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City Scenes
A Martin Wong retrospective

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A connoisseur of urban dilapidation: Wong's "My Secret World, 1978-1981" (1984).

COURTESY MELVA BUCKSBAUM AND RAYMOND LEARSY COLLECTION

Like a firecracker with a very long fuse, the reputation of the Chinese-American painter and bohemian's bohemian Martin Wong has sizzled inconspicuously since before his death, in 1999, from AIDS-related causes, at the age of fifty-three. It should now go bang, thanks to a terrific retrospective of Wong's paintings at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, including his brick-by-brick

slum cityscapes; witty messages in sign language, rendered by fat fingers that emerge from cufflinked white cuffs; gnomic symbologies of star constellations and eight balls; erotic fantasies of hunky firemen and seraphic prison inmates; and celebrations of his close friend Miguel Piñero, the late poet, activist, erstwhile armed robber, and gifted author of the classic prison play “Short Eyes” (1974). All are drawn or painted in a commanding style that bridges exacting realism and poetic vision. The best pictures lock your gaze and take your mind for a fine ride. Wong wasn’t ahead of his time, exactly. He was in the thick of it, as a collaborator with gender-bending performance groups in his home town of San Francisco, in the nineteen-seventies, and then as a fixture on the demotic art scene of the Lower East Side, in the eighties. But his associations camouflaged a uniqueness that has been slow to stand out. Today, he seems a quintessential figure of maverick sensibility and disciplined artistry, on whom little of an era of cultural tumult was lost. His sophistication sneaks up behind dandyish masks of mock naïveté, then won’t let go. The show comes at a moment when the idea of bohemia feels up for reëvaluation, as growing numbers of the educated and discontented young gather in cities to endure economic hardships while leading experimental lives.

Wong was tall, thin, and electrically energetic; he commonly sported a drooping mustache and cowboy duds. As a child in San Francisco, he lived near North Beach and Chinatown. His father died when Wong was three, and his devoted mother, Florence, and his beloved stepfather both worked in engineering for the Bechtel Corporation. Encouraged by Florence, who dabbled in painting, Martin was avid for art from childhood. The Bronx Museum show includes sombre, astonishingly adept self-portraits that Wong made, tracking his growth and his change, until shortly after he graduated from public high school, in 1964. He devoured art history, acquiring an expertise that served him in the eighties, when he worked as a freelance broker for collectors in sales of Asian decorative items and, on one occasion, of a drawing by Mondrian.

After graduating with a degree in ceramics from Humboldt State University, he won a prize, in 1970, in a competitive ceramics exhibition at the de Young museum, in San Francisco. A year later, he was barred from the show, for having used glitter in his work, and abandoned ceramics for painting. For a time, he subsisted as the Human Instamatic, a lightning-fast street portraitist. Between travels in Europe and Asia, he created posters for the Cockettes, a riotously campy Haight-Ashbury performance troupe, and built spectacular sets for its mystically themed offshoot, the Angels of Light.

In 1978, he moved to New York and lived in the formerly grand Meyer’s Hotel, at the South Street Seaport, where, as he told it, he worked as a night porter and got free lodging. (Wong’s stories were sometimes more good than true.) His hypnotically meticulous paintings “Voices” (1981) and “My Secret World, 1978-1981” (1984), inspired by van Gogh’s painting of his bedroom in Arles, afford views of his tidy room. Works seen hanging on the walls include his sign-language translations of such tabloid headlines as “PSYCHIATRISTS TESTIFY: DEMON DOGS DRIVE MAN TO MURDER,” a reference to the serial killer Son of Sam. His reading matter includes books on science, magic, and sports, and fiction by Raymond Chandler and John Cheever.



 VIEW FULL SCREEN



"Starry Night" (1982).

COURTESY BRONX MUSEUM OF THE ARTS

A few years later, Wong took an apartment on Ridge Street, on the still drug-ridden, dangerous Lower East Side. He began showing his work downtown, and supported himself by working at the gift shop of the Metropolitan Museum—in 1984, the museum acquired what is perhaps his masterpiece, “Attorney Street (Handball Court with Autobiographical Poem by Piñero)” (1982-84), which pictures a graffiti-emblazoned wall overlaid with a text in sign language. Wong became a familiar of graffiti artists around the city, gradually assembling a vast collection of their works, which he donated to the Museum of the City of New York in 1994. He also frequented the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, which was co-founded by Piñero, whom he met at the guerrilla art space ABC No Rio. Though hardly secretive about his sexuality, Wong sometimes resented being publicized as gay, perhaps to spare his mother’s feelings. It seems a sign more of improvising spirit than of pretense that, for some years in the eighties, he lived with a female dancer; they said that they were married.

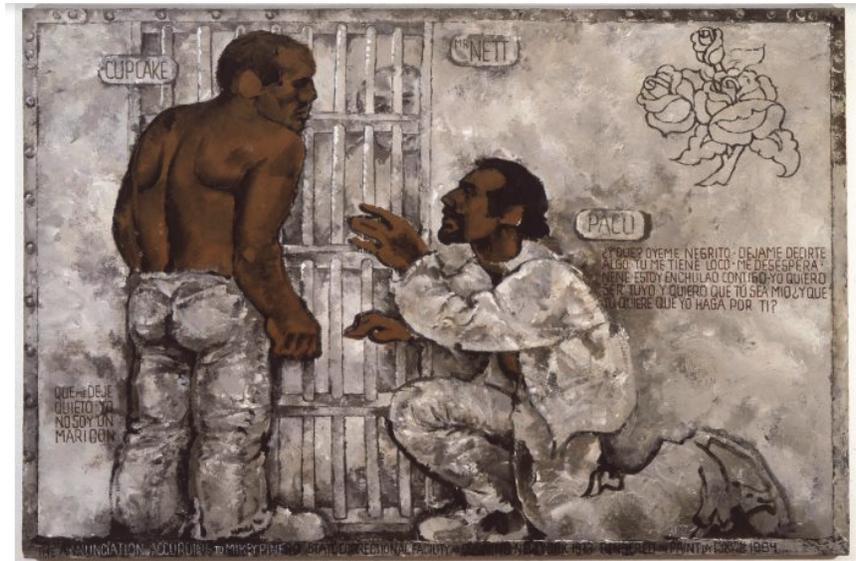
Though Wong befriended many junkies, he largely abstained from drugs, according to his friend and first dealer, Barry Blinderman. One pharmaceutical mishap occurred in 1984, shortly before Wong's solo debut at Blinderman's Semaphore Gallery. Two days after taking a heavy dose of LSD, he became obsessed with a message encountered in the windows of failing stores: "Everything Must Go." He hauled more than a dozen canvases down to the street and offered them free to passersby. A friend managed to retrieve most of them. Blinderman posted reward flyers that led to the recovery of two others. On the day of the giveaways, Wong was picked up by the police after throwing his wallet and his keys off the Brooklyn Bridge and appearing likely to follow them. Blinderman found him in a psychiatric ward at Bellevue, giving impromptu drawing lessons. A hospital intern told Blinderman that Wong was plainly delusional, having boasted that he had a work in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum.

Wong was given to romantic fetishes. Expressing one of them, in 1988, he wrote on a painting of a silhouetted fireman, "I really like the way firemen smell when they get off work. It's like hickory smoked rubber and B.O." A touchstone work, "Big Heat" (1988), owned by the Whitney Museum, finds two firemen in full gear kissing beneath towering walls composed of fool-the-eye-precise discolored and scorched brick. Wong was a connoisseur of urban dilapidation, rendering sad tenements and grim gated storefronts in resonant reddish browns, umber, and dirty whites and grays. The works, some of which are in frames adorned with patterns of brick or wood grain, often have an air of remarkably intact artifacts fished from ruins. Observation and fantasy meld in "Sweet 'Euff" (1987): skateboarders soar over razor-wire fences amid looming buildings.

Wong's style, at its best, maintains a powerful tension between opposing tugs toward illustration and decoration. He faltered for a spell in the early nineties, by succumbing to both extremes at once. Gaudy, folk-artish scenes of Chinatown in New York and San Francisco sabotage his earthy palette with florid infusions of red and ultramarine. The cause was broadly political: a temporary turn among minority-group avant-gardists reacting to art-world biases away from self-invention and toward assertions of collective identity. The show ends with small paintings that adumbrate a return to Wong's original promise: dramatic black-and-white still-lives of succulents and cacti from his mother's garden, made at her house the year before he died.

The show, crisply curated by Antonio Sergio Bessa and Yasmin Ramírez, affords a signal occasion to visit the Bronx Museum, a compact and handsome edifice on the Grand Concourse, near Yankee Stadium. The site points up Wong's collaborative relations, in the eighties, with graffiti crews and the exhibition space Fashion Moda in the then all but apocalyptically beleaguered South Bronx. With the exception of the odd bankable figure—Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring—the New York art world has never got its institutional minds and commercial appetites around the abundance of renegade artistic phenomena from an epoch that feels ever more significant. The stage seems set for the return to influence of neglected cultural insurgents who cannot but include Martin Wong.

Slideshow of Images



 VIEW FULL SCREEN



"The Annunciation According to Mikey Piñero (Cupcake and Paco)" (1984).
COURTESY SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY ART COLLECTION



 VIEW FULL SCREEN



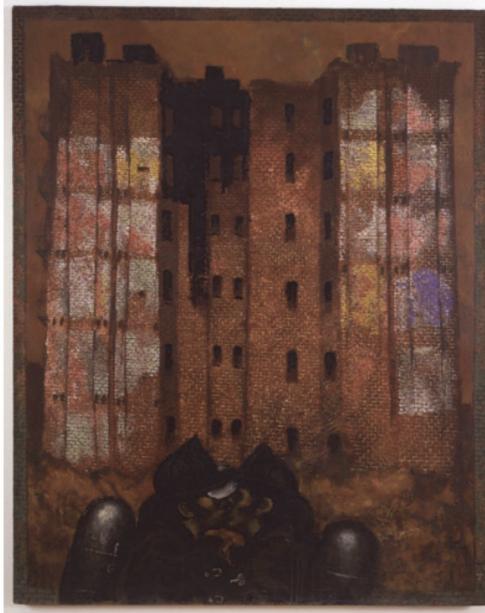
"Chain Saw Valentine (Portrait of Joaquin Angaza)" (1984).
COURTESY SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY ART COLLECTION



 VIEW FULL SCREEN



"Closed" (1984-85).
COURTESY WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART



 VIEW FULL SCREEN



"Big Heat" (1988).
COURTESY WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART



[VIEW FULL SCREEN](#)



"Mammillaria Wildii Crest" (1997-98).
COURTESY ESTATE OF MARTIN WONG AND P.P.O.W GALLERY