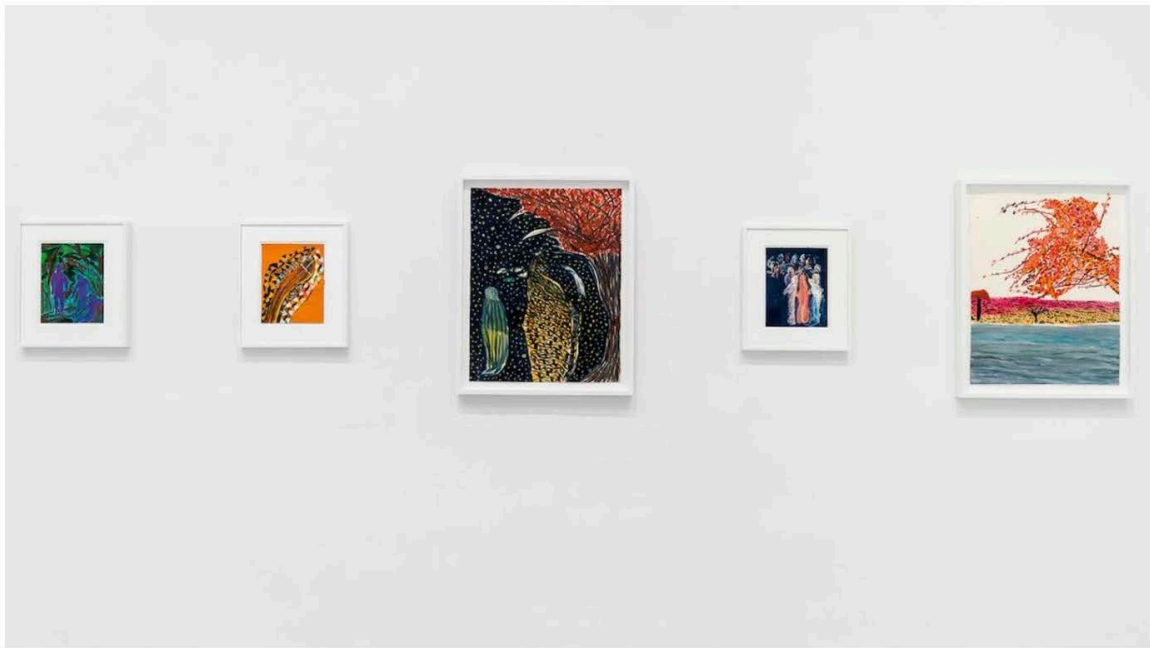


Ocula Magazine



Matthew Wong's Solitude and Longing in New York

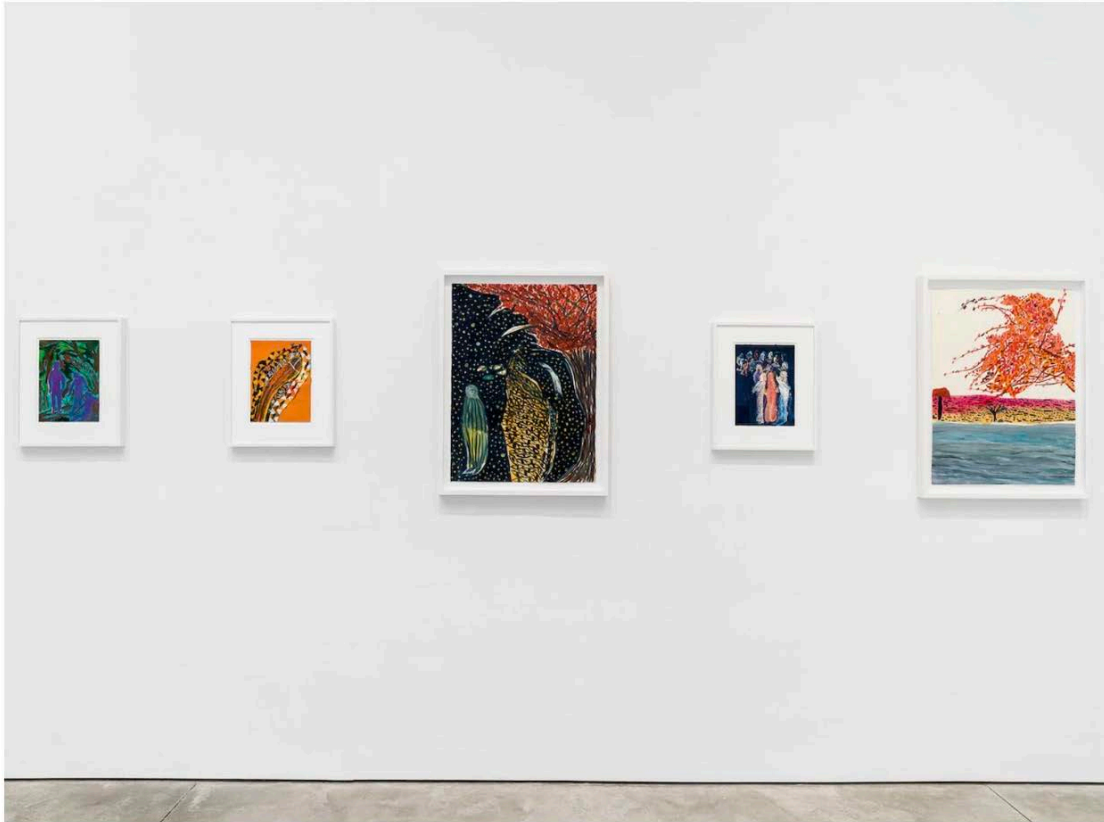
LATEST INSIGHT

New York
22 June 2022

Matthew Wong described his paintings as portrayals of personal and universal nostalgia.



The painter Matthew Wong garnered critical acclaim in a few short years, from his first solo exhibition at the Hong Kong Visual Arts Centre in 2015 (*Pulse of the Land*), to his untimely death by suicide in 2019.



Exhibition view: Matthew Wong, *The New World, Paintings from Los Angeles 2016*, Cheim & Read, New York (4 May–10 September 2022). Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York. Photo: Alex Yudzon.

Though he received no formal training in painting and drawing, the Toronto-born artist demonstrated a mastery of colour and technicality in poetic depictions of landscapes and interior spaces, each deeply saturated in emotive meaning.

At Cheim & Read in New York, a suite of acrylic paintings line the gallery's perimeter for *The New World, Paintings from Los Angeles 2016* (4 May–10 September 2022), an exhibition featuring a body of works Wong produced over a three-month stay in Los Angeles.



Matthew Wong, *Divine Order* (2016). Acrylic on paper. 30.5 x 22.9 cm. © 2022 Matthew Wong Foundation. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York. Photo: Alex Yudzon.

Ambiguous, faceless figures also reside in dark interior spaces, looking and reaching outwards. Wong's influences have been known to range from David Hockney to Vincent van Gogh, to whom he is frequently likened, both stylistically and biographically. These scenes are particularly evocative of Edward Hopper's famous depictions of lone figures seated beside windows.

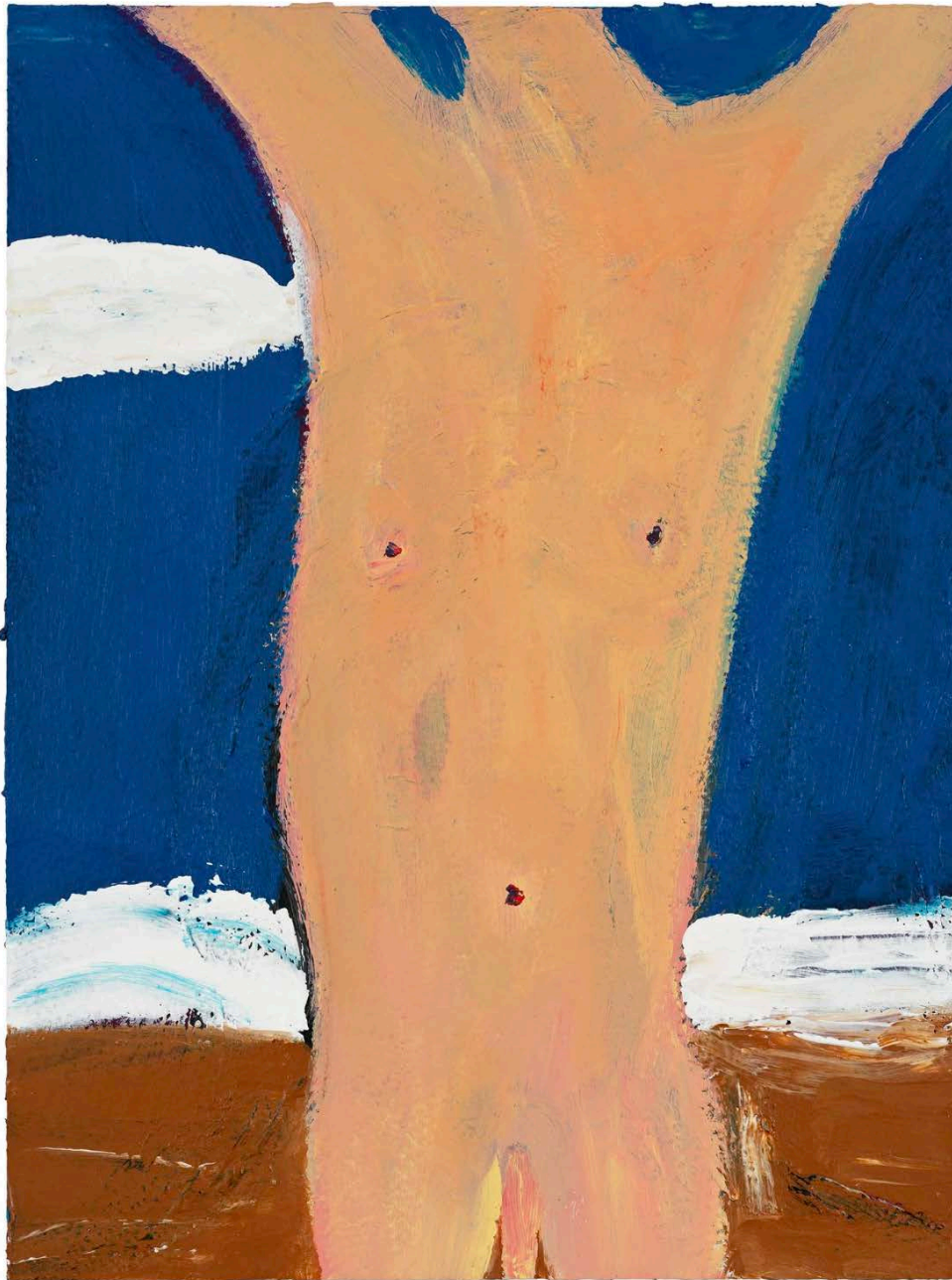
However, Wong reverses the 20th-century realist's vantage point, positioning viewers from the perspective of the portrayed as opposed to that of the observer. Though it is unknown whether the enigmatic figures are intended to be the artist himself, it is possible to infer as much.



Matthew Wong, *Virgin Light* (2016). Acrylic on paper. 30.5 x 22.9 cm. © 2022 Matthew Wong Foundation. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York. Photo: Alex Yudzon.

There is, furthermore, a sense of the prelapsarian in the way nude or scantily clad characters congregate in resplendent settings. These scenes are paired with several abstract compositions, such as *Virgin Light* and *Divine Order* (both 2016), wherein graphic forms take on vaginal and womb-like shapes.

Wong has described his artworks as portrayals of personal and universal nostalgia. It seems the artist was harkening back to an Eden-like time—that of birth, innocence, and unbridled freedom. This is reinforced by *Boyhood* (2016)—a close-up and cropped view of a child-like torso. Though his body protrudes beyond the compositional frame, the boy's arms stretch upwards towards the bright blue sky above as though to joyfully bask in an open, untampered world.



Matthew Wong, *Boyhood* (2016). Acrylic on paper. 31.1 x 23.2 cm. © 2022 Matthew Wong Foundation. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York. Photo: Alex Yudzon.

Disparate as these scenes may be, they are united by a complex sense of yearning that is so palpable as to be nearly heartbreaking. Particularly in the aftermath of his death, so much has been said about Wong's struggles with mental illness that such commentary feels reductive and perhaps even trite.

Though it is admittedly difficult to separate the artist's biography from any meaningful interpretations of his work, hopefully more exhibitions like *The New World*—and, certainly, the forthcoming retrospective opening later this fall at the Dallas Museum of Art (*The Realm of Appearances*, 16 October 2022–5 February 2023)—will contribute towards a more comprehensive understanding of a spectacular practice that ended abruptly. —[O]