

# R AND A

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Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

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### The Intimate Visions of Martin Wong, Loisaida's "Chino-Latino" Painter

*By Tiernan Morgan*

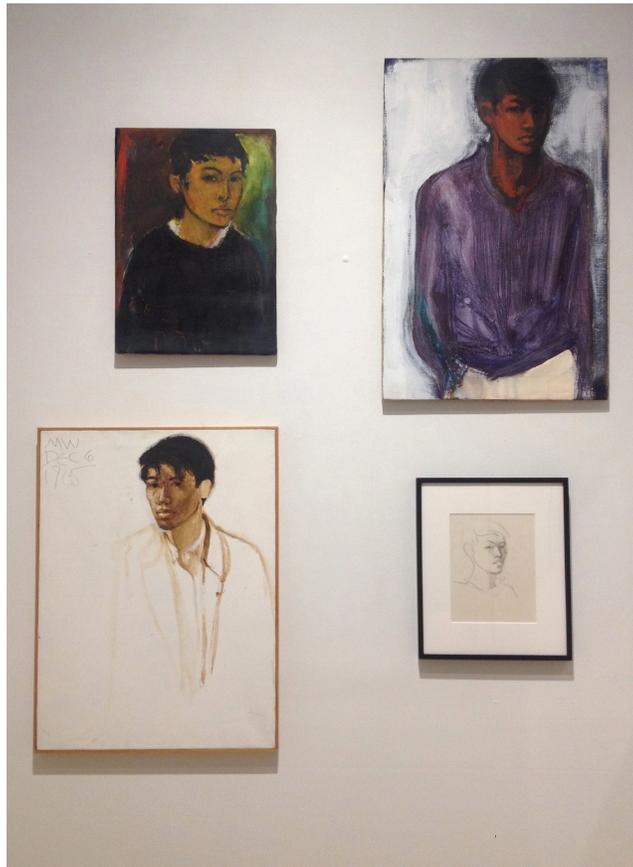


*Martin Wong, "The Flood" (detail) (1984), acrylic on linen, 36 x 48 inches (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic unless noted)*

*Human Instamatic*, the first museum retrospective of Martin Wong's work since his death in 1999, is an insightful celebration of one of New York's most underappreciated painters. Deftly curated and accompanied by an excellent catalogue, the Bronx Museum's exhibition is an indelible contribution to the artist's legacy and reputation. The show, which includes just under a hundred works, was curated by Antonio Sergio Bessa, Bronx Museum Director of Curatorial and

Educational Programs, and Adjunct Curator Yasmin Ramírez, who was a close friend of Wong's for many years. Together they have pulled off a retrospective that manages to be revelatory without being overly reverential.

Although Wong was championed by his peers in the East Village art scene, the institutional art world was slow to acquire and exhibit his work. A trained ceramist and self-taught painter, Wong's seemingly naïf aesthetic and proximity to the graffiti movement contributed to his marginalization within art institutions. "Many people seemed inclined toward a predisposition to experience his work as almost deliberately marginal, perhaps even minor," Dan Cameron writes in the exhibition's catalogue. "The self-styled guardians of [. . .] the art world were too uncomfortable with his folksy neighborhood persona and subject matter."

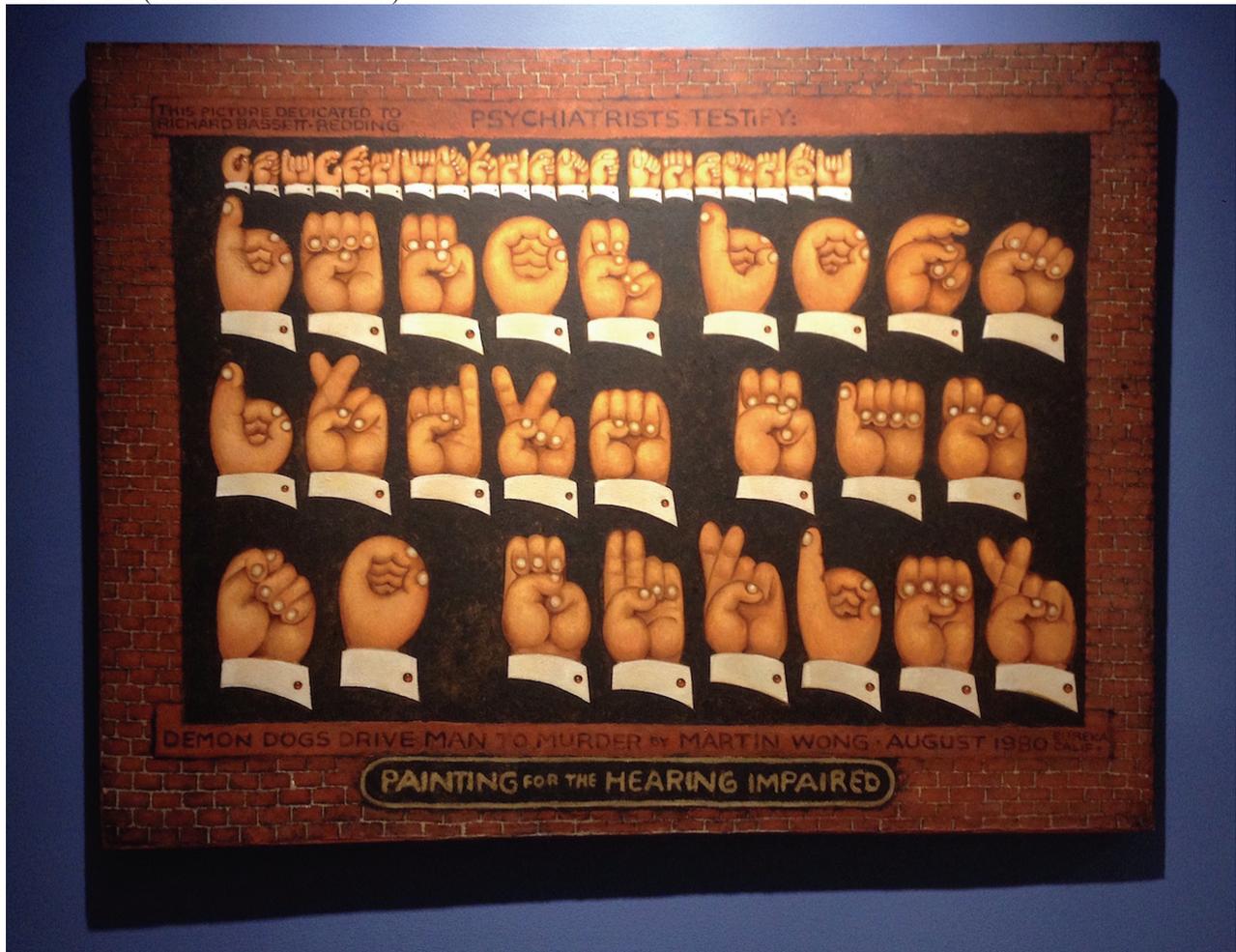


*A series of self-portraits produced by Wong during the 1960s (click to enlarge)*

The son of Chinese immigrants, Wong was born in Portland, Oregon, and grew up in San Francisco's Chinatown. Upon graduating from Humboldt State University, he dubbed himself the "Human Instamatic" and began supporting himself financially by drawing sketches for

passersby on the streets of Eureka, California. Whilst visiting New York City in 1978, he encountered the dilapidated Meyer Hotel and, by his account, managed to convince the owner to give him a room in exchange for working as the night porter. Wong subsequently lived and worked in New York for 16 years, eventually returning to San Francisco to live with his mother after his AIDS diagnosis in 1994.

*Human Instamatic* opens with an intimate display of paintings that Wong produced in virtual isolation at the Meyer Hotel. These works mark the origin of his fascination with brickwork and American Sign Language (ASL), two of his signature visual motifs. Both appear for the first time in the painting “Psychiatrists Testify: Demon Dogs Drive Man to Murder” (1980), the title of which is taken from a *World Weekly News* headline referring to the serial killer Sam Berkowitz (aka the [Son of Sam](#)).



Martin Wong, “Psychiatrists Testify: Demon Dogs Drive Man to Murder” (1980), acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 inches

The painting depicts a blackboard set within a brick wall. At its center is a linear sequence of gesturing hands, each of which corresponds to a different letter presented in ASL. The work's title is scrawled in English across the top and bottom of the painting alongside a black-and-gold plaque that reads "painting for the hearing impaired." The work anticipates Wong's playful combination of varying pictorial and emotional registers. For instance, scenes of urban blight often occupy the same visual space as astronomical diagrams, poetry quotes, or dedications to friends. Wong established a pictorial terrain of his own invention, a unique hybrid of social realism, documentation, and illustrative license. The succession of works in *Human Instamatic* underline just how inventive and ingenious his compositions are. That such diverse scenes can sit alongside one another, yet remain recognizably the work of a single artist, is a testament to Wong's artful synthesis of invention and style.

In his contribution to the exhibition catalogue, John Yau argues that Wong's interest in ASL likely stemmed from his bilingual upbringing as well as his exposure to New York's diverse array of denizens and cultures. Living alone and yet eager to make new friends, Wong's interest in communication developed during a period of relative isolation. The Meyer Hotel paintings conspicuously refer to the books that he was reading at the time, and it's apparent from viewing them that he used his living space and belongings as his subject matter. His fascination with bricks was also likely triggered by his isolation at the decrepit hotel.



*Martin Wong, "The Babysitter" (detail) (1998), acrylic on linen, 22 x 26 inches*

Wong used bricks in a variety of contexts, and while they visually bind his work, their symbolic function is far more nuanced than one might expect. He masterfully depicted the smoky, chalky hues of tenement building walls, rendering each brick individually with the use of earth pigments such as red iron oxide — an ingenious application of his ceramic skills. At their most obvious level, bricks serve as shorthand for the urban landscape: a symbol of obstacle and entrapment. This is evident in apocalyptic scenes such as that depicted in “The Flood” (1984), in which a brick rendition of the Statue of Liberty is largely submerged by water. A group of fireman survey the scene while brick buildings loom imposingly around them, demonstrating the familiar narrative of the city domineering over the individual — a reading that is bolstered by Lady Liberty’s distressed state.



*Martin Wong, "Mi Vida Loca" (1991), acrylic on canvas, 62 x 36 inches (click to enlarge)*

However, Wong also used bricks as a backdrop for serene familial scenes, as is the case in "The Babysitter" (1998), in which a young man plays affectionately with an infant. The artist also regularly contrasted bricks with astronomical diagrams, the implication being that bricks represent terrestrial, day-to-day reality, whereas stars are projections for our hopes, desires, and dreams. When interpreted this way, Wong's bricks can be understood as a corporeal expression of earthly life, a material symbol of our physical interactions and exchanges. This is exemplified in "Mi Vida Loca" (My Crazy Life) (1991), a large painting depicting a monumental phallus made entirely out of bricks.

In 1984, Wong moved to Loissaida (the Spanglish term for the Lower East Side), which at the time was predominately populated by black and Puerto Rican residents. He soon met Miguel

Piñero, the writer and co-founder of the Nuyorican Poets Café. Wong incorporated Piñero’s poetry into several of his paintings, including “Attorney Street (Handball Court with Autobiographical Poem by Piñero)” (1982–84), which was later acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It was around this time that Wong began to depict the displacement of Loisaida’s residents in a series of paintings documenting the regular destruction of tenement buildings.

Although Wong couldn’t speak Spanish, he strongly identified with Latino culture. He was pleased when Yasmin Ramírez honorifically described him as a first-generation “Chino-Latino.” In a 1996 interview, which is included in the exhibition catalogue, Wong told Ramírez that his father was half-Mexican:

YR: Now, I’m really mad at you because if I had said that at the Museo del Barrio they might have let me do the show I wanted to do with you.

MW: (laughs)

YR: You Jerk.

MW: (laughing) I thought you knew.



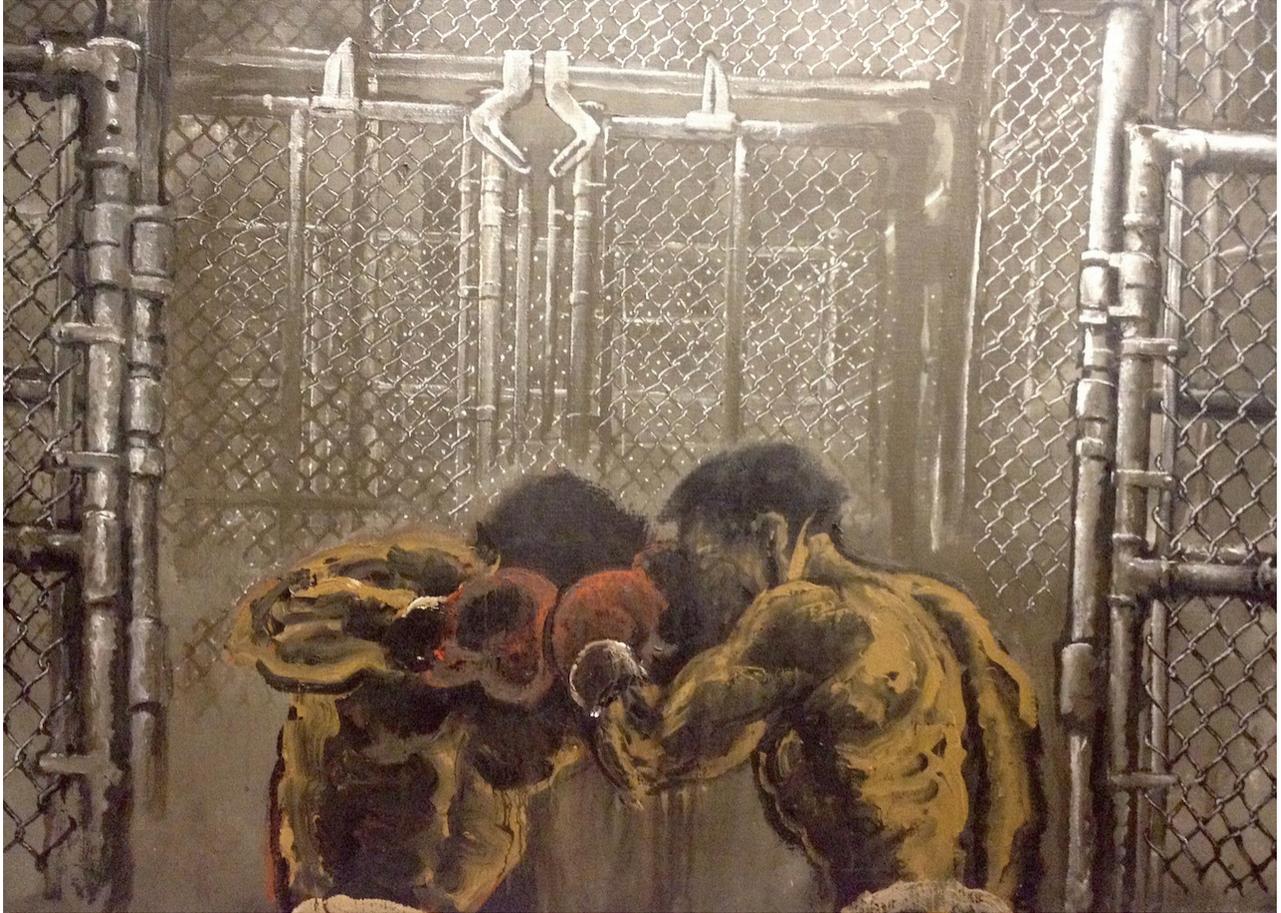
*Martin Wong, "Self-portrait" (1993), acrylic on canvas, 40-inch diameter (courtesy of the Bronx Museum of the Arts) (click to enlarge)*

Immediately before this exchange, Wong had admitted to feeling like a “tourist” and an outsider. He sublimated these anxieties by dressing elaborately in garish cowboy garb — an act of deliberate over-compensation. An ornate self-portrait from 1993 — a pastiche of traditional Chinese and Latin American painting traditions — depicts Wong as a dark-skinned, luminescent cowboy surrounded by grotesque blue demons. This nearly saint-like depiction suggests a mastery over his inner turmoil. To judge from his paintings, it seems that Wong’s self-identity was remarkably fluid, determined in large part by his community friendships and exchanges. “I’m pretty sure that he didn’t listen to country music,” Cameron writes in his essay, “but [Wong] succeeded at presenting himself as the quintessential outsider, who gave his own exotic or non-American spin to a persona that’s more American than apple pie.”

Much of the exhibition is also dedicated to exploring the artist’s sexuality. By his own admission, Wong had a “weird infatuation for the fire department,” though it would be more accurate to describe it as a fetish. Firefighters appeared regularly throughout his work, be it on duty, bathing, or locked in an embrace. In a small painting entitled “I Really Like the Way Firemen Smell” (1988), Wong describes his fixation with remarkable erotic candor:

I really like the way fireman smell when they get off work. It’s like hickory smoked rubber and B.O. After he showers and throws on Old Spice I always loose interest. He thinks I am into him for his uniform. In reality I’m only into him for the smell.

The text, which is laid over a silver background, includes a silhouette of a firefighter, a stark visual of an imagined person. The painting, which one imagines was completed in a single sitting, demonstrates the agility with which Wong commemorated his desires in paint. In a painting entitled “Mitosis” (1985), the musculature of two boxers is rendered with rapid, sensual strokes. In some places, Wong has allowed his paints to bleed and drip, suggesting both movement and sweat.



*Martin Wong, "Mitosis" (detail) (1985), acrylic on canvas, 48 x 72 inches*

Wong further articulated his desires in a series of highly fantastical scenes of prison life. Though he had never been incarcerated, he used his friend's stories as the basis for his own imagined scenes. In the same interview with Ramírez, Wong jokingly refers to these works as his "white on white" paintings. "Cupcake and Paco (Corot)" (1988) depicts one inmate propositioning another on bended knee. The composition intentionally recalls the Annunciation (the connection is made explicit in a related painting entitled "The Annunciation According to Mikey Piñero (Cupcake and Paco)" [1984]), and as with many of his pieces, Wong chose to display this one in an antique gold frame. Though it's tempting to interpret his use of ornate frames as a postmodern nixing of so-called "high" and "low" culture, I suspect his attitude toward framing was more sincere than ironic. Wong didn't set out to *elevate* profane subject matter; instead he used lavish frames, both physical and pictorial, to affirm the subject matter's inherent value. The artist's golden frames sit brilliantly against the Bronx Museum's rich blue walls.

The decision to present the show on colored walls makes a great deal of sense, given the grimy nature of Wong's painting style. Stark, white walls would simply feel antithetical to the spirit of

his work. The only exception to this is three small periphery rooms, all of which are painted white. Two of these are dedicated to a rich display of archival material, and the third is comprised of a modest display of Wong's late works. Executed during the final years of his life, these somber paintings depict the cacti and succulents his mother displayed around her house. Beguiling and enigmatic, they were a major departure from anything Wong had produced before. The wall text for this section is the briefest in the entire exhibition, the curators seemingly reluctant to prescribe any sort of interpretation. Here, at the very end of the show, the marked transition to white walls has a funereal effect.



*Martin Wong, "Euphorbia Obesa" (1997–98), acrylic on canvas, 20 x 30 inches (courtesy of the Bronx Museum of the Arts)*

The exhibition is divided into intuitive subsections with headings such as "Meyer's Hotel," "Loisaida 1982–1922," "Chinatown," and of course, "Bricks." The archival exhibits are relatively restrained. Most of the photographs on display relate to Wong's compositional research, though we also get the occasional family photo, including a remarkable image of a young Wong clambering on top of an actual fire truck. It's a pity that a section wasn't devoted to Wong's ceramic practice; only one small sculpture was acquired for the show. This, however, is

a minor quibble considering the exhibition's unprecedented scope and depth. Visitors who are unfamiliar with Wong's work will discover a unique talent, while those who were dismissive of his community-driven practice will undoubtedly be converted by the variety and pictorial intelligence on display. Accessible and self-assured, *Human Instamatic* was undoubtedly one of the best museum shows to open last year.

[Martin Wong: Human Instamatic](#) continues at the Bronx Museum of the Arts (1040 Grand Concourse, Concourse, Bronx) through February 14.