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Autism, Tourettes and \$5m paintings: the painful reality of the art sensation who found life impossible

Artist Matthew Wong achieved more in three years than many do in a lifetime — but two weeks before his big opening, he committed suicide

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Matthew Wong, *Starry Night*, 2019

A self-taught artist whose work could be bought for less than \$10,000 five years ago, but which has soared at auction to almost \$5 million (£3.6 million), is about to have his first museum exhibition, at the Art Gallery Ontario in Toronto, where he was born.

But the story of Matthew Wong is one of tragedy as well as triumph. Born in 1984, he was diagnosed in childhood with depression, and in his twenties as autistic with Tourette's syndrome. All this he managed to contain as he achieved a degree in cultural anthropology, and a Masters in photography, before becoming inspired to paint by looking at contemporary art.

He started in 2013 with drawing, and "making a mess", as he said, in his kitchen. It was, he said, "a last resort to find something to hold on to." Then, by studying in libraries and on the internet, he taught himself to paint, influenced particularly by Van Gogh, Matisse and the post-impressionists.



Matthew Wong, A Dream, 2019

Wong's career started on Facebook in 2014, when he asked the art dealer John Cheim what paint to use. With no inkling as to what would follow, Cheim suggested Williamsburg - a brand that was used by an artist he represented.

The next year, Wong visited Cheim in New York. "When I met him in person he struck me as a handsome, tall, strong young man with whom I had a direct and clear conversation," recalls Cheim. "I liked his big black eyeglasses - like a young Hockney. I had no clue that he suffered from any health issues."

After seeing some of Wong's slightly obsessive, figurative landscapes on the internet, Cheim recommended them to one of New York's most alert art curators, British-born Matthew Higgs, who was looking for artists to exhibit in a show entitled *Outside*, in reference to the concept of the outsider or self-taught artist.



Matthew Wong, River at Dusk, 2018

Outside was staged in 2016 by the up-and-coming Karma Gallery in New York, owned by Brendan Dugan, who was sufficiently impressed by Wong to also show his work in several art fairs. In Dallas, the Museum of Art bought a painting; another was sold to the respected collector and plastic surgeon Stafford Broumand. Dugan then gave Wong his first one-man show in 2018 and the artist was on his way. His 2019 calendar included major art fairs in America and Europe - with collector interest increasing each time. He drew up plans to show his latest works at Karma, his largest yet, including many night-time landscapes in rich tones of dark blue.

Then, just weeks before the opening and with the art world at his feet, Wong committed suicide. He was 35. Former Guggenheim Museum chief curator Nancy Spector believes in retrospect that the blue paintings - beautiful yet melancholic - were "a harbinger" of what was to come. The Karma exhibition thus became a memorial and, significantly for the market, all his work was withdrawn from sale, not only as a mark of respect but as an acknowledgement that a price recalibration was going to occur.



Matthew Wong, Blue Night, 2018

The reviews, though, were stunning, and a fever built up to buy his work. Since nothing was for sale, the first visible measure of demand did not come until May 2020, when a Wong sold at Sotheby's online for \$62,000. Within the next 14 months, 45 more Wongs were auctioned for ever-increasing prices, reaching \$4.9 million for a large landscape at Phillips in Hong Kong last December. Demand was especially strong from Asia, where the artist had spent time as a child and as a student.

Higgs reckons that Wong "probably achieved more as an artist in three years (2016-2019) than many artists might achieve in a lifetime." He was prolific, completing a painting a day - sometimes two - as he worked deep into the night.

Wong left an estimated 1,000 paintings and drawings, says Julian Cox, the British curator of the Art Gallery of Ontario. Now his parents have the arduous task of managing not only their grief, but their son's estate and the mounting level of interest. An exhibition of his drawings is being held at Cheim and Read in New York, and all the drawings available for sale have been sold, priced \$250,000 to \$450,000. Further projects are in the pipeline at the Dallas Museum of Art and a museum in Europe that has yet to be named. The next Wong at auction will likely be during London's Frieze Art Fair in October.