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MATTHEW WONG TURNED LONELINESS INTO A LANDSCAPE

In “The Realm of Appearances,” the artist’s first museum retrospective, the distinction between inside and outside is slowly broken down.

By Jackson Arn

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In “The Kingdom,” and many works like it, Wong made nature look like the interior of some cramped, windowless room. Art work © 2023 Matthew Wong Foundation / ARS

“Matthew Wong: The Realm of Appearances,” at Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts, is the oddest of ducks, a superb exhibition in which half the paintings are clumsy. Even some of the superb ones are half clumsy. That’s Wong’s charm in a nutshell, though: he seems to have had little interest in producing tasteful, polished, well-made art, thank God. His limitations were obvious from the start; in the years leading up to his suicide, in 2019, at the age of thirty-five, he didn’t correct them so much as put them to work. Once he got going, his compositions stumbled their way into smart choreographies, and his colors could be so dog-whistle shrill as to land with an eerie hush. He was a terrifyingly fast learner, too—walking through this show is like watching one of those time-lapse videos of a plant exploding out of soil. In a fair world, there would be a forest by now.

Wong painted landscapes. Art history offers a few possible terms for his style: “naïve art,” “outsider art,” “art brut.” “Outsider art” seems to be the one that’s stuck (“Outside,” a 2016 group show in Amagansett, helped put him on the map), though the truth is grayer. He taught himself to paint, but only after he’d cooled on photography, the subject of his M.F.A. He spent little time in New York but years in Hong Kong, home to the third-biggest art market on the planet. Despite being tall, good-looking, and snappily dressed, he often felt uncomfortable around people, and struggled with depression and autism. He had powerful allies in the Manhattan gallery world, though most of them he met only near the end of his life.



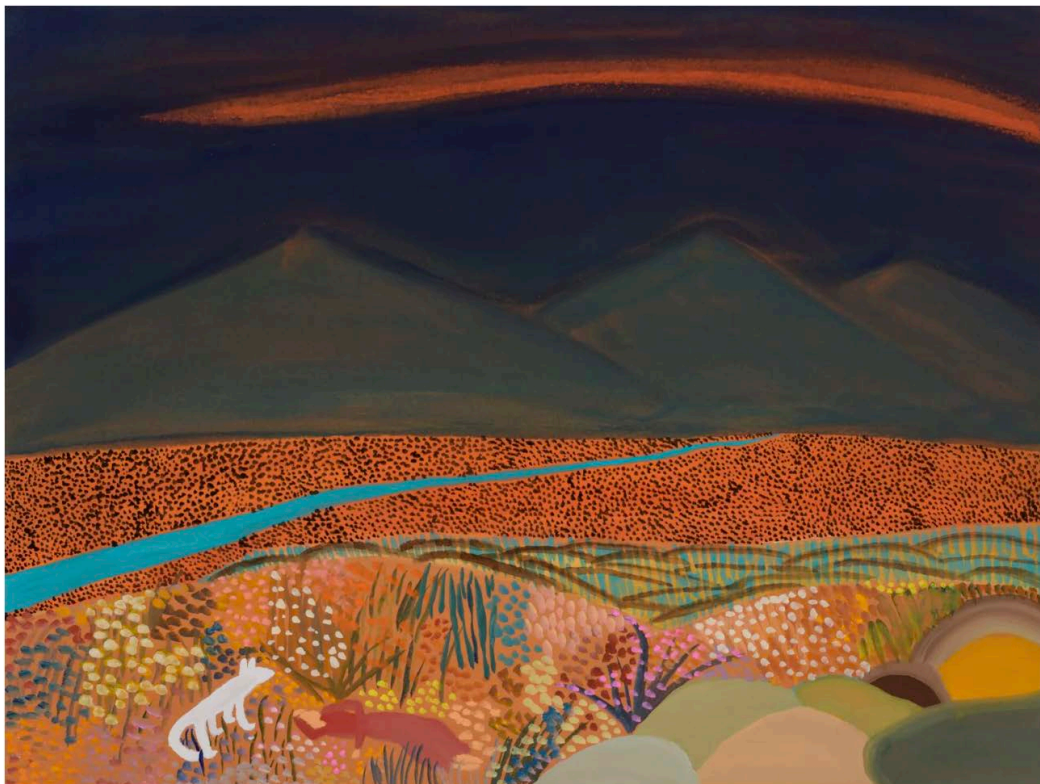
“Landscape of the Longing” (2016). Art Work © 2023 Matthew Wong Foundation / ARS

How much of an outsider was he, really? It’s a silly question, but it matters. A Wong painting is *about* inside versus outside, in every sense: social, psychological, spatial, formal. He knew his blue-chip artists, and the wall text identifies bits lifted from Wu Guanzhong, Gustav Klimt, Yayoi Kusama, and Edvard Munch. (The show, organized by the Dallas Museum of Art and curated by Vivian Li, does a smart job of exploring Wong’s influences without overexplaining.) On the other end of the seesaw, you find visual ideas so basic that you’ve known about them since you were four: the sun is a yellow disk with lines poking out of it; a body is a blob with four sticks and a circle attached; a tree is a vertical line with squiggles on top. The childish comes face to face with the canonical, but there’s no dialogue between them, unless collision counts. Wong never tries to lighten the mood, either. His paintings are humorless to the

bone, and their thick impasto surfaces, invisible in the Facebook photos that first got gallerists’ attention, add a bonus whiff of anxiety.

When images like these don't work, they are crude and nothing else. When they do, they are crude and *everything* else: vulnerable, cunning, ecstatic, menacing. "The Kingdom" (2017) is a painting of a forest that a terrified kid might dream about. You wouldn't be wrong to call it Wong's homage to Klimt's "Birch Forest" (1903), but it's more like a point-by-point rebuttal: instead of cozy emptiness, he gives you a suffocating place that wasn't meant for human beings; instead of Klimt's misty outdoor cathedral, he hits you with a phalanx of pale, blue-spotted trees, the pigments all but pricking your eyeballs. He has a way of making the outdoors look like the interior of some cramped, windowless room. There is a small, crowned figure—possibly a reference to the Chinese character for Wong's last name, which means "king"—but nobody else. What's the point of ruling a place where you can barely breathe?

Most of the art in this show has been divided between two galleries: one, in the horribly abbreviated terms that Wong's death imposes, for "early" work and the other for "late." I suggest you walk briskly through "late," take "early" at mid-tempo, and finish by giving "late" the second, longer look it deserves. There's a fine line between chaos and incoherence, and Wong needed a few years to get on the right side of it. "Heaven and Earth" (2015), one of the oldest works on display, is both a fair sample of the abstract ink-on-paper painting that he favored at first and a prime example of garden-variety confusion: there's no rhythm or momentum to the brush marks, which go from thin to thick to splattered with an abruptness that's almost surly. The early triumphs tend to be bits and pieces rather than entire paintings—the tall, gray mountain in "Landscape of the Longing" (2016), which bears a freaky resemblance to a sleeping vulture; or the furious sun in "Landscape with Mother and Child" (2017), which looks like the kind they used to sacrifice people to.



"Once Upon a Time in the West" (2018). Art Work © 2023 Matthew Wong Foundation / ARS

By 2018, Wong had learned three important tricks: sowing his landscapes with small figures to provide a sense of scale; using snaky diagonal forms (rivers, roads) to separate near from far; tempering layers of warm colors with cool ones. Marvel at how far the trio takes him in the mini-epic desert scene “Once Upon a Time in the West” (2018). The brushwork hasn’t changed too much, but now a magnetic current runs through everything: your gaze shoots from the dozing woman and the little beast in the foreground to the dark mountains in the distance, and when you get tired of the bright oranges and pinks in the lower half you can rest your eyes on the deep blues above. The painting’s title comes from Sergio Leone—Wong was a cinephile, too—but its light reminds me of a line from David Lynch’s “Mulholland Drive”: “It’s not day or night. It’s kinda half-night, you know?”

The paintings that Wong completed in 2018 and 2019, the last two years of his life, tend to have this half-night illumination, a glow that is also a burn. It was around this time that he discovered how much drama he could wring from the color blue. Mix one breakthrough with the other and you get “Tracks in the Blue Forest” (2018), something like the long, weary sigh to “The Kingdom”’s panic attack. When you study it closely, you begin to see how savvy Wong was at turning his formal weaknesses upside down: he was never great at conveying weight, but that’s half the reason the painting works. The lower edge is an almost indecipherable bluish white, and the trees don’t widen with roots as they approach the ground—they just stop, as though dangling from the sky. The more you stare, the less solid it all looks, until the only thing left holding you steady is the set of footprints running up the middle of the canvas, at once comforting and tormenting.



“Old Town” (2017). Art Work © 2023 Matthew Wong Foundation / ARS / Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston / Adam Green Art Advisory

“Tracks in the Blue Forest” is, unmistakably, a painting about loneliness, the curse of outsiders who want to come in. It was Wong’s great theme, and at his best he handled it with amazingly little mawkishness. That isn’t to say that “Tracks” is *un*-mawkish: like a number of the later, gentler paintings on display, it flatters loneliness with beauty, and seems to long for an old-fashioned, Munchian version of the feeling, all grand introspection and dazzling vistas. By contrast, there isn’t a single sentimental brushstroke in “Old Town” (2017), let alone a nostalgic one. More than any image I can think of, it looks the way twenty-first-century digital isolation feels: bright and draining, without the alibi of physical distance. It’s another claustrophobic landscape—even the sky is just one more gawky structure—but this time nothing is obviously wrong, which means that nothing can be repaired. Tiny figures seem too far away for conversation but not far enough to long for one another. Their pain is deafening. Normally it makes sense to praise a work of art by saying that you could look at it forever, but in the case of “Old Town,” one of the most haunting paintings of the past few years, I almost wish I could forget. ♦