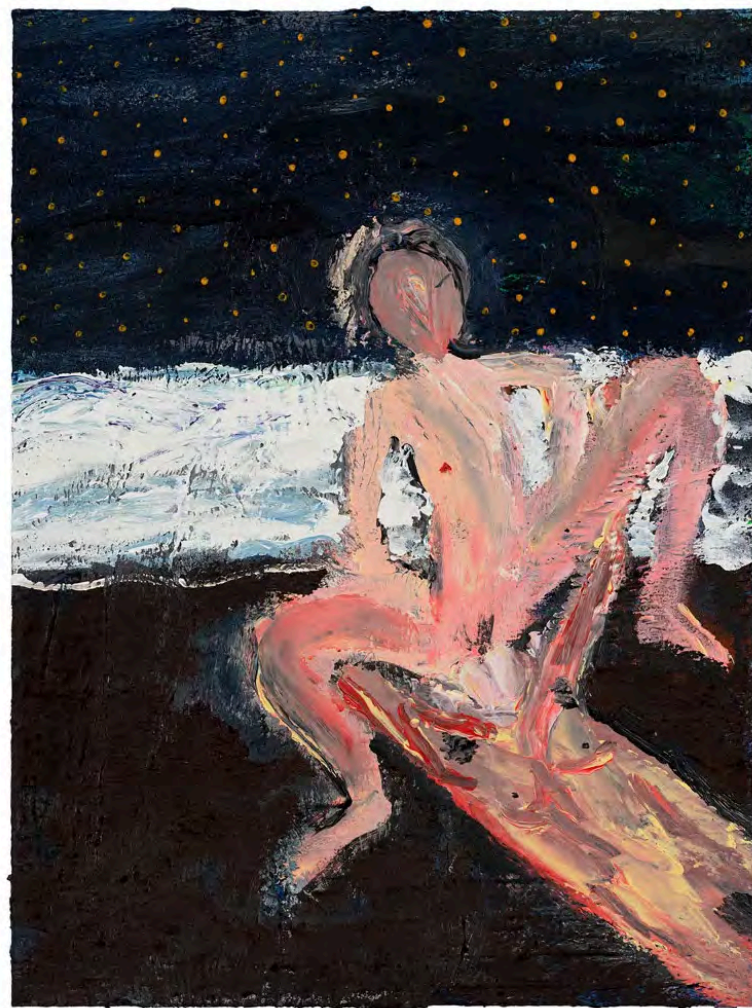


Matthew Wong: *The New World, Paintings From Los Angeles 2016*

By Jessica Holmes



Matthew Wong, *BEACH AT NIGHT*, 2016. Acrylic on paper, 12 1/4 x 9 1/8 inches. Courtesy Cheim & Read.

When artist Matthew Wong passed away at age thirty-five, he had only been painting for five years. A self-

taught artist, he was a voracious learner and relentless worker, prolific in his efforts despite working in his medium for such a short time. His reputation as a deft and assured artist, already ascending at the time of his death in 2019, accelerated breathlessly afterwards. His persona was assigned an aura of mystique, exacerbated by his history of depression, as well as diagnoses of autism and Tourette's Syndrome. That he took his own life just as he was surmounting the first floodgates of success seems to have largely sealed his legacy as that of the tormented artist—the mystique becoming myth. Demand for his work has soared, with museums and collectors scrabbling to acquire it. But what is in danger of being lost in the lore that now surrounds Wong is that he was, above all else, a true painter's painter.

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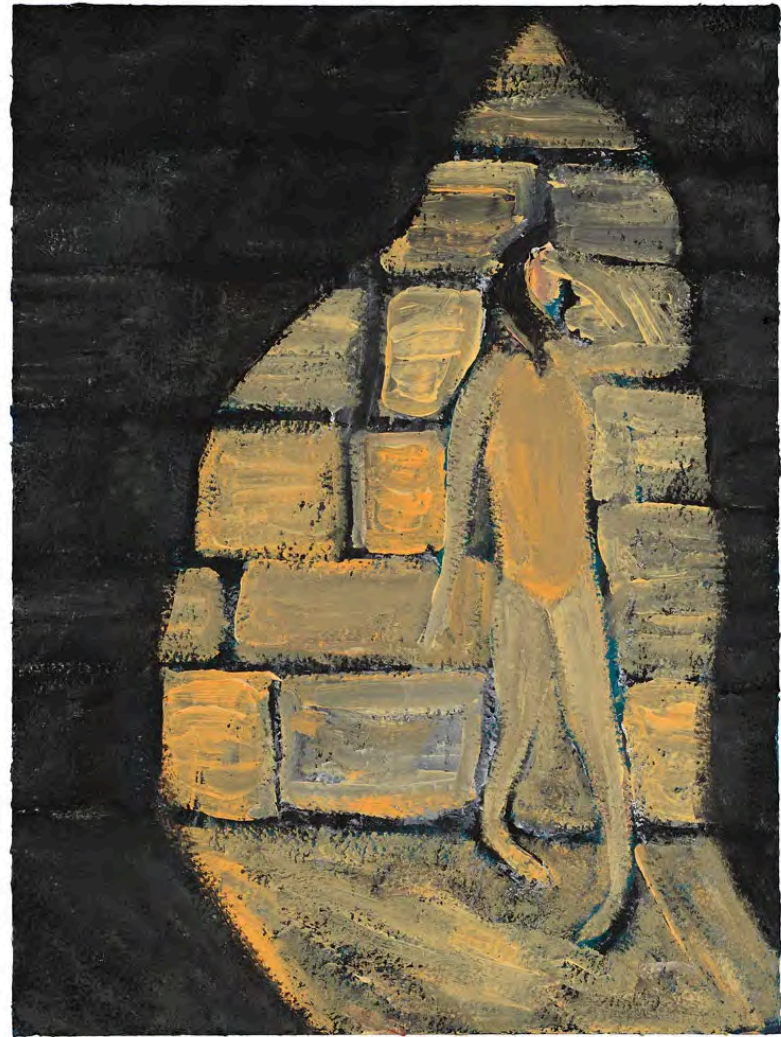
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Matthew Wong: The New World, Paintings From Los Angeles 2016 at Cheim & Read allows the viewer space to tune out from the mythological Wong and instead focus on the material Wong. Nearly sixty pieces hang in the show, all made in 2016 when Wong spent three months living and working in Los Angeles, one of the cities that the Canadian artist called temporary home during a prolonged, multi-stopped trip across the United States that year. A single gallery of acrylics on canvas opens the exhibition, but the majority of

the show is given over to small paintings made on rice paper, and nearly all uniform in size, measuring approximately 9 by 12 inches.

Wong's experimentation and fearlessness with paint is on full display in these works on paper, and show an artist combing his new locality, plumbing it for inspiration. His figurative paintings often highlight both the urban qualities of Los Angeles as well as its striking, natural backdrops. *After Hours* combines elements of both. Wong depicts the inside of a darkened movie theater, with the scattered heads of the cinema's audience attentively facing the big screen. Onscreen a lush, green landscape is bisected by a gushing cataract, a reference to both the city's famed



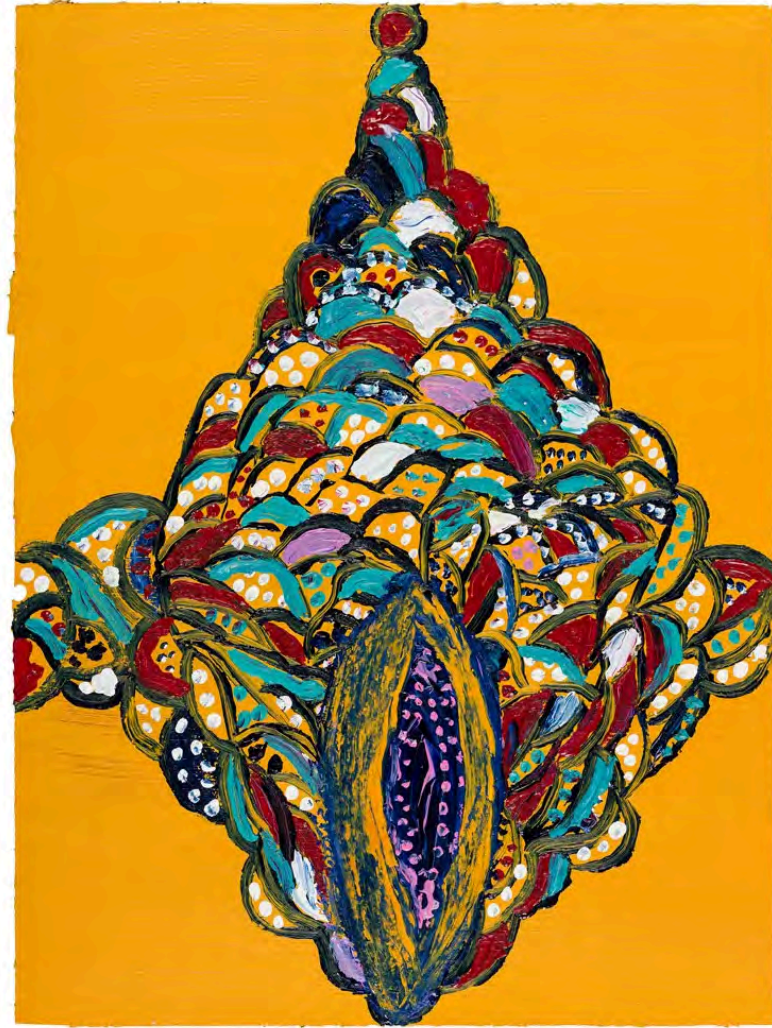
Matthew Wong, *THE WALL*, 2016. Acrylic on paper, 12 1/4 x 9 1/8 inches. Courtesy Cheim & Read.

movie industry and also its dramatic landscapes. There's a cinematic facet to a number of works. In one untitled painting, a lone figure hovers at the threshold of a darkened room, standing tentatively on heels considering the passageway and an area of light beyond a door. The light casts a long shadow behind the form, evoking a film noir movie poster. In *The Wall*, another single figure stands in spotlight against an otherwise murky stone wall. Her hand shades her eyes, as if she were trapped and blinded by the incandescence.

Not all of these works tend towards the dark and in fact, Wong's deft use of color is clear. He captures the verdancy and saturation of Los Angeles, to which generations of artists have flocked to experience that famous Californian light. Wong renders beaches and gardens, forests and rock ledges—nature was unquestionably an influence. Painting it also afforded him an opportunity to experiment, melding color in surprising ways. In *Night Garden*, Wong filled the page to its edges with alluring, taffy-colored flowers laced through with virescent foliage. *Bright Moment*, another densely-filled painting, an explosion of flora is composed from a banquet of harmonized color. Marigold orange is layered upon lavender, which in turn bleeds into a tangy vermillion. The work straddles a line between the representational and the abstract; it's more that one intuits a field of

wildflowers than actually distinguishes any individual flowers themselves within the painting.

Wong seems to have had little compunction about moving back and forth between more straightforward representation and abstraction, a hesitation that sometimes stymies painters more formally schooled. Instead, Wong was an autodidact. Once he became interested in making art, he studied it on his own as fervently as he made work, and art historical references are threaded throughout these works on paper. *The Thinker* seems to recall Rodin's sculpture by the same name. Despite it being purely abstract, a large amorphous shape that resembles



Matthew Wong, *DIVINE ORDER*, 2016. Acrylic on paper, 12 x 9 inches. Courtesy Cheim & Read.

the form of that sculpture commands the center of the painting, and is though shot through by fiery red and orange swaths of color. Surrounding it are Wong's brushy marks of golden and green hues that seem once again to suggest a flowerbed, and beyond that, an asphalt swoop draws the eye sensually around the form. A grayish-blue surge of the brush then conjures up a roiling ocean while a small patch of red in the upper left corner, anchored by a small yellow dot, might be an a-perspectival horizon line. Despite no clear demarcations, one feels grounded in Wong's sensation of Los Angeles—the abundant flowers, the flowing traffic, the beaches—as much as they do in his sense of being as an artist. As we mourn what was yet to come, we give thanks for what was left to us.

Jessica Holmes is a New York-based writer and critic. She is an Art Editor and ArTonic Editor for the *Brooklyn Rail*.