

# ARTNEWS

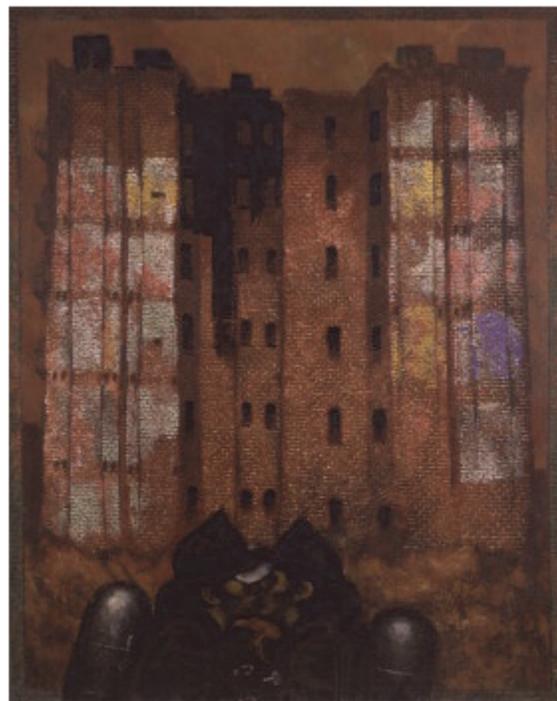
November 6, 2015

## Big heat: The Bronx Museum Champions the Brave, Unflinching Martin Wong

By: Andrew Russeth

Martin Wong loved firemen. The late East Village artist, whose paintings stand as some of the most original and brave art produced in New York in the past 40 years, painted an intimate portrait of one in bed, still wearing his heavy jacket under the covers, in *My Fire Guy* (1988). “I really like the way firemen smell when they get off work,” he wrote in another piece from the same year. “It’s like hickory smoked rubber and B.O.” And in one of his masterpieces, *Big Heat* (1988), two firemen in full uniforms (hats on their heads, oxygen tanks on their backs) kiss in front of an abandoned building, which looms over them ominously. Friends gave Wong FDNY gear, and despite warnings, he couldn’t resist gallivanting around downtown Manhattan sporting the stuff. (“It’s a felony to impersonate a fireman,” he once explained. “So of course I wore them.”)

And so, while I could not at first believe my eyes, it was a joy to find a team of firemen perusing the Bronx Museum of the Arts’ superb Wong retrospective one morning this week, admiring his paintings of shuttered storefronts, ruined buildings in downtown Manhattan, boxers, and prisoners—and, yes, joking with each other about that make-out session. Wong, I hope, was staring down from someplace and swooning. It was an unreal sight, but also somehow a weirdly plausible one: of course magical things were going to happen when so many of his paintings were brought together.



Martin Wong, *Big Heat*, 1988.

COURTESY THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

The artist's heartrending, bewitching works are still too rarely seen. When Wong died of an AIDS-related illness at the age of 53, in 1999, he was painfully under-rated. His lone museum retrospective had occurred only the year before, at the New Museum and the University Galleries at Illinois State University, with only around two-dozen paintings. His reputation has been growing steadily since then, but only bits and pieces of his oeuvre have been on view for the public, in museum group shows or at galleries in New York and Germany.



*Starry Night, 1982.*  
COURTESY THE BRONX MUSEUM OF THE ARTS

The Danish-Vietnamese artist Danh Vo, a Wong collector, has helped matters. In 2013 he presented thousands of little trinkets, tchotchkes, and collectibles that Wong amassed during his life as a single, moving installation—a tribute to Wong's voracious, all-encompassing love of vernacular culture—at the Guggenheim, and earlier this year he hung paintings by Wong alongside giants like David Hammons and Nancy Spero at collector François Pinault's Punta della Dogana in Venice. Now New York finally has a chance to take in the full scope of Wong's achievement. The Bronx show, with more than 90 works—organized by Sergio Bessa, the museum's director of curatorial and education programs, and Yasmin Ramírez, an adjunct curator—is a revelation.

Like most of the other truly great New York artists of the past century, Wong was an outsider. He was already in his early 30s when he arrived in New York in 1978, after living for years in Eureka, California, selling quick sketches on the street (he dubbed himself the Human

Instamatic, which the Bronx curators borrow for their title), wearing a formidable cowboy hat and mustache, and partaking of the outré gay hippie scene as a member of fringe performance groups like the Cockettes and Angels of Light. (“Hippie Modernism,” now on view at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, tells parts of that story.) He had studied ceramics at Humboldt State University and shifted to painting only around his 30th birthday, in 1976.

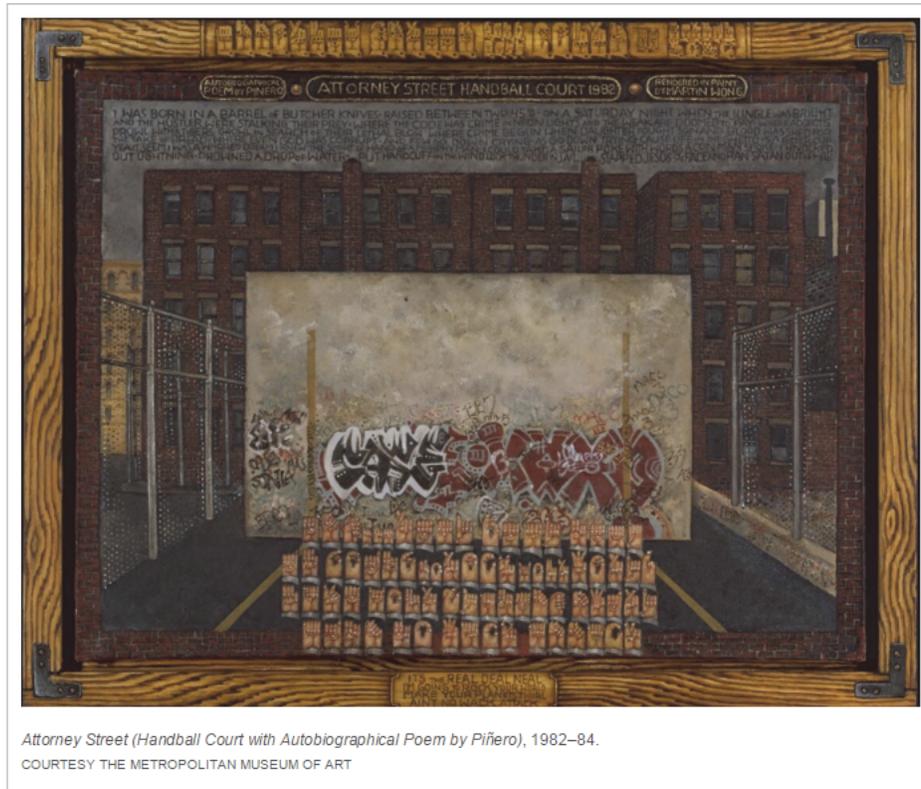
Rather than throw himself into the freewheeling downtown New York art scene of the late 1970s, then on the verge of a boom, Wong camped out on its periphery upon his arrival, taking a room in a dilapidated waterfront hotel on South Street and getting to work on his sly, sui generis style. His earnest rendering and compressed perspective have touches of the naïf. (The hotel’s owner agreed to rent him an apartment in exchange for him cleaning out three wrecked rooms.)



*My Secret World, 1978–1981, 1984.*

In 1984 Wong painted that first New York home of his, in *My Secret World, 1978–1981*, which hangs in the opening gallery in the Bronx. We are on the outside looking through two windows of a brick building, and as is always the case in Wong’s work, each gritty block is carefully painted. The bed is made, pencils sit in a cup on a windowsill, books are in a row atop the dresser, and Wong paintings hang on the walls—a giant eight ball, a pair of dice, and bulbous cartoon hands signing out a tabloid headline about the Son of Sam serial killer, which is part of a series he made depicting American Sign Language. Wong has inscribed a message above one window: “It was in this room that the world’s first paintings for the hearing impaired came into being.”

Wong was always on the hunt for new means of communications, of making meaning, and his paintings hum with numerous languages and modes of speaking. After his hotel changed hands, he moved to the Lower East Side, where at a reading at the art-punk dive ABC No Rio he met the poet Miguel Piñero, whose writing soon filled his paintings, snaking around his hand-drawn frames or incised into brick.



In 1982 Piñero asked Wong to paint a graffiti-bedecked handball court on Attorney Street on the Lower East Side. No people are present in the work, another masterpiece, but he documented each squiggle and scrawl with loving care. His trademark hands float near the bottom, spelling out lines that Piñero penned for the 1981 film *Fort Apache, The Bronx* (“It’s the real deal Neal/I’m going to rock your world”). Up above, in the gray sky, black letters spell out a long poem by Piñero that begins: “I was born in a barrel of butcher knives, raised between two 45’s.”

The mood and palette of these city paintings are often unrelentingly bleak—visions of a vacant, claustrophobic city in the middle of the night. In the mid-1980s Wong also painted roughly life-size storefronts, gated and locked, and set them flush with the floor so that the impoverished East Village seems to have somehow slipped into the white-walled gallery.



Martin Wong, *Sweet 'Enuff*, 1987.

COURTESYS THE DE YOUNG MUSEUM, SAN FRANCISCO

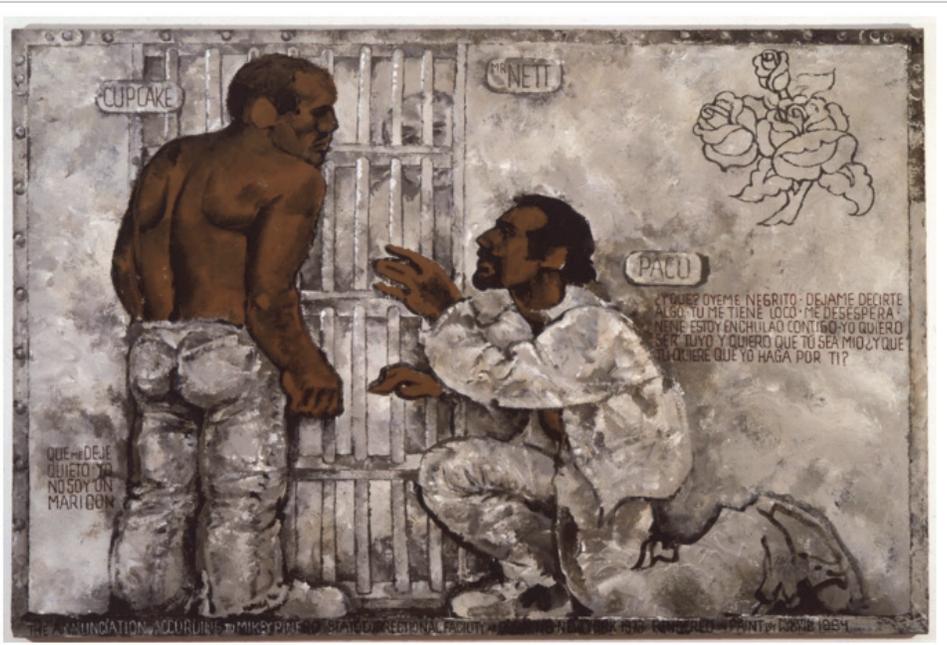
But moments of hope and tenderness sometimes quite regularly sneak through. In *Sharp & Dottie* (1984), the titular lovers (the former a famed graffiti writer) embrace amid a pile of rubble, another tall building towering overhead. In *Sweet 'Enuff* (1987), three skateboarders fly effortlessly over a barbed wire fence. And in the 13-foot-long *La Iglesia de Dios* (1986), a blue-green church façade glows angelically in crepuscular light.

Many paintings read as tributes to the men and women Wong lived next to in his largely Latino stomping grounds, and Dan Cameron, who co-curated the 1998 retrospective, writes in a catalogue essay that he is “probably the essential painter of the American scene of the second half of the twentieth century.” And so it is striking to read as Wong—whose mother is Chinese and whose father was half-Chinese, half-Mexican—admit in a 1996 interview, reprinted in the show’s catalogue, that he felt like a “tourist” living there. “I don’t really know that many people in the neighborhood,” he says.



Some of Wong's paintings are also brazen public declarations of private erotic fantasies, as in his depictions of muscular boxers that he would see in fights in New Jersey, his firemen, and the prisoners that he painted from models, inspired by tales relayed to him by Piñero, who had written his 1974 classic, *Small Eyes*, while imprisoned. Posed in classical religious poses, a few take on a spiritual grandeur. These are some of the sexiest, most alluring, and ultimately humane pictures that I know of. They are also unflinching. In *Cell Door Slot* (1986), a man with dark skin stares out at the viewer. Only his eyes are visible.

In the early 1990s Wong turned his attention to Chinatown, painting scenes that are filled with slick kitsch and stereotypes. These are harder to love, but still exude Wong's characteristic thrill in challenging tastes. In 1991 he painted little bricks into a roughly four-foot tall penis inside a luxurious golden frame. It was titled *Mi Vida Loca*. (The man was irrepressible.) A self-portrait from 1993 has him in a cowboy hat emblazoned with a thorn-crowned Jesus and a shirt embroidered with snarling dragons; Wong is snarling too.



*Cupcake and Paco (Corot), 1988.*

The next year, Wong was diagnosed with AIDS. He moved back with his family in San Francisco, and during the last years of his life he painted succulents in his mother's garden with white paint on a black background. They look like ceramics, brains, or maybe meditative abstractions—a new, radical turn that he would never get to develop. His career had lasted only about 20 years. Among his papers was a drawing of two firemen kissing inside a cartoon heart. Underneath it Wong had written a message, which was perhaps just as a note to himself for a painting, but which reads now as his secret mission statement: “Make sure the heart is full and voluptuous.”