



**Matthew Wong: Footprints in the Wind, Ink Drawings 2013-2017
at Cheim & Read**



Matthew Wong, Untitled, 2014. Ink on rice paper, 30 3/4 x 57 1/4 inches ©2021 Matthew Wong Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York Photography: Alex Yudzon / Cheim & Read, New York.'

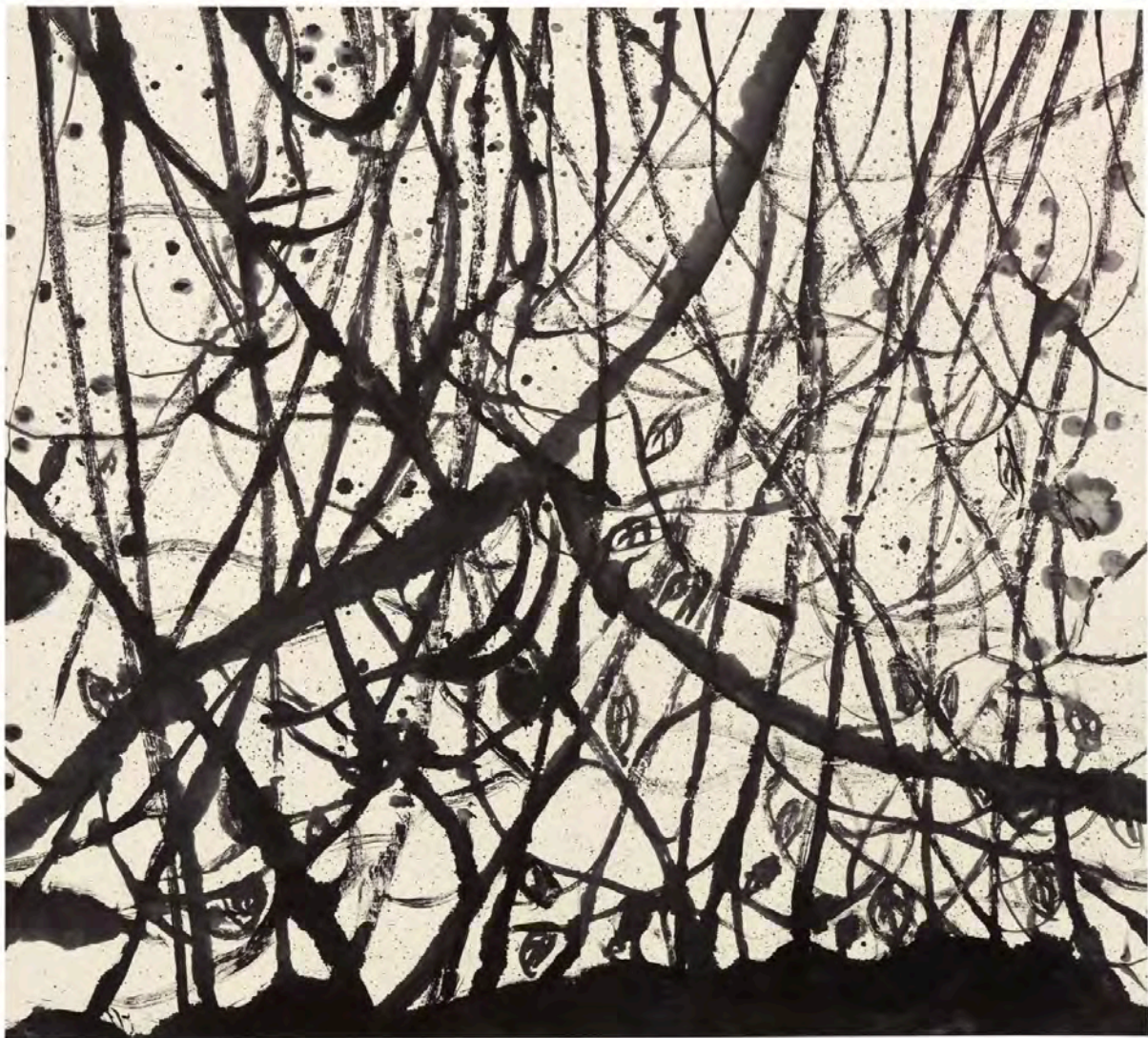
Matthew Wong: *Footprints in the Wind, Ink Drawings 2013-2017*

Cheim & Read

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By **JONATHAN GOODMAN**, June 2021

The Chinese-Canadian artist Matthew Wong was born in Toronto in 1984 and died, a suicide, in Edmonton in 2019. He spent time in China--in 2013, he received his MFA degree from the School of Creative Media at the City University Hong Kong; and spent two years, from 2013 t 2015, in Zhangshan. The show at Cheim & Read, of 24 ink drawings on paper, manifest Wong's awareness of the Chinese painting tradition he belonged to, but also demonstrate a stylized dislocation, based upon both nature and abstraction, that feels very contemporary. It deliberately undermines the elegant cohesion of Chinese paintings in the past. This not to say that Wong's paintings are visually incoherent, but it is fair to comment on their difficulty to read at times. Some of the works employ recognizable landscapes, while others feature organic blots superimposed upon one another, with no reference to anything beyond themselves--this is his version of a pure abstraction.



Matthew Wong, Heaven and Earth, 2015. Ink on rice paper, 70 x 74 inches ©2021 Matthew Wong Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York Photography: Alex Yudzon / Cheim & Read, New York

Wong, a Chinese artist growing up in Canada, must have felt a double allegiance--to the past, his culture's legacy, and to the present condition he found himself in, as a semi-rootless Asian artist in a country far away from his ancestral home. Perhaps the complexity of his art has to do with the shared motivations behind his art, *Heaven and Earth* (2015), a large ink-on-paper painting, consists of a series of criss-crossing branches with the white of the paper showing through. A thickish diagonal runs through the center of the rice paper, off of which two branches push out toward the upper left and lower right. The rest of the composition is filled with verticals, branches really, between which we find inchoate blots and leaf-like shapes. The work is an excellent mixture of abstraction and a compelling view of a thicket or forest. It is a major piece in Wong's exhibition, balancing as it does between Asian ink painting and a Western treatment of nature.

Another striking work, an untitled piece from 2014, also is a rough, uneven grid of black ink lines, with rounded splotches at a good number of the intersections. We know that the grid is central is a good deal of contemporary Western art, but in this case, Wong eschews the rational articulation of the modernist matrix in favor of something rougher and hence more deeply emotional. One of the great strengths of this body of work is its expression of feeling, achieved abstractly, but also in light of deeper structures in nature. An untitled work from 2014 seems somewhat messy, even incoherent, but his audience might see in the large black mass dominating the painting the depiction of a fierce storm scene, with the large form acting as a kind of tornado hurrying the painting along. In the lower left there are a series of rounded lines that might serve as hills, while in the upper right black clouds hover in an open white sky. It may be a touch whimsical to interpret the piece in this way, but Wong's strategy is to put the image in a place where anything might happen or might be interpreted.



Matthew Wong, Winter Wind, 2016. Ink on rice paper, 31 3/4 x 27 1/8 inches ©2021 Matthew Wong Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York Photography: Alex Yudzon / Cheim & Read, New York.

Winter Wind (2016), likely the most overtly psychological image in the show, presents, on the lower left, a Munch-like spectre of a figure clothed in a hooded, long black coat. His face, the epitome of melancholy, stares off to the side with black holes for eyes. Above him, on the right, are the clawed feet, legs, and most of the body of some huge bird of prey--we don't see the upmost body or head. The image is one of unrelieved desolation, and offers no solace, either to the figure or to the audience. A four-pronged weed, insistently repeated, covers much of the background, mostly on the left and in the center, while in the upper right, small black blots punctuate the white of the paper. It is hard not to see this image as a statement of Wong's psychological state, and knowing as we do he would take his life three years later, the work has a pathos no words can fully do justice to.

Wong is a true original, an artist of unusual talent whose brief life brings out both admiration and deep sadness. There are figures like this--artists and writers whose lives ended too soon--that make it clear a certain artists develop their creativity quite early in their lives, as if they tacitly knew their life would be short, erased by circumstance. That the erasure was brought about by Wong himself makes the show terribly melancholic and moving. Additionally, Wong was highly innovative in his process. He devised a style that successfully negotiated art history and contemporary abstraction in a creative fashion. We can only wonder, sadly, how much further he would have gone had he remained alive. **WM**