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ART & DESIGN

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Matthew Wong

Through Sept. 11. Cheim & Read, 547 West 25th Street, Manhattan. 212-242-7727, cheimread.com.



Matthew Wong's "Footprints in the Wind" (2016), ink on rice paper. Matthew Wong Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Cheim & Read, New York

Matthew Wong began making colorful, compulsive paintings around 2016, and they got attention quickly — they were gorgeous. By 2019, when [he killed himself at the age of 35](#), he was already planning his [second New York solo show](#). (He had struggled with depression, and other conditions, since childhood.) For years before taking up color, Wong had been making a large ink drawing most mornings before breakfast. And apart from one piece, briefly exhibited in Hong Kong, the drawings now hanging at Cheim & Read are the first that have ever been shown.

Raised between Toronto and Hong Kong, Wong was as interested in classical Chinese painting as in the modern Western kind. He even mounted some of his drawings on silk. But while the ink in a classical Chinese landscape is always flirting with translucency, Wong's is more like oil paint — dense, reflective, resistant. The drawings are like the later paintings in other ways, too. The same marble-like little sun appears frequently, gleaming over strange landscapes in which solitary figures may be hidden. In many drawings you will also see Wong's need to fill every available space, although working in ink did force him to leave at least a little room around his brush marks.

But sometimes black and white achieve a breathtaking balance. Half a dozen narrow birch trunks lean against a wall of black leaves in one piece. Above them a sun peers down from a narrow strip of sky; below lies a curving path under heavy snow. A few pointed black leaves, scattered across the snow like footprints, are the only evidence of life. (This piece and the show are both called “[Footprints in the Wind](#).”) Throughout the show, Wong shows you how many tones can be wrung from black ink, but here he pulls off a similar trick with white paper. As the sky, it’s bleak and wispy; as snow, lustrous and rich.

WILL HEINRICH