

Art in America

News & Features

November 9, 2015

Martin Wong's Legacy on View in the Bronx

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Martin Wong: *Big Heat*, 1988, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 60 by 48 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.



A sprawling and dazzling survey of paintings by Martin Wong opened yesterday at the Bronx Museum. The first—and long overdue—retrospective of the artist's work since his untimely death from AIDS-related causes in 1999, at age 53, the show features some 90 paintings, as well as never-before-exhibited archival material. Co-organized by the museum's director of curatorial and education programs Sergio Bessa and adjunct curator Yasmin Ramírez, "Martin Wong: Human Instamatic" remains on view in the Bronx through February 14, 2016, before traveling to the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive in California.

Wong was a brilliant painter and a charismatic figure on the New York art scene in the 1980s and early '90s. Born in Portland, Oregon, in 1946, he began his career in the 1960s in San Francisco, creating elaborate sets and costumes for experimental performance collectives, such as Angels of Light and the Cockettes. In 1978, he moved to New York City, where he developed a distinctive style of figurative painting, focusing on street life on Manhattan's Lower East Side and Chinatown.

Wong often collaborated with prominent artists and writers of the neighborhood's Black and Latino communities; and in his later years his imagery frequently alluded to his Chinese-American heritage. "He was an extremely generous person and a wonderfully flamboyant character," Ramírez told *A.i.A.* She added that Wong, as an Asian-American, West Coast native associated with the Nuyorican Movement, which thrived in the late '70s when the artist arrived on the scene, "was a walking hybrid of regional and ethnic signifiers."

Among the highlights of the show is a series of rarely exhibited self-portraits painted in the early '60s. The artist, then still a teenager, demonstrates an impressive command of the medium, using a Gauguin-inflected style. It is fascinating to compare these works with a late *Self-Portrait*, painted in 1993. This remarkable tondo combines his more wizened self-image with Chinese calligraphic flourishes in a bravura painting performance.

Wong established his reputation for meticulously rendered abject street scenes, such as *Closed* (1984-85), an imposing image of a gated storefront, on loan from the Whitney Museum. He is perhaps best known for his paintings of street urchins, the city's night life, and works featuring a particularly homoerotic image of two firemen kissing.