

## A Must-See Matthew Wong Retrospective Reveals New Sides of an Artist Whose Story Is Still Emerging



BY ALEX GREENBERGER

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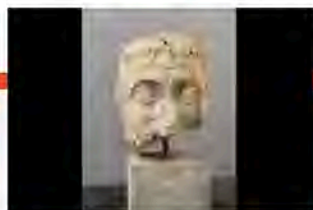
Matthew Wong, *The Realm of Appearances*, 2018.

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When they die unexpectedly, certain male painters get mythologized. Pronouncements about how they were at their best just as they passed follow, then musings on their tortured mental states, and finally awe as their markets explode. Think of what happened with Jackson Pollock or Jean-Michel Basquiat, and you'll be able to conjure many more recent examples.

**Matthew Wong** might be one of them. He received this same treatment following his death by suicide at age 35 in 2019, and I'll admit that as a result, I erected a mental wall against his lush landscapes, viewing them as part of an easy narrative rather than significant works in their own right. But Wong's current Museum of Fine Arts, Boston retrospective, which has traveled from the Dallas Museum of Art, proved to me that I hadn't judged him fairly.

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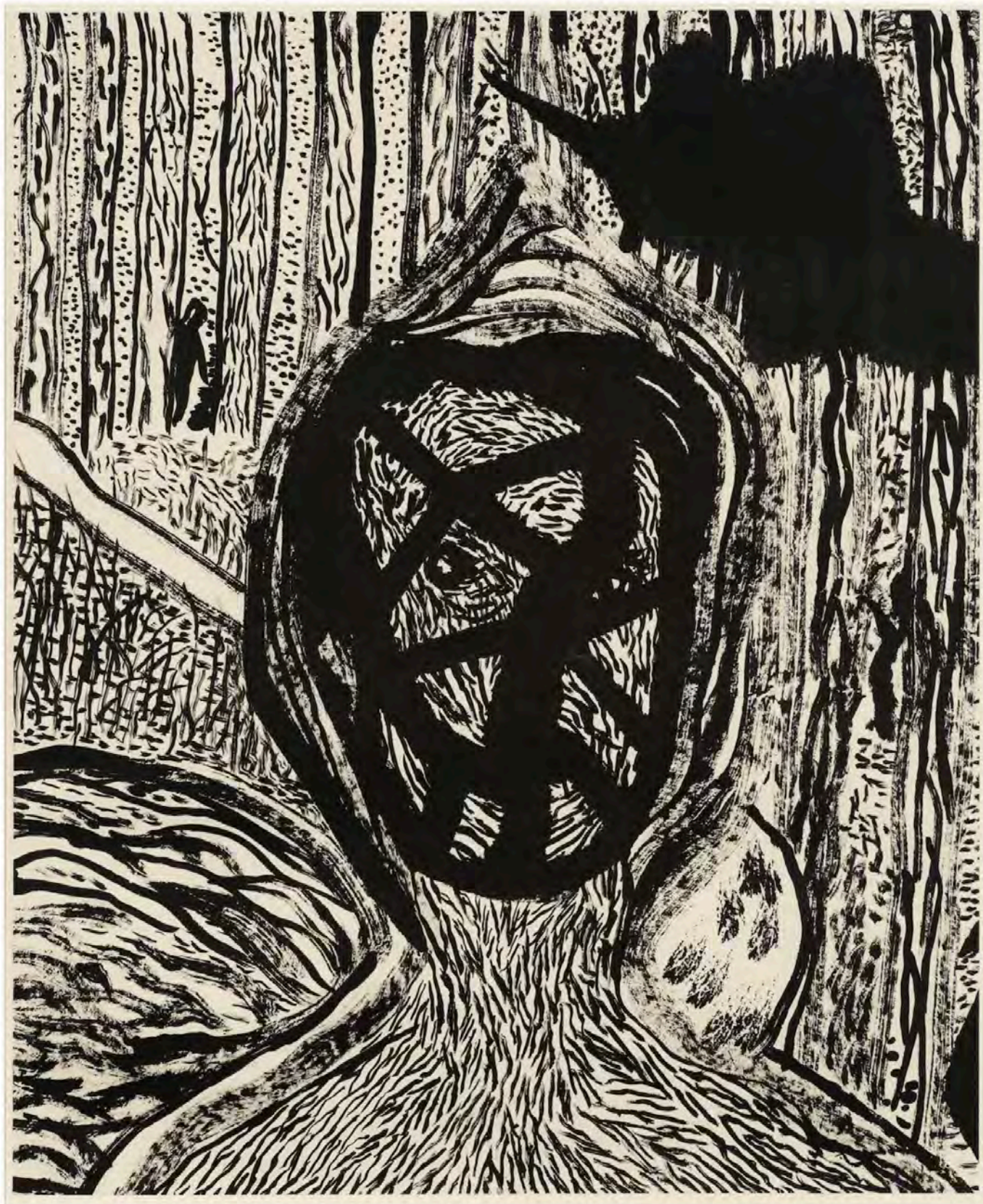
**Matthew Wong's Luminous Landscapes Will Have First U.S. Museum Retrospective in Dallas**

This show, tightly curated by the DMA's Vivian Li, does a smart job of cutting through the noise surrounding Wong's legacy. It presents him not as a prodigy but as a talented artist who had only just begun to find his footing and as a Canadian of the Asian diaspora who had started to discover his place within the world. With a checklist numbering 40 works, it is an understated sampler that makes much-needed edits to Wong's story, which has been told over and over in the past four years, often in ways too grandiose for work that's so humble.

Wong has been frequently labeled a self-taught painter, the suggestion being that he discovered his Fauvism-inflected palette of royal blues and hot reds virtually overnight, that he had almost no help in devising his curlicuing paths and speckled trees. The label is not quite true, as this exhibition deftly proves.

In fact, Wong had attended art school in Hong Kong and even received an MFA—not in painting but photography. He'd initially hit the streets of Hong Kong, shooting on-the-fly pictures of unaware passersby in the tradition of Daido Moriyama. These

aren't included in the exhibition itself, but they're printed in the catalogue. "Photography's distanced relationship with its subject left [Wong] dissatisfied," Li writes. He found his solution in ink on paper, a medium with a long history in Hong Kong.

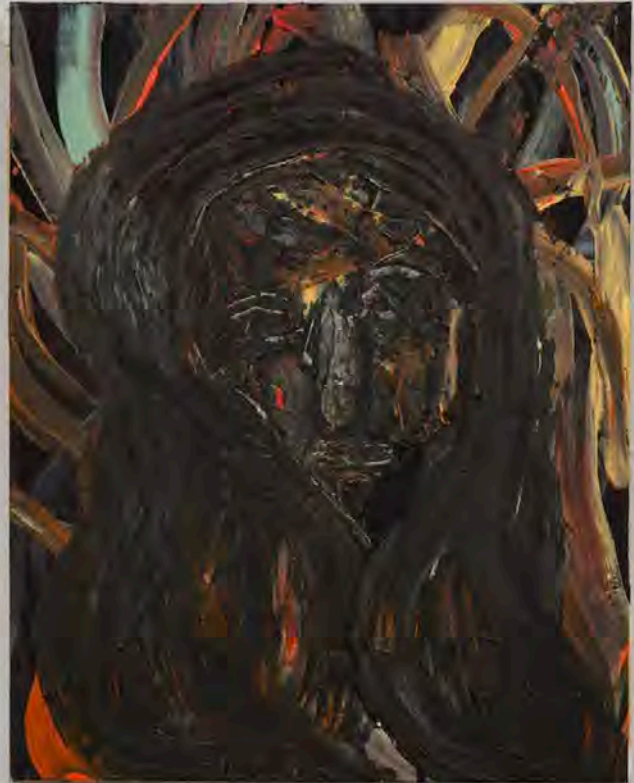


Matthew Wong, *Untitled*, 2015.

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These ink works are mixed in quality. *Heaven and Earth* (2015), a Pollock-like mess of black gashes, offers a visual feast, but an untitled 2014 work formed of a blotchy grid feels safe. They're the work of an artist still too shy to jump into the void.

Even once he did make the leap to oil on canvas around the same time, dragging around thick smears of burnt umber and beige to evoke twines of trees, he couldn't quite get it right. The results feel too familiar, like twice translated riffs on German Expressionism.



Matthew Wong, *Banishment from the Garden*, 2015.

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The platonic ideal of a retrospective includes no unremarkable works, but there's a certain pleasure to be had in seeing masterpieces brush up against duds. Failures can illuminate just as much about an artist as successes, and in this case, Li's inclusion of these misfires disturbs the notion that greatness struck Wong like lightning. The reality was hardly that at all.

It took another couple years before Wong found a steadier position with painting, producing a showstopper called *The Kingdom* (2017), in which a crowned ruler sits enthroned amid an isle of gray set in a forest whose surface is filled with dashes of saffron orange and mint green. The clustering of unlike colors and the smatterings of parallel strokes evoke a laundry list of art-historical giants, from Henri Matisse to Gustav Klimt, whose 1903 painting of a birch forest Li offers as the main referent here.

Europeans like these are typically suggested by critics as the primary inspirations for Wong, but Li also asserts that he was also looking at 20th-century Chinese artists like Wu Guanzhong, whose brushy paintings merged avant-garde modernism with traditional calligraphic techniques. This much is even obvious in *The Kingdom*, in which the trees, their gnarls represented only by dots, could be said to evince a Wu-like minimalism. One of the many reasons this retrospective is valuable is that it views Wong not just as a modernism aficionado but as a curious art lover whose inquiry transcended the Western canon.

The self-aggrandizing inclusion of a monarch in *The Kingdom*, sketched out by way of a few jabs of a brush gobbled with white paint, and the canvas' scale, at six feet wide, imply that Wong had gained a confidence that was missing in past efforts. Yet Wong seemed uncomfortable with the idea that he was a master. His king appears minuscule and expressionless—hardly very regal at all.

Likewise for the searching figures who populate contemporaneous works such as *The Bright Winding Path* (2017), in which a person in a blue shirt ambles along a zigzagging white walkway, nearly fading away into its thick web of pink dots. That figure has only one way to go, but because of the painting's crowded composition, he seems lost.

It's difficult not to see a parallel for Wong's career here. He'd been included by curator Matthew Higgs in a group show at the Amagansett space of Karma, the New York market juggernaut with an eye for cutting-edge painting. This initiated a following for Wong, a painter by then based in Edmonton, Canada, who few in New York had even heard of before that.

Wong's social connections emerged organically—this was no nepo baby. Yet it's worth considering how much knowing the right people helped Wong. The **MFA Boston** show includes loans from blue-chip artists like KAWS, Rashid Johnson, Jennifer Guidi, and Jonas Wood; the reason the Dallas Museum of Art ended up with a Wong at all was because of the Dallas Art Fair, where the curators acquired his painting from Karma's booth. This much is hinted in the wall text, but rarely ever is it laid bare. The fullest possible examination of Wong's career, one that accounts for how his career and his legacy have enjoyed some level of market-oriented privilege through these ties, has yet to emerge.

Li does better when it comes to Wong's mental illnesses. She does not skip over his diagnoses of Tourette Syndrome and autism, which Wong himself embraced during his lifetime at the urging of his mother Monita. But more crucially, she does not view his paintings as metaphors.

It could be tempting, for example, to read a work like the terrific *Blue Rain* (2018), a painting of a solitary blue house behind chunky whitish slashes, as an allegory for Wong's internal state. After all, such an argument is often made about Picasso's Blue Period paintings, van Gogh's Arles works, and a whole lot more. Li doesn't fall into that trap, writing in the wall text that this spare abode is "a symbol of both shelter and loneliness" and leaving it at that.



Matthew Wong, *Blue Rain*, 2018.

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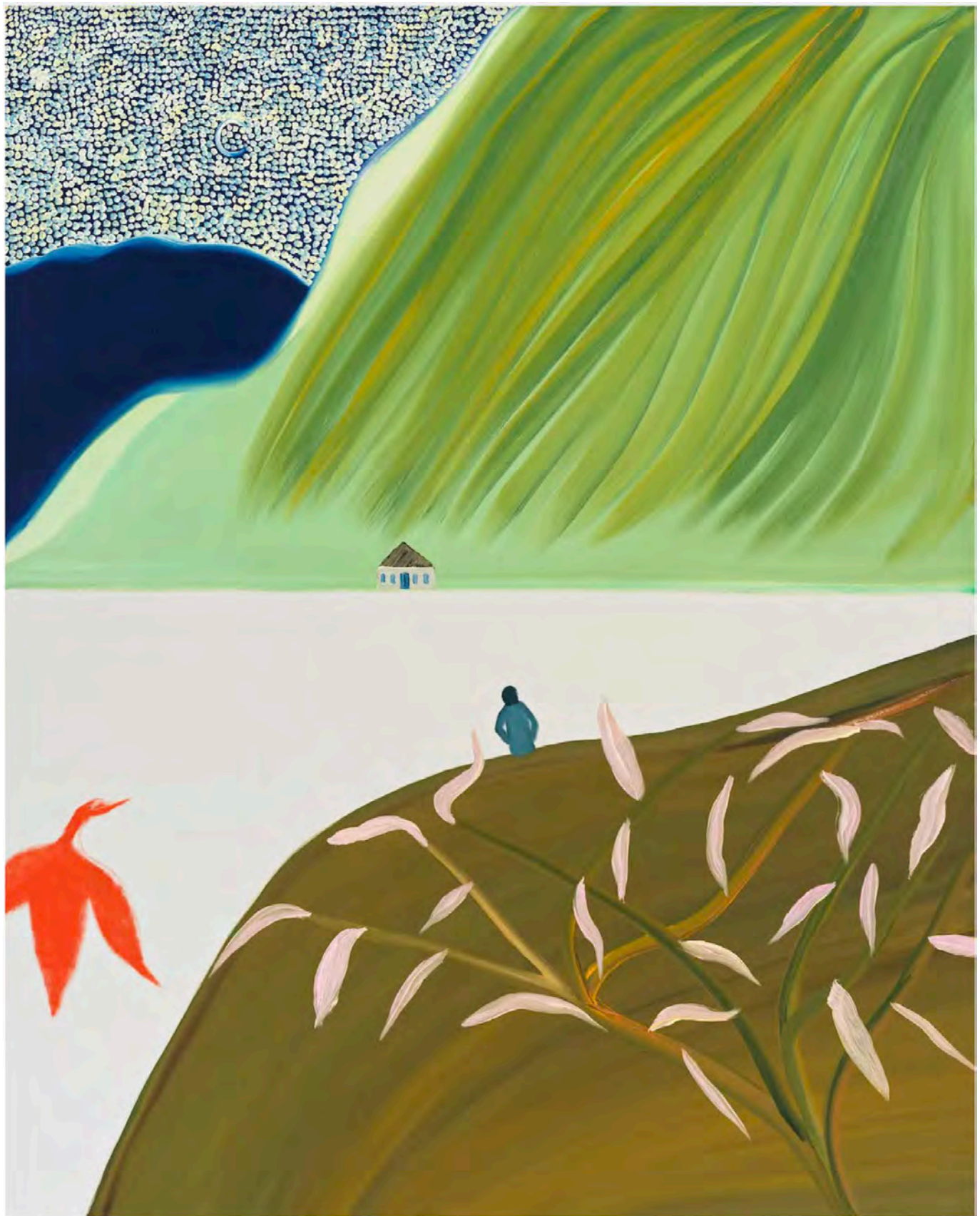
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How much one really can avoid that interpretation is admittedly tested by pieces like *See You on the Other Side* (2019), a painting made the year during Wong's final year. It features a single figure sitting on a cliff, with a house far in the distance set off by a vast gulf of white. This painting appears toward the MFA show's end, but it is not the last thing viewers see. That would be something that is not an artwork at all: a set of brochures that offer resources for those having suicidal thoughts.

By avoiding any heavy-handed proclamations about Wong's mental state, Li allows him to be complex and not entirely knowable. Wong himself even welcomed that ambiguity with paintings like *Tracks in the Blue Forest* (2018), in which footsteps in snow trail off into the distance before disappearing altogether. Where is their maker, and what has happened to that person? The image leaves all that a mystery without a solution.



Matthew Wong, *See You On the Other Side*, 2019.

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