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# Promise cut short: Dallas show examines the late artist Matthew Wong's growing prowess

DMA's 'The Realm of Appearances' tracks his evolving influences and ascent before his early death.

By **Matthew Bourbon**

Special Contributor

Matthew Wong was an artist who kept his influences close to his heart.

These allegiances are on display in “The Realm of Appearances,” a comprehensive retrospective exhibition now on view at the Dallas Museum of Art.

At his best, Wong’s artistic kinships play a supporting whisper in his paintings. It’s also fair to say that in some instances, he is too burdened by his influences. Wong, who came to painting late after writing poetry and pursuing photography, took to painting with a voracious appetite. Once committed to painting, he began to experiment.

The exhibition highlights these trials and errors as his work enters a genre territory, explodes, dissipates and then changes. In a new monograph about his art, curator Vivian Li opens her essay with a revealing 2013 quote from the artist:

*I’m still working to come into my own, so I cannot say with any assurance what the meaning or significance of my body of work is yet, but at the moment what sustains me is an enthusiasm and faith in the fact that even though I*

*never know where I’m going with a painting, I will eventually get there. The surprise of finding out is what keeps me going from painting to painting.*

While examining the breadth of Wong’s paintings, it’s easy to appreciate the insistent and thoughtful searching that’s inherent to his work as an artist. The exhibition effectively underlines the various moments when Wong was trying to find a method to match his intentions — to express what often feels like a pervasive melancholy or aloneness within the world.

Wong's biography is complicated and alters the lens from which we understand his artwork. As a child, his mother made her way from China to Hong Kong, avoiding the Cultural Revolution. The family eventually sent his mother to boarding school in Toronto, which, drawing a long story short, led to her return to Canada as an adult to give birth to Wong.

## **Mental health struggles**

Growing up, the artist was described as intelligent but with a strong feeling of social anxiety that led to him being bullied and teased in school. Diagnosed with Tourette syndrome, autism spectrum disorder and depression, Wong eventually found ways to navigate and cope with his isolation through art and sharing via social media. Wong ended his life in 2019 at age 35.

It's difficult not to let his mental health and unfortunate ending engulf the ways in which we interpret his art. Assuming all his work is a manifestation of his troubled internal life is probably too convenient and facile a narrative. Yet an undeniable energetic need is represented in the busy material surfaces of Wong's paintings. One can't deny the implied sensibility behind the repetitions of solitary figures caught within feverish and voluptuous landscapes.

In his early attempts as a visual artist, Wong discovered a way to paint with ink on rice paper that led to his most imaginative works. These images share a place in the long history of brush and ink paintings from China and beyond but also express Wong's contradictorily casual yet intense mark making.

For example, look at the segmented playfulness of patterns in *Snowfall* (2015), the metaphysical simplicity of *Where Did the Time Go?* (2016) or the tunnel narrowness of *Odyssey* (2017).

Wong's paintings become even more varied when he shifts to working on canvas. They are also less consistently convincing. He continues to depict solitary figures in larger landscapes, drawing a loose connection to the poet-scholar paintings of historical luminaries like Shen Zhou.

While the Chinese tradition of portraying a poet philosopher walking within an encompassing landscape is present in Wong's work, his figures seem less comfortable within their setting; there is often something unsettling when Wong depicts a figure dwarfed by the world.

In *Origin* (2017), the artist paints a lone figure standing in a golden-hued beach scene that's set in the center of an encircling black. There is something dramatic and slightly Edvard Munch-like about this small painting.

Unfortunately, several of the larger paintings feel too closely aligned with the familiar styles of famous artists. In one instance, we see Wong taking on a Fauve landscape constructed through dashed lines of yellow, red, green and blue. In other cases, such as *Kingdom* (2017), it's too obvious that the artist is combining the landscapes of Gustav Klimt with a nearly exact usage of colors and brushwork à la Vincent van Gogh. Despite the inclusion of a small king figure, the painting feels excessively reliant on these art-history superstars.

## Finding his way

Thankfully, soon thereafter Wong's work takes a turn for the better. Aside from the ink-and-paper works, this next period before his death proves to be his most substantial. During 2018 and 2019, the artist starts to envision paintings that build upon each other.

Prior to this moment, Wong's talent seems not always at his full disposal; he will make a confident painting and then another that feels amateurish to a fault. In these last years of his life, however, the consistency of his expression is considerable.

Look at the stunning and delicate beauty of *Blue Night* (2018) or the monochrome mystery that is *Day 4* (2018). Both show a newfound restraint in Wong's method that is compelling.

The painting for which the exhibition is named — *The Realm of Appearances* (2018) — has Wong digesting Per Kirkeby and David Hockney into something that feels like Wong's own vision. It's fascinatingly active and quiet.

In this case, the lone figure that Wong portrays is integrated into a symphony of accented markings that hover over an orange field. The painting does not suggest barren loneliness, but rather an oddly relaxed connectedness within the cacophony of colors and patterns.

Works like this presaged an exciting next phase in Wong's art that sadly will never come to pass.

## Details

“Matthew Wong: The Realm of Appearances” runs through Feb. 19 in the Hoffman Galleries at the Dallas Museum of Art, 1717 N. Harwood St. Open Tuesday through Thursday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Friday from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Free. For more information, call 214-922-1200 or visit [dma.org](http://dma.org).

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