



Art

# Matthew Wong's First Museum Retrospective Rejects the Myth of the Tortured Artist

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In 2018, artist Matthew Wong made headlines for his critically acclaimed New York solo debut at Karma; in 2019, for his death by suicide at age 35; and from 2020 onwards, for the prices his paintings have fetched at auction. Interpretations of Wong's work have since often been colored by the sensationalizing lore of the tortured artist. It seems the story of his career will always focus on its ending, forever entangling biography with artistic practice.

Wong's first museum retrospective, on view through February 19, 2023, shifts Wong's singular talent to the forefront, where it rightfully belongs. An unexpected homecoming for the artist, "The Realm of Appearances" is organized and presented by the only institution to acquire his work during his lifetime — the Dallas Museum of Art (DMA). Curated by Dr. Vivian Li, the DMA's Lupe Murchison Curator of Contemporary Art, the illuminating exhibition opened on October 16th, just over three years after Wong's death on October 2, 2019. Organized thematically and roughly chronologically, the retrospective conveys the experimental evolution of a prolific artist who only worked in earnest for about seven years and exhibited for three.



Born in Toronto, Wong received a BA in cultural anthropology from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. In 2013, he received an MA in photography from the City University of Hong Kong's School of Creative Media. That same year, Wong began pursuing painting more seriously, manipulating black ink to create nonrepresentational forms. Though "The Realm of Appearances" does not include Wong's photographs, it features these early works on paper.

As the spatial elements in Wong's work became more suggestive of landscapes, works like *Heaven and Earth* (2015) and *Landscape of*

endeavors into oil and acrylic painting have brought comparisons to Yayoi Kusama's obsessive markmaking; Henri Matisse's dreamy color palettes; Pablo Picasso's somber Blue Period; Max Ernst's inventive *grattage*, or scraping technique; and Shara Hughes's imaginatively colorful landscapes.





Through connecting art historical references with Wong's textural handling of paint, the exhibition makes a convincing argument that art is best experienced in person. Digital representations of Wong's oil and acrylic paintings only express half of the work's essence. It's easy to glean from images a melancholic undertone, as many have, though they fail to capture Wong's energetic markmaking. In person, subsumed by the glossy and impasto surfaces of his large canvases, it's difficult to reduce Wong's work to a reflection of his mental health.

Viewers can easily become lost following Wong's brushstrokes as they turn from blue to white. Even with a nocturnal palette, his paintings glow with an inner light achieved through the artist's masterful use of color and handling of paint. Wong's blue period, and the DMA gallery dedicated to that body of work, appears less like an exercise in anguish and more a technical exploration of the shade's ability to contain life.





In one of Wong's last interviews before his death, writer Maria Vogel characterized his work as melancholic for including lone figures. In response, Wong expressed that he wanted viewers to relate to his paintings; he acknowledged melancholy and loneliness as potential entry points, but in the same breath, said there's more to it than that. Yet this part of the interview is often reproduced out of context, thus perpetuating, in my opinion, misreadings of Wong's paintings that overemphasize sorrowful alienation. Wong himself plainly described his life as "reclusive" and "solitary" without self-pity or a desire to live any other way.

"The Realm of Appearances" acts as a corrective measure, positioning Chinese landscape painting as an early influence in Wong's artistic career. Li's curation situates Wong's work not in emotion-based projections, but in an art historical tradition in which lone and diminutive figures in vast landscapes are a common motif.



Regarding Wong's "matters of the mind," the exhibition probes the artist's philosophical and existential inquiries. Connecting the entirety of the retrospective, from the first gallery to the last, are works that feature a gaping chasm, such as ink paintings *Where Did the Time Go?* (2016) and *Odyssey* (2017), watercolor painting *Origin* (2017), and oil painting *Path to the Sea* (2019). While *Where Did the Time Go?* has a more abstract style characteristic of Wong's early experimentation with ink, a tunnel opens into a forest in *Odyssey*, and the trail in *Path to the Sea* leads to a clearing in the trees.

*Origin* has a more surreal approach. Emerging from the center of darkness is an opening to a beach where the sky glows with bright bands of colors. A small silhouetted figure stands facing the waves, but a closer look reveals—from the arch of his nose, the dot of an eye, and even the shadow of a close-cropped hairline—that he looks off to the side, facing neither the sea nor the dark cave. *Origin* is one of only three works displayed in the final room of the exhibition; the other two paintings were made in the last year of Wong's life.

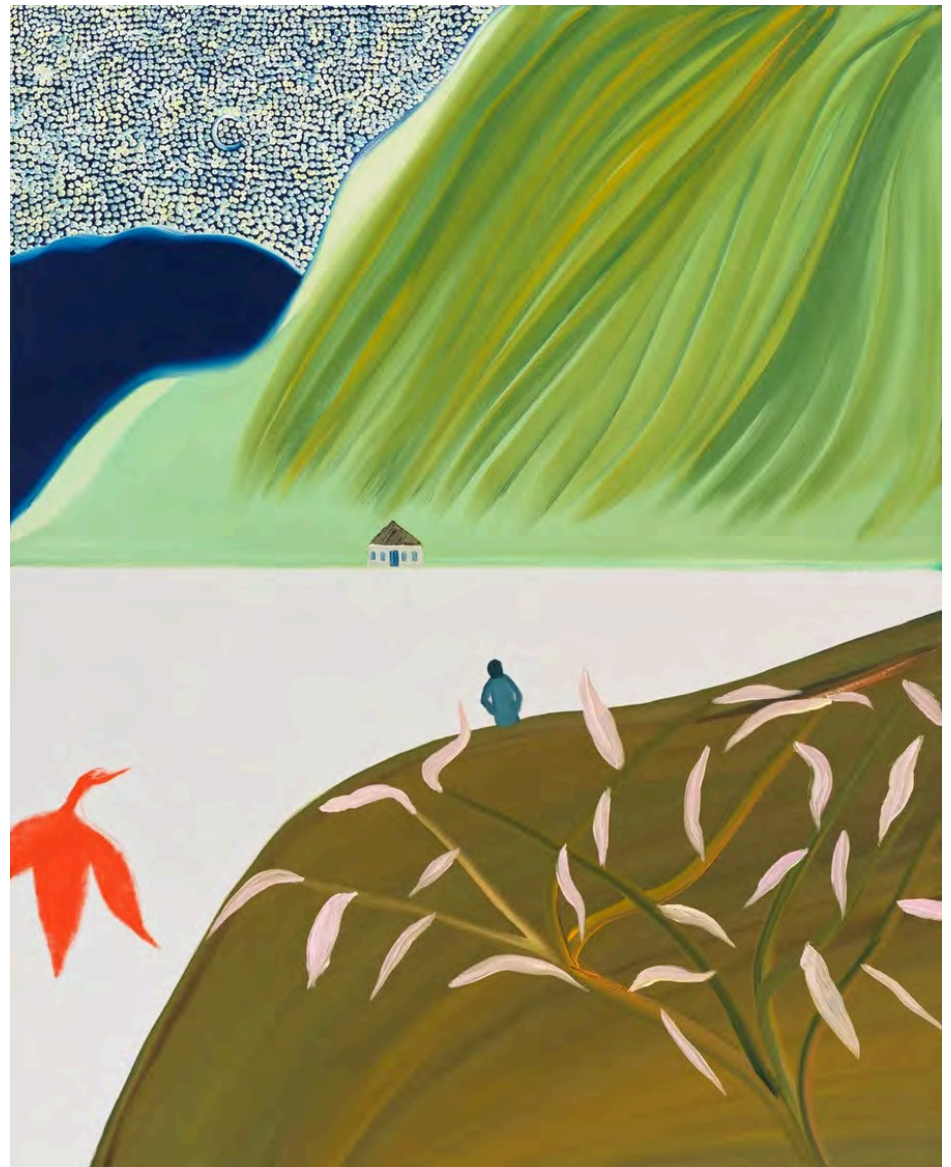
Hung adjacent to *Origin* is *See You On the Other Side* (2019), in which a single figure looks out into a wide expanse of unpainted



but the downpour endured by the small cabin in *Blue Rain* (2018) from the previous gallery does not extend to here. Instead, gentle strokes of green overhead suggest rolling pastures or even aurora borealis. On the other side, the air is tranquil yet filled with wonder.



Matthew Wong, *Blue Rain*, 2018. Collection of KAWS, Promised Gift of KAWS inspired by Julia Chiang to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. © 2022 Matthew Wong Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of the



Matthew Wong, *See You On the Other Side*, 2019. © 2022 Matthew Wong Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of the Matthew Wong Foundation; Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; and the Dallas Museum of Art (DMA).

On the wall opposite this pairing is the third and final work in the section, *Landscape for Ella (For John Cheim)* (2019), which is based on an iPhone photo Wong received from his friend, the gallerist John Cheim of New York's Cheim & Read. The gouache painting was gifted to Cheim by co-founder of the Matthew Wong Foundation and Wong's mother, Monita, after the artist's death.

The retrospective concludes not with Wong's blue period—which has often been cited to mythologize the artist's career as one of tragedy—but with a focus on the intellectual side of his mind that wonders what, if anything, exists beyond this life. Witness to Wong's philosophical endeavors were his supporters, from his parents and Cheim to artist Scott Kahn and Matthew Higgs, director and chief curator of White Columns. It's both difficult and disingenuous to paint Wong as an asocial, troubled artist—he certainly didn't. ■