

# R AND A

## frieze

January 31, 2016

Martin Wong  
*The Bronx Museum of Arts, New York, USA*

*Matthew Shen Goodman*

*4 November, 2015 – 14 February, 2016*



Martin Wong, *Self-Portrait*, 1993, acrylic on canvas, 102 cm diameter.  
Courtesy the estate of Martin Wong, P.P.O.W., New York

The Bronx Museum of the Arts has mounted painter Martin Wong's first in-depth retrospective nearly two decades after the artist's death. The show is titled 'Human Instamatic,' as Wong called himself during a stint hawking portraits in Humboldt County, north of San Francisco where he grew up, and where, having returned home to his parents' care, he passed away from AIDS-related causes in 1999. Though Wong was relatively unheralded at the time, interest in his work has grown since his death, due in part to Danh Vo's 2013 Guggenheim exhibition 'I M U U R 2.' In that show, Vo presented close to four thousand of Wong's collected objects, including rare Chinese calligraphic works, racist trinkets, and unexhibited paintings. Making clear his superb eye and roving intellect, that exhibition cast Wong in an artist-as-curator/hoarder role, au courant to our archive-hungry moment when the personal collections of artists are offered as representative of a greater aesthetic sensibility (sometimes at the expense of one's more traditional artistic practice).

Though Vo's approach was acceptable (even predictable), the Bronx Museum's studied focus on Wong's painting marks a welcome shift. Nearly 100 paintings on display form the crux of the show, starting with those made upon Wong's arrival to New York in 1978, when he began working as a night porter at a waterfront hotel on South Street, and ending with pieces from his final days in San Francisco. From the very beginning, written language appears frequently, as Wong paints works' titles, tabloid headlines, graffiti tags, and excerpts of poetry and play dialogue composed by his friend and sometimes lover Miguel Piñero, a poet, playwright, and cofounder of the Nuyorican Poets Café. Words are rendered in both Roman letters and humorously fleshy, disembodied hands that spell out lines in American Sign Language, like 'Psychiatrists Testify: Demon Dogs Drive Man to Murder,' in the 1981 painting of the same name.



Martin Wong, *Starry Night*, 1982, oil on canvas, 56 x 76 cm. Courtesy Bronx Museum of the Arts

Ripped from a *Weekly World News* story on the Son of Sam (Wong seemed to gravitate towards violent spectacle), that sentence of gesturing fists is bordered by brick, another of Wong's fixations. Wong layers burnt oranges and iron reds until the paint develops the texture of cracked earth, each unexpectedly sumptuous block outlined by golden-hued mortar. These bricks form the smoldering backdrops for the Lower East Side tableaux for which Wong is best known. With a lusty approach to his figures that at times seems equal parts Tom of Finland and Robert Crumb, Wong paints the black and Latino residents of his adopted neighborhood in intimate and isolated scenes that, dwarfed by abandoned and flame-lit nighttime cityscapes, traffic in an apocalyptic romanticism. Couples huddle in junk-strewn lots in front of monolithic walls; heavily muscled boxers embrace in a labyrinth of chain-link fencing; two firemen (maybe Wong's greatest obsession) kiss, as a dilapidated housing project looms behind them.

The show gives equal space to Wong's later works. A series of jail-set paintings inspired by Piñero's stories and further embellished by Wong's fertile erotic imagination, in which shirtless soft-eyed men lounge in their cells, join three heartbreakingly stark black and white paintings of flora made at the very end of his life. Also present are a number of paintings joyfully delving into Chinese-American kitsch, depicting San Francisco's Chinatown, Bruce Lee, azure Himalayan demons, and Wong himself, sneering in a cowboy hat with a *botanica* candle-style portrait of Jesus on its brim. (Though quite funny and visually mesmerizing



Martin Wong, *Brainwashing Cult Cons Top TV Stars*, 1981, acrylic on canvas, 76 x 102 cm. Courtesy Bronx Museum of the Arts

in their cacophony of detail, these works have been remarkably less acclaimed, possibly because white art critics tend towards shrill reduction when confronted by anything smacking of identity politics.) Most striking were a series of large-scale storefront paintings Wong made in the mid-'80s. The massive monochromatic metal grates and bluish-white Spanish Pentecostal church windows are the colour-field experiences I didn't realize I wanted to have in 2015. Depopulated and forlorn, they also commemorate the end of the Lower East Side memorialized in Wong's previous paintings, portraying what Julie Ault describes in the exhibition catalogue as the 'casualties of yuppification on the cusp of uninvited redevelopment.' The works struck a note, obviously, in today's New York, as artist-led gentrification continues apace—even in the usually maligned South Bronx, where in October real estate moguls hosted a one-night, celebrity-studded ruin-porn exhibition a mile south of the Bronx Museum. As Wong chronicled the ways a working-class minority community survive and even flourish in spite of urban neglect, so too could he show how it might wither and die under a deluge of money.