

# HYPERALLERGIC

Art

## Matthew Wong's Tenacious Vision

The Dallas Museum of Art's retrospective of the artist is an opportunity to reframe the conversation about Wong and his work.



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Matthew Wong, "The West" (2017), oil on canvas (Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas Art Fair Foundation Acquisition Fund, 2017.28) (all images © 2022 Matthew Wong Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; courtesy the Dallas Museum of Art)

DALLAS — Some might think it strange that Matthew Wong would have his first US museum exhibition and retrospective in Dallas. The brilliant painter with strong ties to New York City had lived in Canada, Hong Kong, Michigan, and China before his untimely death at age 35, but never in Texas. However, Wong did make a decisive journey there in 2017, and the story behind this trip reveals much about who he was as an artist.



Wong's painting "The West" was completed in early 2017, and his New York gallery Karma brought the piece to the Dallas Art Fair in April of that same year. The artist — eager to experience his first US art fair — traveled from his home in Edmonton, Canada to attend the event. Wong worked and evolved remarkably quickly, often creating several paintings per week, and when he saw the piece the day before the fair opened, he decided it needed to be retooled. So Wong set to work, filling in the painting's sparse sky with an infinity of stars as the gallery set up its booth. The Dallas Museum of Art (DMA) purchased the piece shortly afterward, becoming the only museum to collect Wong's work during his lifetime. When the painting entered the DMA's collection, it was still wet.

This anecdote highlights Wong's tenacious, clear-eyed vision for his work and for his career: He didn't let distance deter him from professional opportunity, and he didn't let up on his own creative rigor. Both of these traits come through in *Matthew Wong: The Realm of Appearances* at the DMA. Curated by Dr. Vivian Li, the exhibition features nearly 50 of Wong's oil, watercolor, ink, and gouache paintings from across his short but spectacular, often misunderstood six-year career. "From the very beginning, he was confident in his art," Li said. "It was about the outside world catching up with him, because he was moving very fast."

For Li, who joined the museum shortly after Wong's death in October 2019, the exhibition is an opportunity to reframe and expand the conversation around the artist and his work. Wong has been portrayed as a solitary, van Gogh-esque figure, and his work now fetches millions of dollars at auction. "Many narratives have grown around him related to his biography, his mental health, his early, tragic death, and also his market rise," Li told Hyperallergic on a recent tour. "The point of this exhibition is to center [the focus] back on his art, for people to see his paintings, and to experience the wide range and diversity of works that he was creating."





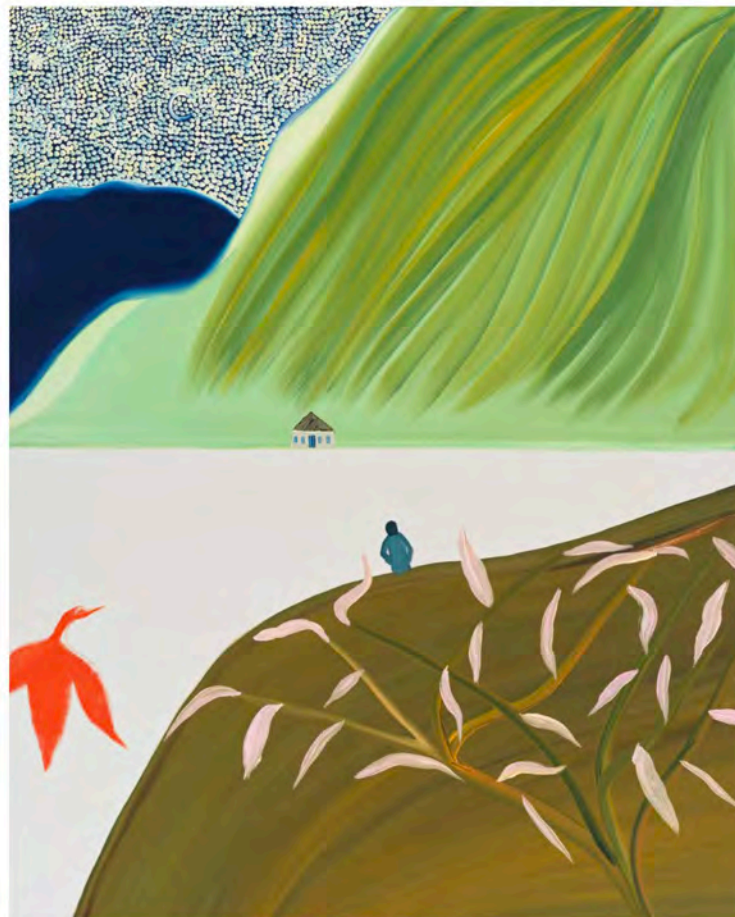
Matthew Wong, "The Performance" (2017), ink on rice paper

The show opens with the artist's first exploratory ink paintings on rice paper. After studying photography, Wong took up ink as an entry point to drawing and painting. These works' thick black lines and scattered stains show an artist plainly testing the possibilities of the material and his own hand. A catalog essay by Lesley Ma — and a previous review for *Hyperallergic* by John Yau — compellingly argue that Wong's ink work represents a connection to the artist's Chinese and Hong Kong roots, and links him to the artistic heritage of the East more generally. It's been said that Wong made an ink drawing each morning before breakfast, and works like "The Performance" (2017) seem to carry the potent residue of dreams.



The graphic flatness of Wong's ink paintings contrasts sharply with his thickly-layered surfaces in oil. A conversation study conducted especially for this exhibition revealed that the artist frequently painted over his earlier works two or sometimes three times. "He doesn't do sketches, and he doesn't have a preconceived idea of how the image will look," Li noted. Wong painted intuitively, often working wet on wet and finishing even larger works in one sitting. His creations are, in Li's view, a sort of "artifact of the moment" that condense not only the artist's influences and mood at the time, but also his vivid encounters with paint.

Perhaps because of his posthumous exhibition *Blue*, Wong is often considered an artist of thoughtful melancholy. But the breadth of work in the DMA exhibition reminds us of his unmistakably vibrant and lively side, too. The artist's wall-sized works, painted in tangy colors and busy brush strokes, are especially potent. Stretching nearly five by six and a half feet, "The Realm of Appearances" (2018) immerses the viewer in a field of pulsing green and purple marks against a glowing orange ground. The piece's disconcerting sense of space and pattern is entrancing; it practically vibrates with a sense of elation and exhilaration.



Matthew Wong, "See You On the Other Side" (2019), oil on canvas

Paintings like this one prove that Wong was a gifted colorist, but in one of his last works, color disappears. The white area between the lone figure and a distant house in “See You On the Other Side” (2019) is actually unpainted blank canvas. After seeing Wong’s other late paintings, like the stunning but somber “Blue Rain” (2018), where we gaze at the image of a far-away home through a downpour, the omission of paint seems especially purposeful. Here, the far-off symbol of refuge, along with the piece’s poignant title, have an especially heartbreaking effect.

Little-known but important aspects of Wong’s creative life, like his poetry and his love of film, also come into focus in the show. Most of all, Li emphasized Wong’s dedication to his international network of mentors, friends, and peers. Wong met Jerry Salz, Jonas Wood, and other big name artists, critics, and gallerists through his prolific online presence. Thanks to Facebook, Instagram, text, and email, Wong seemed to bypass many of the usual hesitations and obstacles that artists face when trying to approach and navigate the art world. He wasn’t just a tireless talent driven by his own extraordinary artistic ambition and integrity; he was hungry to be a part of something bigger.

“He recognized the need for building a context and a community around his work,” Li explained. “One thing that was very surprising when I started researching and working on this project is how decisive he was, and how self-directed he was in his career. He wasn’t just painting out in isolation and just waiting to be discovered. He was working hard to have people see his works.” His exhibition in Dallas gives even more of us the chance to see Wong’s work in person.





Matthew Wong, "Once Upon a Time in the West" (2018), gouache on paper



Matthew Wong, "Blue Rain" (2018), oil on canvas



Matthew Wong, "The Realm of Appearances" (2018), oil on canvas



Matthew Wong, "A Walk by the Sea" (2019), gouache on paper





Matthew Wong, "Banishment from the Garden" (2015), oil on canvas

Matthew Wong: The Realm of Appearances continues at the Dallas Museum of Art (1717 North Harwood Street, Dallas, Texas) through February 19. The exhibition was curated by Dr. Vivian Li.