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More Than a Feeling

THROUGH HIS LANDSCAPE PAINTINGS, MATTHEW WONG COULD COMMUNICATE A STATE OF MIND WITH THE VIEWERS. BY D. DOMINICK LOMBARDI

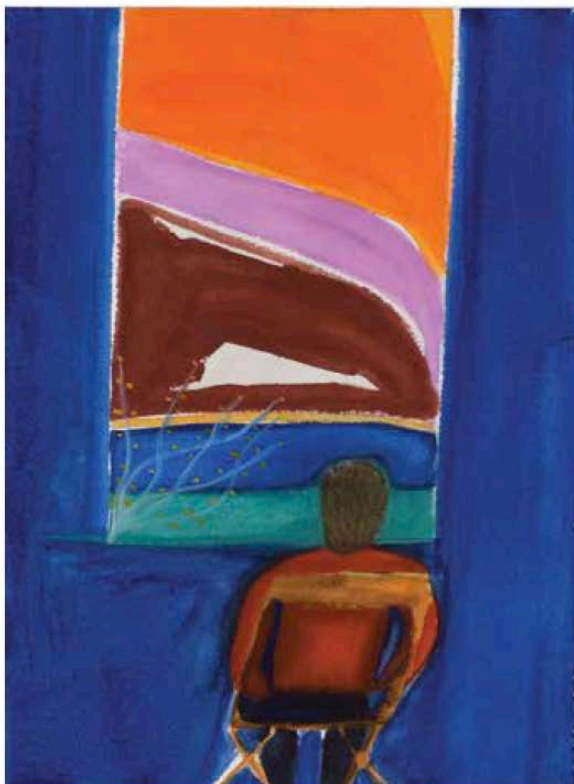


New Moon (After John Beerman),
2019. Gouache on paper.

WHEN THINKING about the art and life of Matthew Wong, it is difficult not to compare him to Vincent van Gogh. Van Gogh struggled with depression most of his life, and Wong had major depressive disorder. Both were incredibly prolific, solely dedicated to their craft in the final phase of their short lives. They experimented with various approaches to art making in search of their own unique voice, often painting over old paintings creating new work in a single day. Each left us with vaunted legacies, and both committed suicide in their mid-30s.

The difference, of course, is the time they lived in, and the fact that Wong's life

and education was spread between Eastern and Western culture, while Van Gogh solely lived in Europe, although he would eventually be inspired by Japanese wood-cut prints. The biggest difference between the two was the fact that Wong was on the cusp of a meteoric rise in status when he died, and Van Gogh had only a modicum of recognition before his death from the fringes of the avant-garde. In addition, Van Gogh died in 1890 when the then contemporary art world was much smaller and a far less commodified practice. Conversely, Wong utilized social media, had developed many productive relationships with other

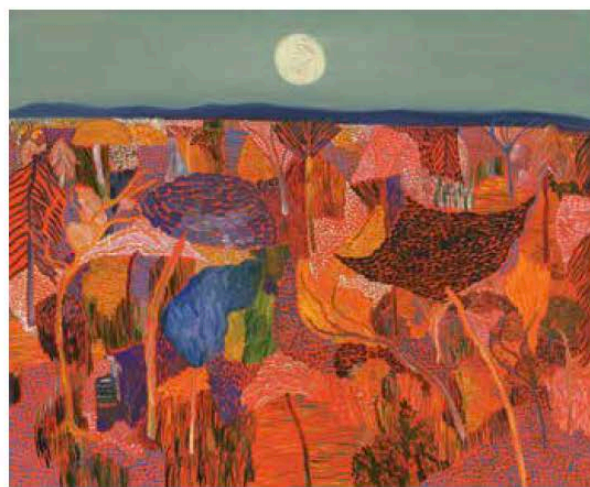


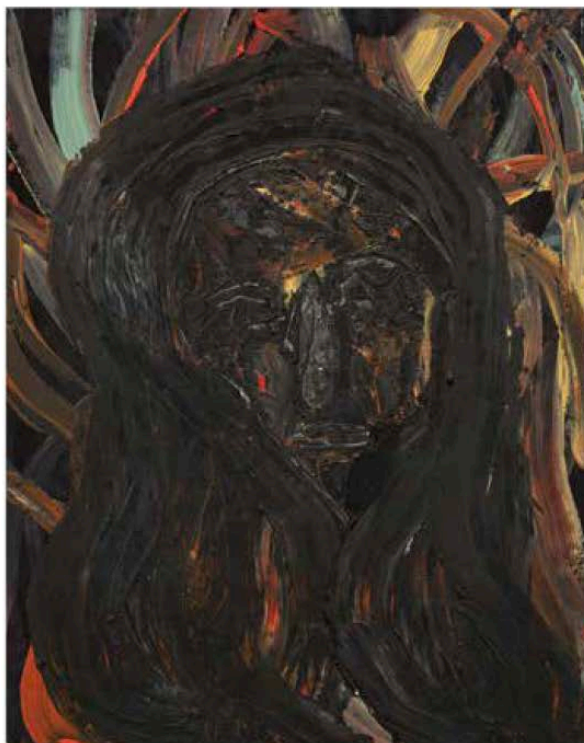
artists, mostly virtual, and had access to just about anything art related online or in print. What is most important here, though, is Wong's ability to achieve the same intensity of spirit, expression, color and symbolism as the great depth of Van Gogh's oeuvre in a shorter period of time, from 2013-19. "Matthew Wong: The Realm of Appearances", a most significant, must-see exhibition that includes approximately 50 paintings, will be held at the Dallas Museum of Art through February 19.

Born in Toronto in 1984, Wong's family moved to Hong Kong when he was 7, moving back to Toronto eight years later for improved medical care. He returned to Asia in 2010, obtaining a master's degree in photography from the City University of Hong Kong in 2012. That same year, Wong started drawing when photography was not fulfilling his creative vision. Eventually, through social media outlets such

as Facebook and Instagram, Wong built a community where he would garner feedback and ideas, see diverse techniques and a variety of media, and more substantially self-educate. One need only look at the work of Peter Doig's *Milky Way* (1990) and Wong's *River at Night* (2018) to see the crossover in approach to painting a night scene from an artist Wong greatly admired. Looking at both artists' works, you can experience their understanding of light, color and spatial relations that slowly emerges as their eyes adjust to the

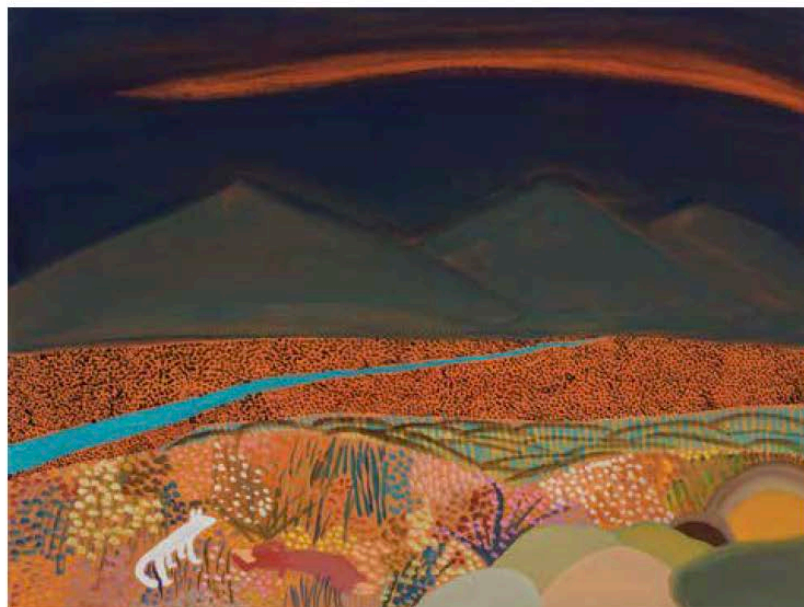
Clockwise from top left: *Blue Room*, 2018. Gouache on paper.; *See You On the Other Side*, 2019. Oil on canvas.; *The Realm of Appearances*, 2018. Oil on canvas.





Top: *Banishment from the Garden* (diptych), 2015. Oil on canvas (left panel), oil on panel (right panel).

Bottom: *Once Upon a Time in the West*, 2018. Gouache on paper.



low light, eventually revealing powerful lines and texture. The difference between the two paintings is the weighty presence of some of Wong's looming forms, the slight references to cubism or collage in a few of the areas, and how his composition seems to be simultaneously expanding and contracting.

Wong also found inspiration, ideas and kinship with artists from the past with works like *Once Upon a Time in the West*, (2018), which gets its title from Sergio Leone's 1968 film. Here, we see subtle nods to the work of Paul Klee and Milton Avery, especially in the distilled representation of the landscape and the playfulness of the techniques and forms. Intensity breaks through in the heavy dark sky that bears a slash of an orange cloud, while the bright and curiously hypnotic blue stream in the middle ground ups the magnitude of the menacing mood. Then there is the fallen



The Performance, 2017. Ink on rice paper.

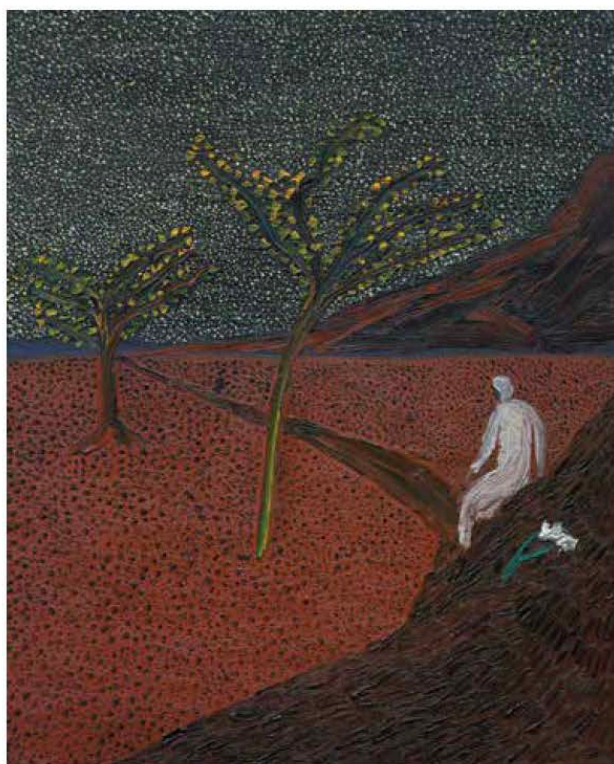


River at Night, 2018. Oil on canvas.

female that has a friend or a foe standing by, as the narrative quickly becomes angst ridden and foreboding.


With all this stated about Wong's prowess regarding color and technique, it is his unique understanding of the power of composition that is most striking. Perhaps this relates to his time spent in two vastly different cultures in his formative years, that he is able to balance contrary styles and

elements so oddly and perfectly. Take *See You on the Other Side* (2019), for instance. Aside from its dark title being coined so close to his demise, Wong manages to make a usually difficult 50/50 split of a composition seem like a stroke of genius. He accomplishes this by placing a white void just below the center, turning it into a two-part, ascending narrative. In so doing, Wong amplifies the visual rhythm



of the imposing hills or mountains making them seem sequential. The upper portion of the composition is quietly breached by a somewhat suspicious structure, perhaps representing a peaceful place of rest. Atop the lower hillside sits a lone figure leaning toward the distant building, while an orange red bird awaits nearby to assist this figure on his impending journey. Then there are the disturbing and irregular angles of the leaves on the tree in the foreground that look like they are dry and dying. This, plus the intertwining brushstrokes, the hypnotic dots in the sky and the disproportionately dark distant hill all suggest a very strained moment. You see that same tension in *Blue Room* (2018), where the subject gazes out a window, sitting on a folding chair that appears to twist and ache under the weight of the subject's emanating anxiety.

Like the predictive elements in one of Van Gogh's last paintings *Wheatfield with Crows* (1890), Wong's *See You on the Other*

Side turns a troubled state of mind into a cry for help. It is hard to imagine the struggles that Wong endured to create such incredible time-defining and timeless work. His legacy is one for the ages, as he turns the individual elements he depicts into anything from soul searching passion to enlightened realizations of the purpose of our very existence. Of course, both Wong and Van Gogh's fame is in part due to their back stories. That goes without saying. But Wong, like Van Gogh, has something very important to share with the world. He was able to clearly articulate in his art, a complex and at times overwhelming state of mind that we all can feel. He moves us with a powerful range of brushstrokes, the pushing and removing of paint and continual experimentation that forms a clear and unmistakable communication of emotional and contemplative expressions. His art bridges the gap between "normal" thought and brilliant vision, taking us to a place where passion and pain inevitably coalesce. 

From left: *The West*, 2017. Oil on canvas.;
Blue Rain, 2018. Oil on canvas.