

R AND A

Art in America

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Street Life

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Martin Wong:
*Brainwashing Cult
Cons Top TV Stars,*
1981, acrylic on
canvas, 30 by 40
inches. Bronx Museum
of the Arts, New York.



Martin Wong's intricate paintings meld keen observations of his gritty New York neighborhood with a rich poetic imagination.

Martin Wong, whose visionary paintings of the 1980s capture the tragic lows and vibrant highs of life on New York's decaying Lower East Side, received his first and, until now, only retrospective in 1998, at the New Museum, as he was dying of AIDS. After more than a decade during which his work received relatively little critical and curatorial attention, Wong's paintings have been reappearing in prominent venues, including the 2014 Whitney Biennial, where they have tended to stand out as embodiments of a more authentic, less market-driven art world.

An avid collector, Wong left behind a rich archive of papers, objects and ephemera, which complements and sheds light on his own artistic production. At New York's Guggenheim Museum in 2012, artist Danh

Vo staged an homage to Wong, presenting objects from the late artist's massive collection of curios, paintings, antiques, calligraphic scrolls and kitsch. (Wong's mother had been preserving these varied materials in her home since her son's death in 1999.) In 2014, the Museum of the City of New York showcased Wong's vast collection of drawings and paintings by graffiti artists. Last spring, an exhibition at San Francisco's CCA Wattis Institute featured letters and artifacts from Wong's personal papers, which are held at New York University's Fales Library.

The culmination of this broad reassessment of Wong's life and art is now on view at the Bronx Museum of the Arts. "Martin Wong: Human Instamatic" (the title comes from a moniker Wong adopted while doing street portraits in Eureka, Calif., in the '70s) is a wide-ranging survey organized by Sergio Bessa, Bronx Museum curatorial director, and Yasmin Ramirez, adjunct curator at the museum and a close friend of the artist.

The exhibition reveals why, even in his active years, Wong was an enigmatic figure. He is described in the Wattis catalogue as "a sort of queer Chinese-Latino fireman cowboy graffitist."¹ A San Francisco native who moved to New York in 1978 at the age of 32, Wong became an unlikely fixture in his adopted neighborhood, identifying with bohemian Latino poets, petty criminals and drug abusers. Tall and lanky, he fantasized about beefy firemen and was known for wearing a fireman's jacket to openings and parties. He painted numerous prison scenes charged with homoerotic desire despite having spent only a single night in prison himself. He developed a signature visual motif: rows of cartoonish gesticulating hands that spell out tabloid headlines or fragments of street poetry in American Sign Language (ASL). These manual characters appear in works Wong referred to as "paintings for the hearing impaired." He spoke about his canvases in the casual vocabulary used by the graffiti artists he admired, but his archives reveal how intricate and deeply researched his compositions could be.

There is some controversy among critics and historians as to whether Wong should be considered a self-taught artist. Though he studied ceramics at Humboldt State University in California, Wong learned to paint on his own after he moved to New York. Dan Cameron, who co-curated the artist's 1998 retrospective, argued in that show's catalogue that the artist's work bears a strong kinship with the obsessive visions of such outsider figures as Joseph Yoakum, Martín Ramírez and Adolf Wölfli. In the catalogue for the Bronx exhibition, poet John Yau and art historian Benjamin Binstock counter in separate essays that Wong's style evolved far more rapidly than that of most self-taught artists. Indeed, both writers are more inclined to compare Wong with canonical painters, ranging from Bosch to Vermeer to Johns.

The Bronx exhibition makes the case that Wong's prowess as a painter transcends semantic categories. His vision of Loissaida—a Spanish-inflected term for the Lower East Side popularized in the 1970s by Nuyorican poet Bittman Rivas—offers a contemporary version of the apocalyptic sublime. Echoing the spectacular imagery of Romantic-era figures like J.M.W. Turner and Caspar David Friedrich, Wong's paintings often present human figures as diminished or even obliterated by an overwhelming environment. His urban landscapes from the 1980s present a human-built world imbued with the fearsome, awe-inspiring majesty of the untamed wilderness. Wong's city is an airless territory of obdurate brick walls, padlocked storefronts, chain-link fences topped with coils of razor wire and alleys piled with rubble. The red of crumbling bricks bleeds into ochre skies, blotting out any touch of blue in what seems to be a perpetual twilight. Above ragged skylines, constellations expand like gossamer webs. Meanwhile, the (mostly male) figures who appear in Wong's works are often dwarfed by the urban canyons around them. These figures also seem completely at home in their blighted surroundings, quietly writing, embracing each other or drifting to sleep in a drug-induced haze. It is a highly romanticized version of a city that offers a zone of existential freedom even as it is beset with the multiple scourges of crack, heroin, crime, homelessness and AIDS.

Texts superimposed on these sometimes bleak streetscapes are sources of humor, beauty and lyricism. Indeed, Wong's paintings are laced with language, much of it composed by poet Miguel Piñero, Wong's friend and sometime lover. *Attorney Street (Handball Court with Autobiographical Poem by Piñero)*, 1982-84, borrowed from New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art for the Bronx exhibition, was the first work of Wong's to be acquired by a major museum. It offers an inventory of the textual forms that Wong

employed. A hand-printed passage from a Piñero poem is inscribed in the sky above a row of brick tenements. Below, a concrete wall in an asphalt playground is covered in flamboyant graffiti. Four rows of ASL hand signs appear to float over the blacktop. The entire composition is bounded by a trompe l'oeil frame decorated with a faux plaque inscribed with the lines Piñero spoke in the critically panned 1981 cop film *Fort Apache: The Bronx*: "It's the real deal, Neal. I'm going to rock your world make your planets twirl. Ain't no wack attack." The complex work features a catalogue of painting techniques, from linear perspective to decorative patterning. The various forms of writing and mark-making on display invite multiple modes of visual engagement, often melding reading and looking.

Wong drew directly from his own life experiences to create paintings with an intimate, personal feel. One of the earliest works in the Bronx show is *My Secret World 1978-81*, from 1984, a composition some critics have connected to van Gogh's *Bedroom in Arles* (1889). This painting offers a glimpse through two tenement windows into Wong's first residence in New York, a small room in the Meyer's Hotel where he was employed as night watchman. The furnishings and decorations in the room add up to a symbolic self-portrait, though the artist is not visible. Above a single bed we see partially obscured representations of Wong's own paintings of an eight ball, a pair of dice and a set of ASL hand signs spelling out a tabloid headline about the notorious serial killer Son of Sam. Through the other window we see a bureau stacked with books, the titles of which suggest Wong's interest in everything from hockey to physics. A text inscribed on the outside window sill announces, "it was in this room that the world's first paintings for the hearing impaired came into being."

Wong's art historical bent is also evident in *Down for the Count* (1985), which is not included in the Bronx show. The work depicts boxers and firemen in a composition that subtly recalls Goya's *The Third of May 1808* (1814). The prisoner before the firing squad in the Spanish master's iconic work is transformed by Wong into a boxer exulting in his victory over a supine sparring partner. Crouching on either side of the victorious figure, a pair of firemen hold the fallen fighter. The poses of the firemen, Wong's notes reveal, are based on allegorical figures of sleep and death on a 6th-century b.c. Greek vase that he saw at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where he worked in the bookstore. Through these references to tragedy and violence, the artist imbues his ostensibly quotidian figures with heroic import while complicating the painting's overt narrative of victory.

Similarly, Wong's depictions of prison transform the institutions of incarceration into sites of erotic fantasy. These works are greatly indebted to Piñero's writings and experiences as a convict. In contrast to the pervasive red of the urban landscapes, the backgrounds of the prison works share a predominantly white palette. Dark-skinned men recline suggestively in some of these scenes, assuming poses that recall 19th-century odalisques. In others, prisoners engaged in sexual encounters are glimpsed between bars. In *The Annunciation According to Mikey Piñero (Cupcake and Pico)*, 1984, Wong references Renaissance depictions of the Annunciation, with the angel's message from God to Mary reconfigured as an attempted seduction of one man by another.

By the 1990s, Wong had changed gears, perhaps under pressure from critics and curators to explore his Asian heritage, as Yasmin Ramirez suggested to me in a conversation at the press opening. As Lydia Yee, co-curator of the New Museum retrospective, put it in the catalogue for that 1998 show, Wong began producing works that "seemed to better fit a multicultural paradigm than their Lower East Side predecessors."² These paintings, which could be understood as reflections on how Asian identity is constructed in popular culture, feature glitzy panoramas of the New York and San Francisco Chinatowns. As Yee argued, these works are more indebted to the orientalist stereotypes of 1930s movies than to

anything Wong personally experienced in the 1990s. Accordingly, the paintings have a very different feel from his Loisaída works. They are gaudy and playful, mingling depictions of the laughing, pot-bellied Hotei Buddha and other Asian spiritual motifs with depictions of Hollywood heroes like Bruce Lee and representations of historical figures, including a youthful version of his own aunt, who was Miss Chinatown in the 1930s. In contrast to the rectilinear geometry of his earlier works, these compositions are full of undulating lines, curling lotus forms, curved pagoda roofs and intricate chinoiserie patterns.

These late works were featured prominently in Wong's 1998 retrospective, and Cameron suggested they were key to his appeal at a moment of "increasing public interest in art that attempts to bridge cultural differences between disparate groups."³ However, many critics at the time found them less convincing than Wong's earlier work. Barry Schwabsky, reviewing the show for this magazine, noted disapprovingly that Wong had "become something much more like a conventional Pop artist than he was before."⁴

By the late 1990s, the decaying splendor of Wong's Loisaída was quickly disappearing into memory, and the art that it spawned—by figures like Keith Haring, David Wojnarowicz and Jean-Michel Basquiat—was being eclipsed by Conceptualist practices that offered cool, impersonal critiques of the media and consumer culture. As Marcia Tucker, the New Museum director at the time, noted, even Wong's preferred medium—painting—was falling out of fashion.

The renewed attention Wong's work is receiving today comes in the context of widespread popular nostalgia for the gritty authenticity New York had before the economic boom transformed marginal neighborhoods like Loisaída into playgrounds for tourists, well-heeled students and Google millionaires. Wong's work now strikes us as a time capsule, memorializing and romanticizing a bygone era.

However, the rough image of urban life Wong conveyed is also steeped in self-conscious artifice. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, middle-class youth flocked to New York to mingle with the underclass they would soon displace. Artists in Wong's circle fetishized ruins, cultivated decadence and assumed the guise of outlaws. In a 1996 interview with Ramirez published for the first time in the current catalogue, Wong speaks about his life in the East Village and jokes about watching friends commit robberies, shoot up and talk about their prison experiences.

But it is clear that Wong was more a voyeur than a participant in such rituals. A 1993 self-portrait, painted in the same style Wong used to render Asian movie icons, shows the artist sporting a cowboy hat, Fu Manchu mustache and embroidered Western shirt. Though this is one of the few works in which Wong depicted himself, what we see is more a persona than a true identity. Wong's theatrical sensibility dates back to his days in San Francisco in the late 1970s, when he was involved with the Angels of Light performance troupe. In New York, Wong seems to have channeled this affinity for the stage into his paintings, creating setlike environments populated by figures—actors, really—who strike dramatic poses. Today, artifice, rather than social realism, is the most striking aspect of his work. As Wong noted in a 1991 talk in San Francisco, reprinted in the Wattis catalogue: "Basically in painting you have to fake things."⁵

Of course, this pervasive artifice could be used to convey larger truths. *Penitentiary Fox* (1988), is a memorial to Piñero, who died of cirrhosis in 1988. The poet is painted before the closed doors of Sing Sing, the prison where he wrote and first staged his Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Short Eyes* (1974), while serving a sentence for armed robbery. Above prison gates lined with guards, the walls are cut away to reveal the inmates who were in the original cast. They are arranged in front of their cell block as if standing on a multitiered stage set. The entire prison is contained within a cartoonlike thought bubble: Piñero's dream as reimaged by Wong.

Canvases like this suggest that it is wrong to separate Wong's prison and Loisada works from his Chinatown paintings. His visions of urban grit and prison life are as much works of the imagination as his Hollywood-style

Chinatowns. Like any great storyteller, Wong took the materials of his life and world and wove them together into believable fictions. Because they spark our own fantasies, desires and memories, they continue to resonate today.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW "Martin Wong: Human Instamatic," at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York, through Feb. 14.

ELEANOR HEARTNEY is an *A.i.A.* contributing editor.

1. Alia al-Sabi, Caitlin Burkhart and Julian Myers-Szupinska, *My Trip to America* by Martin Wong, San Francisco, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art, California College of the Arts, 2015, p. 15.

2. Lydia Yee, "Martin Wong's Picture Perfect Chinatown," in *Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong*, New York, New Museum, 1998, p. 53.

3. Dan Cameron, "Brick by Brick: New York According to Martin Wong," in *Sweet Oblivion*, p. 13

4. Barry Schwabsky, "A City of Bricks and Cyphers," *Art in America*, September 1998. p. 104

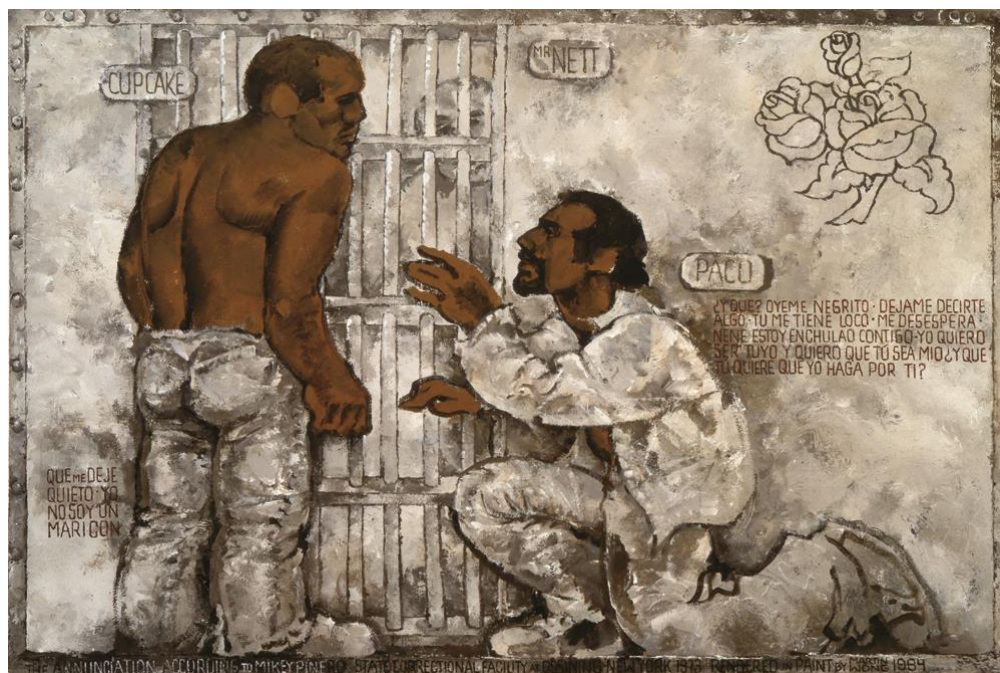
5. Martin Wong, "It's Easier to Paint a Store If It's Closed," in *Painting is Forbidden*, p. 92.



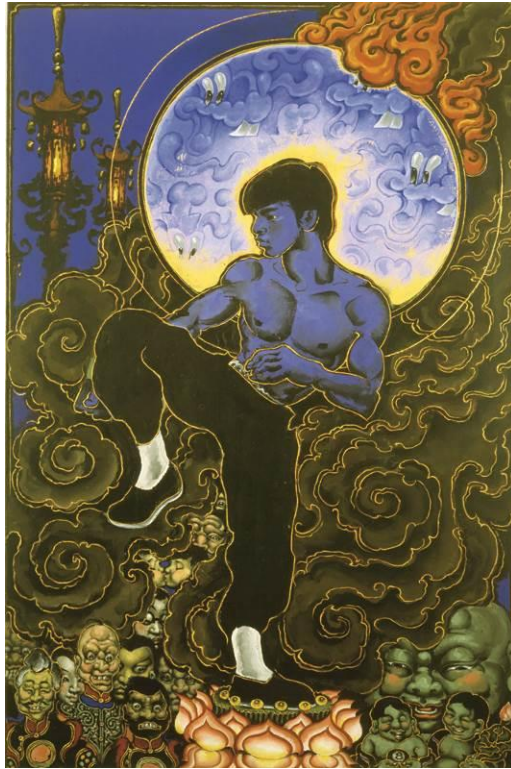
My Secret World, 1978-81, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 48 by 68 inches. Collection Melva Bucksbaum and Raymond Leary.



Attorney Street (Handball Court with Autobiographical Poem by Piñero), 1982-84, oil on canvas, 35½ by 48 inches.
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



The Annunciation According to Mikey Piñero (Cupcake and Paco), 1984, acrylic on canvas, 48 by 72 inches.
Syracuse University Art Collection.



Bruce Lee in the Afterworld, 1991, acrylic on canvas, 72 by 48½ inches. Courtesy Martin Wong Estate and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York.



Self-Portrait, 1993, acrylic on canvas, 40 inches in diameter. Courtesy Martin Wong Estate and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York.



Sweet 'Enuff, 1987, acrylic on canvas, two panels, 72 by 62½ and 69¾ by 64¼ inches. De Young Museum, San Francisco.



Penitentiary Fox, 1988, acrylic on canvas, 64 by 56 inches. Collection Melva Bucksbaum and Raymond Leary.