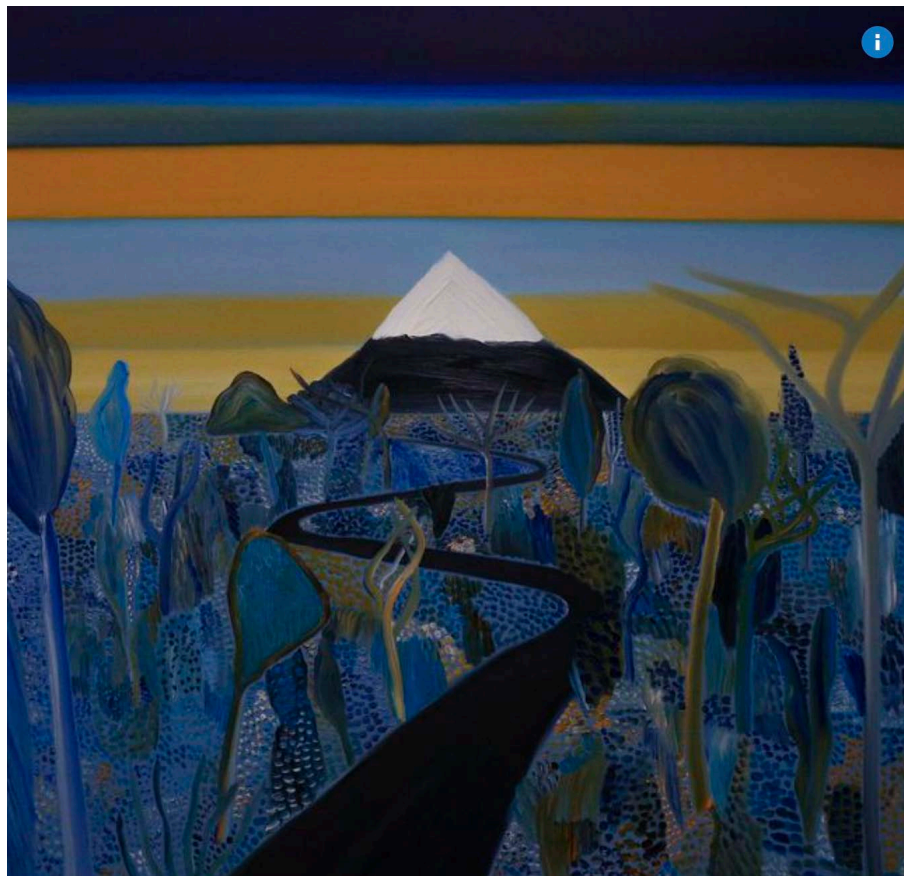


VISUAL ARTS

‘Matthew Wong: Blue View’ at the AGO a chance to see the work of an artist ‘hitting his full stride’

By Bruce DeMara Culture Reporter
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Matthew Wong is getting his first museum exhibition, one he never lived to see.

["Matthew Wong: Blue View"](#) opened Aug. 17 at the Art Gallery of Ontario, an opportunity to see the works of a Toronto-born artist whose idiosyncratic life ended all too soon. In 2019, the artist — who discovered his love of painting late in a relatively short life — died by suicide.

"What you're seeing in this exhibition is an artist who I would describe as hitting his full stride, in full command of their materials and understanding what it is they want to do," said chief curator Julian Cox, who oversaw the exhibition.

Wong is "someone we believe to be one of the most talented painters of his generation," Cox added, noting the artist was on the cusp of achieving international acclaim and success — with a major exhibition opening in a New York City gallery — when he died in October 2019 at the age of 35. His work "Shangri-La (2017)" sold at Christie's New York in October 2020 for \$4.47 million (U.S.)

"Blue View" features more than 40 works, the majority oil on canvas, painted between 2017 and 2019. In all, Wong created more than 1,000 works of art despite only taking up painting in 2013.

Wong was born in Toronto in 1984 but moved with his family to Hong Kong at the age of seven. He returned to the GTA at 15 when his family moved to Richmond Hill, finishing high school at the York School in Toronto, a private school known for its international baccalaureate program.

He went on to study anthropology at the University of Michigan before returning to Hong Kong, where he studied creative media, specializing in photography, at the City University of Hong Kong. Wong began to write poetry and perform his works at public events before he returned to Canada, settling in Edmonton.

From an early age, Wong lived with autism spectrum disorder and, as a teenager, was diagnosed with Tourette Syndrome. As a result, he struggled with depression throughout his life.

Cox — who spoke with a dozen artists and members of the arts community in preparing for the exhibit — noted that Wong was not a typical artist. Despite his education in photography and digital imagery, Wong never received any formal training in painting.

“(Wong) essentially taught himself how to paint and learned through a combination of different strategies,” Cox said, including voracious reading at public libraries, particularly in Edmonton, and reaching out via social media to a range of artists, art dealers and influencers throughout the world.

“He (Wong) arrives at painting and realizes that it is singularly suited to what he wants to say and do, and how he wants to express himself. That’s one of the reasons why he was so tremendously productive in such a short period of time. He finally found a preoccupation that suited him,” Cox said.

Chicago artist Soumya Netrabile was one of them, meeting Wong only once but corresponding regularly through digital media.

“It’s very hard to say something meaningful about Matthew Wong with only a few words or sentences. I will say that he was a supportive and inspiring friend, and I cherish the exchanges we had about poetry, art and literature. During these exchanges, he would often offer up brutally honest and insightful opinions. I always appreciated this about him. He never held back,” Netrabile said.

Also atypically, Cox said, Wong created his works without preparatory sketching on canvas or a reference sketch close by. He would often “burn through” and complete a work in one sitting, Cox added.

Wong’s influences are vast and varied, Cox noted, ranging from van Gogh and Matisse to American 20th-century realist Edward Hopper. Elements of his works exhibit “a fabulous sense of humour.”

“One of the things that we do in our business as curators is to access work and to understand its relevancy and its impact on our own time but also to sort of imagine whether it might endure for the ages. We feel (Wong) is one of those artists that lives up to that kind of billing,” Cox said.

Wong’s parents, Monita and Raymond, have set up a foundation in their son’s name, their only child. They declined to comment for this article.