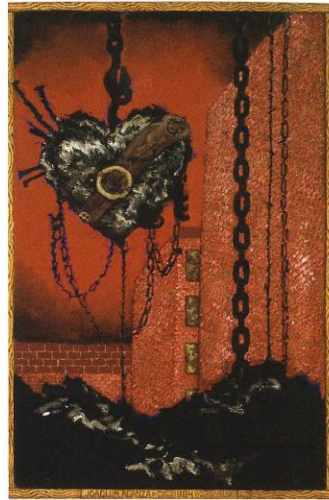


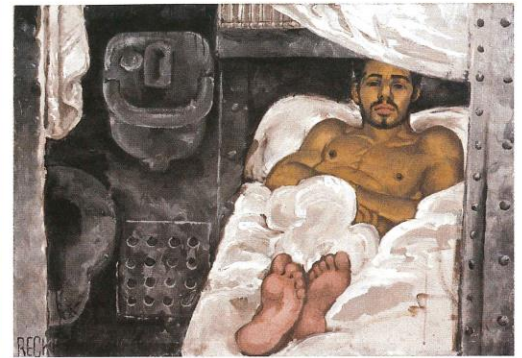
R AND A

ARTFORUM

March 2016



From left: Martin Wong, *Everything Must Go*, 1983, acrylic on canvas, 48 × 60".
Martin Wong, *Chain Saw Valentine (Portrait of Joaquin Angaza)*, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 72 × 48".
Martin Wong, *Reckless*, 1991, acrylic on canvas, 34 × 48".



Martin Wong

BRONX MUSEUM OF THE ARTS, NEW YORK

Carlo McCormick

DECADES AGO, well before Martin Wong had a gallery—let alone the fame that has only gathered momentum since his passing in 1999—he hung some paintings in an inexpensive little Japanese restaurant on St. Marks Place in New York. There were a few neighbors who disliked them and said so, but it's safe to assume that most people never even noticed them: These were paintings of brick walls, hanging on brick walls. To those of us who were actually paying attention, they seemed like some ultrabanal *trompe l'oeil*, or perhaps a reminder of the horrifyingly cheap patchwork jobs the local slumlords specialized in; there was nothing of the picturesque in them, nor did they even contain those flourishes of self-expression we typically endure in café art. These paintings seemed illegitimate, too prosaic for the East Village, that legendary zone of difference where normalcy was systematically eschewed. Eventually, though, we understood them to be some of Wong's signature works. They were emblematic of the way he infused the abject and the wretched with a romantic luster, uncannily hilarious as a kind of situation comedy, and impossibly profound—operating in that hypothetical space where surface meets feeling and the hopelessly mundane spills forth an intimate yet infinite poetics.

These characteristic qualities were wonderfully evident throughout the Bronx Museum's ambitious and comprehensive survey of Wong's oeuvre, which offered an episodic sprawl of paintings from four decades. The show's title, "Human Instamatic," quoted Wong's own description of himself—denoting his uncanny manner of replication and his concern for visual veracity. And the curators took him at his word, presenting a rigorous and scholarly effort that strictly organized Wong's work according to subject matter,

as if presenting some taxonomy of his world. But of course Wong's self-described automatism was a joke, cunning and dissembling as his wit always was, and to miss his humor is in many ways to miss the point. For all the laudable earnestness brought to this welcome gathering of great works, Wong might have been better served by a scoundrel with a taste for transgression and an understanding of fantasy's power to convert facts into fiction. If this presentation was faithful to his narrative, it still missed something of his gift for storytelling. Strangely, too, his sexuality—so much a part of the texture of his work—was left largely unexamined, going almost unmentioned in the catalogue and wall texts. While we were given much opportunity to enjoy Wong's masterful powers of concentration, it might have been just as helpful to reveal his manic capacity for distraction, as well as to delve deeper into the complexities and contradictions of his identity.

Wong's hybridity was between not only the fundamental fractures of subjectivity but generational divides as well. His art brings together the optimism and idealism of the psychedelic '60s, the nihilism of the No Future '70s, and the cynicism of the urban '80s, never one more than the other. The richness of this work lies in the frisson between a stunning realism and a rather more dreamy romanticism. His work was born of his tenure as a street portraitist in California, informed by the drawings and poetry of his lysergic late-'60s/early-'70s youth, and enriched by the eruption of his freak identity as a gay Chinese American participating in the radical and bedazzled theatrics of San Francisco's gender-bent troupe the Cockettes. By the time he arrived in the burned-out rubble of New York's downtown to join the nascent East Village art scene, Wong had developed a steady hand, a woolgatherer's imagination, a poet's love of language, a street artist's populism, and an insider's understanding of subculture and counterculture.

This range of attitudes and attributes informed the pictorial investigations and obsessions on view in the Bronx: the collapsing cityscapes, the brick-skinned paintings, the homoerotic fantasies of prison life and fetishized firemen, the life-size renderings of closed bodega gates (disconcertingly hung

on the wall rather than resting on the floor as the artist intended), the resketched urban-vernacular poetry (often by the great Nuyorican writer Miguel Piñero), the constellation paintings, and the kitsch-tacular Chinatown scenes. Wong surely would have appreciated this typological presentation of his work, but the real force behind his oeuvre is the riotous energy and latent melancholia that drift through his myriad fascinations, binding them into a singular vision: Subject matter, theme, and even truth itself are subservient to the great critical and visual power of this consummate raconteur. Like brick against brick, his work makes us look twice at the quotidian surfaces and outsider languages that otherwise recede into the background, to see in this seduction of surface that which needs belief and even faith, a humanism and spiritualism for a generation that knew far better. And his voice rings with particular resonance today, long after he has passed and his beloved neighborhood has been redeveloped into something unrecognizably white and polite. His art was always a most human kind of reclamation, and the way his paintings invoke our haunted past

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not only fits the current nostalgia for that down-at-the-heels outlaw city of yore; his outré persona is rightfully inspiring to the evolving identity politics of a current generation of artists. Epic in the best way, Wong's work shares the forlorn and forbidden in intimacies writ large—fearsome noises and raised voices uttered back to us in hushed whispers. □

"Martin Wong: Human Instamatic" travels to the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH, May 14–Aug. 7; University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Sept. 12–Dec. 10, 2017.

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