embraces diversity, and celebrates our unique urban environment. Although their philanthropy extends internationally, Estrellita and Dan’s involvement with numerous institutions here speaks to their broader goals for our City’s civic and artistic wellbeing.

Estrellita is devoted to engaging Latin American artists and visual culture in our museums. She is a member of the Museum of Modern Art’s Latin American and Caribbean Acquisitions Committee, and a founding member of the Metropolitan Museum’s Multicultural Audience Development Advisory Committee, which seeks to diversify the Met’s cultural and educational content and outreach. Her support is matched by scholarship and curatorial accomplishments, including exhibitions: Taino, Pre-Columbian Art and Culture of the Caribbean at El Museo del Barrio where she subsequently served as the Co-Chairman of the Board of Trustees; Jesús Soto; Paris and Beyond 1950–1970 at the New York University Grey Art Gallery; Bearing Witness: Art and Resistance in Cold War Latin America at the John Jay College for Criminal Justice; and the upcoming exhibit, Julio Le Parc: Spectacle scheduled to open at PAMM the Pérez Art Museum Miami in 2016.

Dan is a Trustee at the New York City Ballet, and served on the boards of the Municipal Art Society, the American Museum of Natural History, and numerous educational and civic organizations. Perhaps his most profound legacy, however, will be at the Metropolitan Museum of Art where he has brought his unique combination of wisdom, patience, and optimism to the role of Chairman since 2011. He also played a pivotal role in the museum’s Real Estate Council, founded to promote and maintain industry involvement, by turning it into an essential source of support for educational programs. Most recently, the Brodskys’ shared devotion to the Met has manifested in two new and important endowed curatorships in the areas of Latin American art, and Architecture and Design. This magnificent show of support reflects their deep commitment to elevating the presence and scholarship of these fields within the context of more than 5,000 years of world culture.

Through these and other countless philanthropic endeavors, the couple plays a vital role in the breadth and depth of New York’s cultural community and their contributions are profoundly felt. However, it is their modest, sensitive, and principled approach that makes them all the more deserving of this great honor, and a particularly fitting beneficiary of Skowhegan’s tribute. Parallels can be drawn between the Brodskys’ conviction about education, diversity, and community engagement with the ethos and history of Skowhegan, which last year expanded and evolved its commitment to better serve its mission by opening a permanent space in New York.