

Jacob Wilson, "Where do you start with Seth Price?," *Plaster*, December 12, 2024.

PLASTER

Where do you start with Seth Price?

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Words: **Jacob Wilson**

Photographs: **Milly Cope**

Seth Price did his art education backwards, starting with experimental film and only recently turning to paint. Staff writer Jacob Wilson spoke with Price about going back to basics, testing out new tech and making "cool shit."



Seth Price in Mayfair

Where do you start with Seth Price? He's a man who avoids predictability; an artist who only calls himself an artist because his tax forms require an occupation; an artist who prefers being an amateur, who doesn't want to be "trapped" by expertise, or become a tool of technology. The only certain thing is that he'll always change. It's funny squaring this attitude with his current show of paintings and chairs at Sadie Coles HQ on Davies

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Street. These are objects that are about as conservative and predictable as you can get. But it’s all part of his plan, as I found out when I spoke to him.

Friday morning and the gallery is quiet, it’d been packed a couple of days earlier at the private view. You can always trust Sadie to put on a PV. I’m led up the stairs to a table in the back room. Price is sitting across the table, looking out of the low, ribbon windows that face out onto Davies Street, wearing leather trousers and a purple windbreaker. He’s 51 now, with a full head of medium-length hair but a little greyer than the photos I’d seen online. After the small talk about the election (“I mean, it feels like we all got slapped in the face.”), life back home (“I love New York this fall, I’ve suddenly reconnected with going out, walking around and running into people that I know and seeing artwork I don’t know. It just feels great.”) and we get into it.



Price has only recently started painting. In a sense he did his art education in reverse. He didn’t go to art school. Instead he went to Brown University where he studied in the Modern Culture and Media department which, at the time, meant theory and experimental film. “I didn’t get this kind of trial run in painting where you learn the basics. I skipped over that and came in via film and video and dematerialised things.”

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Jacob Wilson, “Where do you start with Seth Price?,” *Plaster*, December 12, 2024. After his studies he moved onto sculpture. You might have seen his vacuum-formed bomber jackets. The 2000s were an exciting time to be an artist, he says. “Floods of money and technology and new development, people were like laying track in every direction. There were new enclaves being opened up everywhere, and a huge vacuum for young artists and young writers and young curators. And the speed, I think, took a lot of people by surprise.” A lot of people, including Price. In 2002 and 2008 he showed at the Whitney Biennial, followed in 2011 by the Venice Biennale and in 2012 by Documenta.

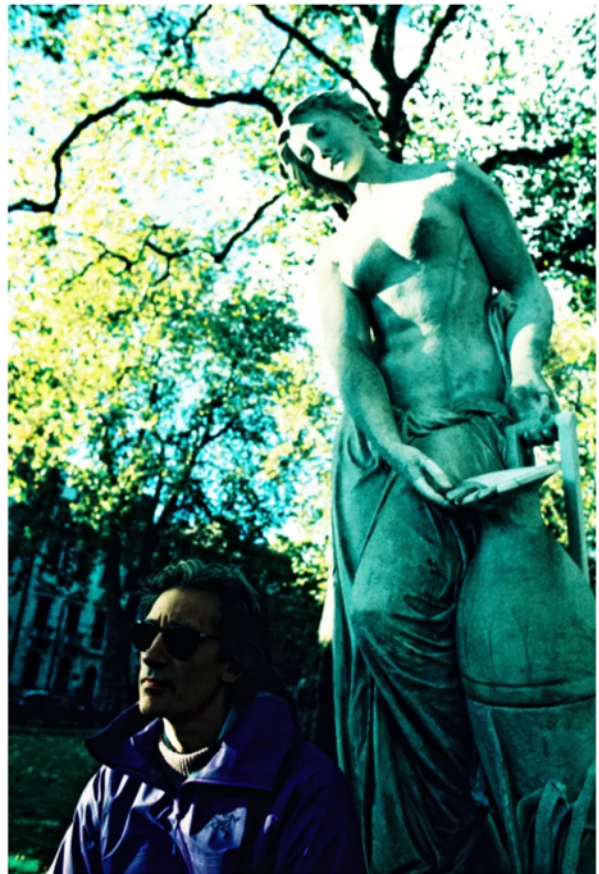
Following this success, he “needed to put the brakes on,” to focus on writing a “Christian, evangelical apocalyptic sci-fi novel,” something he’d wanted to write since 9/11. Unfortunately, “it proved to be impossible to write the way I wanted to.” Strangely, during that “enforced writing break”, Price says, he got more institutional show offers than ever before, and ever since. “I just took, I think, too much pleasure in saying no. I mean there were things that were cool exhibitions [for] existing work. It would not have been much work for me... then, you know, they dry up and go away, and people don’t come back.” It turns out that when you say ‘no’ enough times, nobody will invite you to cool stuff. He gave up on the book, published a piece of de-rigueur autofiction, *Fuck Seth Price*, launched an online database doxxing art collectors, and turned back to the visual arts.

Music has always been in the background throughout all of this. Mainly noise music. As a student he made 4-track records, now he releases 12 inches (there’s one in the gallery office downstairs) and I had heard that he sometimes hands out tape cassettes (he didn’t have any with him). He still writes too and he’s currently working on a new YA novel. But he won’t say any more than that.

So, you see, paintings and chairs are kind of the last thing you’d expect him to do.

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Price explains his apparent retrograde motion by describing paintings and chairs as familiar forms for unconventional experiments. You don't have to ask if a rectangle hanging on a wall is art, everyone knows it is, and everyone knows a chair is something with four legs and "a place for you to put your ass." Once you've established the ground rules, you can begin to play. And that play is all about making "cool shit."

That cool shit includes apparently abstract works covered in intersecting planes, cylinders and spheres of reflective 'metals'. It is cool, but strictly speaking, these artworks aren't paintings. They're a mixture of photographic prints, three dimensional design and generative artificial intelligence with a dash of acrylic paint. Their construction takes a little explanation, which Price seems to revel in. "If you look at a billboard with an advertisement for an iPhone on it, or ads for cars, those are not in fact photographs. They're often 3D generated objects that are output as a file because they're infinitely controllable." Why? Because recreating the laws of optics and physics in software is cheaper than hiring photographers and set designers. The trick to making it look and feel real, Price says, is all down to light and reflections and shadows. Suddenly I'm cast back into my art history foundation survey, thinking about Bernini and

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the mirror in Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini Wedding.

Using a special camera, you take a spherical photograph (of, say, an art gallery, the plaza of Canary Wharf, a road somewhere in the English countryside lit by moonlight or the inside of Price's own studio) and use the information captured in that photograph (specific magnitudes of brightness, the radiance of the different points of light) to accurately reconstruct the light, shadows, colours and reflections in your computer generated model. Price did that and then incorporated those CGI objects into his paintings. All the reflections on the pipes and spheres and cones that cover his paintings reflect the real light of his studio. It's all about bringing together the material and the immaterial. It's all about bringing the flair and spontaneity and aimlessness of human gestures into contact with the cold technical precision of computation.



Price is clearly turned on by new tech. He reminisces about the "five year period" in the 1990s when digital tools that we take for granted today were being released "every month": compact discs, digital video editors, desktop publishing software, Photoshop... it was "magical." But there was an imbalance between the tools and their distribution, you could make a digital image, but it was difficult to share it. "It was this strange

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window, technologically, it was unlike anything that came before. But because you could not distribute work, it was a kind of enforced wood shedding period where you had to focus on your tools and your ideas and your material. There was no public for you yet.”

Are you a geek? “No, I’m kind of interested in a tool, only to the extent that I can kind of slightly misuse it, and then I like to just move on before there’s any risk of mastery, which has no interest for me in any medium.” In his view, too many artists are slaves to their tools. They learn how to use something, and then they get stuck in a rut, only producing things that that tool can produce. Price wants to avoid that, at all costs.

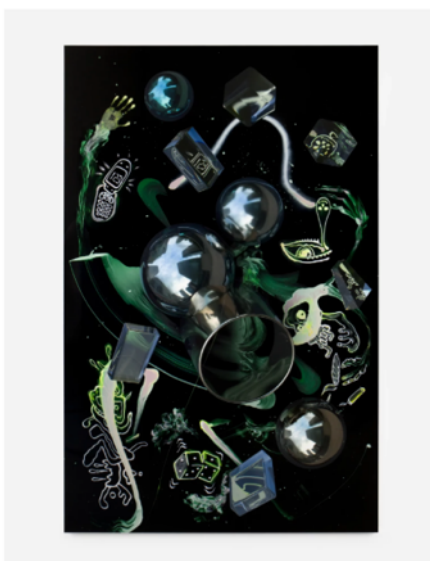
While we’re sitting there chatting a visitor walks into the room and stands behind us. For a moment, I think he’s going to start asking questions as well. He quickly realises the situation and walks off. Likewise, I realise we’ve been sitting at the desk a while now. Our conversation is all in the abstract, so I suggest we take a walk around the gallery.

“ I wasn't trying to make a painting. I was just
essentially doodling with the expectation that
it was shit. ”



Seth Price, 'Canary Wharf',
2024. Credit: © Seth Price
Courtesy the Artist and Sadie
Coles HQ, London. Photo: Katie
Morrison.

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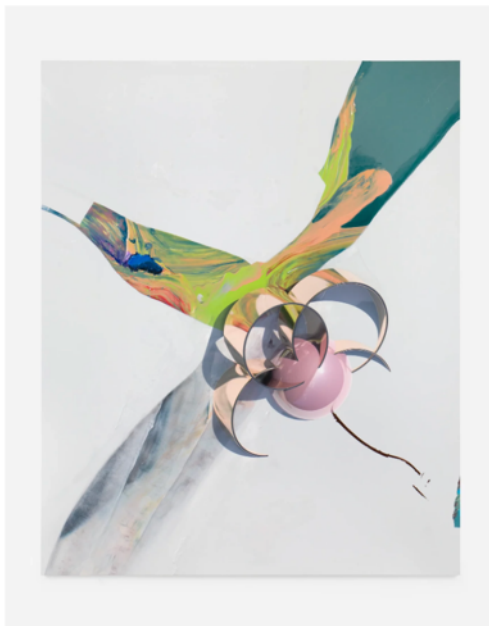


Seth Price, 'Do You Like to
Party?', 2024. Credit: © Seth
Price Courtesy the Artist and
Sadie Coles HQ, London.
Photo: Katie Morrison.

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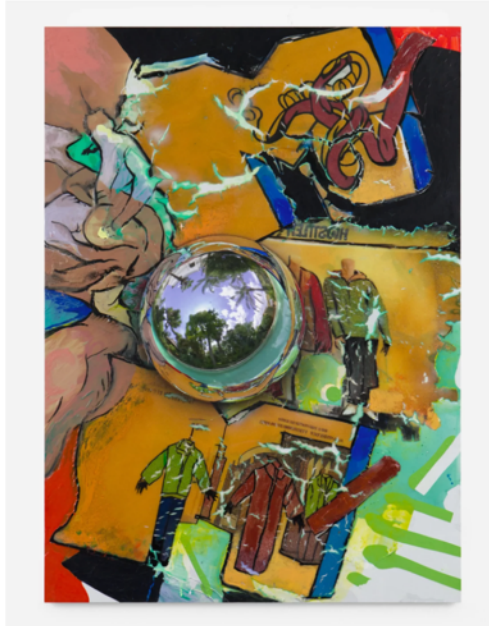
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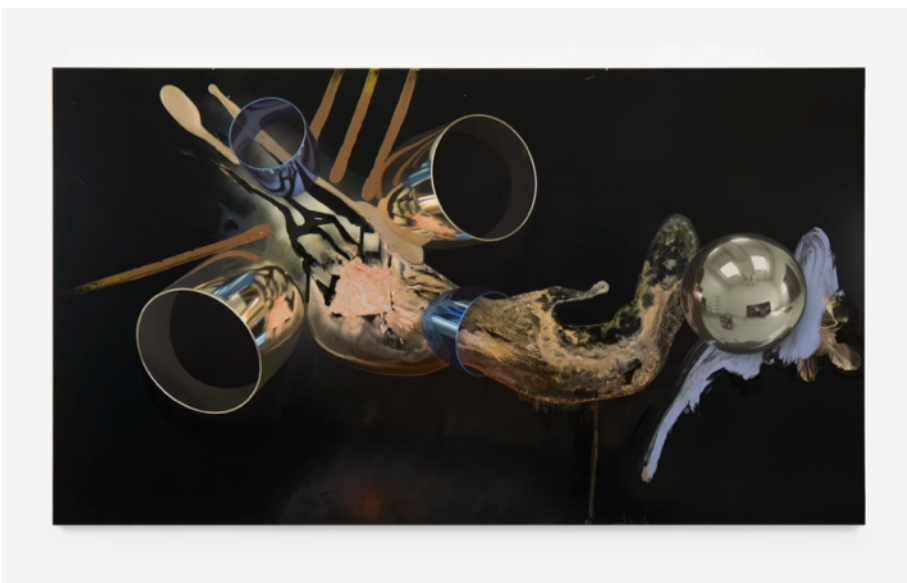
Seth Price, 'EULOGRE', 2024. Credit: © Seth Price
Courtesy the Artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London.
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Seth Price, MTV HOLSTER, 2024. Credit: © Seth
Price Courtesy the Artist and Sadie Coles HQ,
London. Photo: Katie Morrison.

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Seth Price, 'Zaarwid Time', 2024. Credit: © Seth Price Courtesy the Artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London. Photo: Katie Morrison

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“These works came out of a very long line of investigations and thinking and experiments in similar areas, conceptually and in some ways materially. It started with being interested in the image and kind of investigating it through sculptural forms, like

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series of silhouettes I did, taking images off the internet and turning them into kind of material forms on the wall with laminated rare woods and things, or those crumpled mylar pieces with images from those early [jihadist] beheading propaganda videos, or even the vacuum form pieces where it's it's the body part or the clothing is presented as an image. And in all those works, I think there was an interest in exploiting a kind of friction between the image and then the material, which often had to do with deception and trickery."

One work draws on classic stick and poke tattoos and toilet graffiti: a skull smoking a joint, blood, dice laid over with computer generated ice cubes which reflect the drawings across their surfaces. "I wasn't trying to make a painting. I was just essentially doodling with the expectation that it was shit. And then I took a step back and I thought 'this is horrible...' and then it just lay against the side of the studio wall for months, because I thought, well, that's a piece of crap." After studio visitors complimented the work, Price decided to introduce the computer, reasoning that "if the marks are stupid and quick, then I should go overboard with what the computer offers... I thought I would just crowd it with prisms and tubes and balls and different metals on the balls and just kind of throw tons of stuff on there, and it ended up working."

It's a surprisingly slow process, as Price explains. "We think of machines as being quick, but in fact they take ages to do something like this, where they're tracing rays of light and applying laws of physics. It's slow. The processing can take 30 hours for one of these paintings. I don't need to be there. I can go away, thank God.



He gestures over to the chairs facing the wide triple height gallery window, looking onto the main road. These are based on a chair he spotted in an old documentary: "a kind of crude plywood chair that they had banged together from scraps that had been sitting out in the rain." "It was just so beautiful and made from necessity, but with a kind of flair," he says. He cut up the metal support of a "failed painting" he found lying around and glued

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it back together to make these chairs. “I thought it might be fun for the show that you can sit on the failed painting and look at the unfailed painting.” I crack a joke about the permanence of these artworks: one day, when everything else is gone, all that’ll be left of human culture will be landfills full of plastic, those plastic buildings and perhaps his plastic paintings. “Oh gosh.” I can’t tell from his reaction whether he’s surprised or worried.

Speaking of legacy and longevity. Who is his work for? He seems to have such fun making it. Trying out new tools. And so little regard for creating a coherent body of work. I get the feeling (sorry Sadie) that he doesn’t care much about his market beyond paying the bills. Does he think about his audience?

“I think for years I was making it for myself. Exclusively playing with my back to the audience. And that’s certainly a way to do things, it’s a way to protect yourself. But I have started thinking about audience and context much more: the context is this is an art gallery. In this matrix of the art world the truth is I make finely crafted, one of a kind, luxury objects, but I don’t want to think about that too much. I’m thinking about the relationships, you know, like I love working with the people I work with, including the galleries and people I meet there. That’s the context I would like to think about...”

That’s a good place to end it. And as we do, Milly arrives to start shooting.

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Information

'Seth Price' continues until 8th February, 2025, at Sadie Coles HQ, 1 Davies Street, London, W1K 3DB. www.sadiecoles.com

<https://plastermagazine.com/articles/seth-price-sadie-coles-hq-davies-street-interview/>