

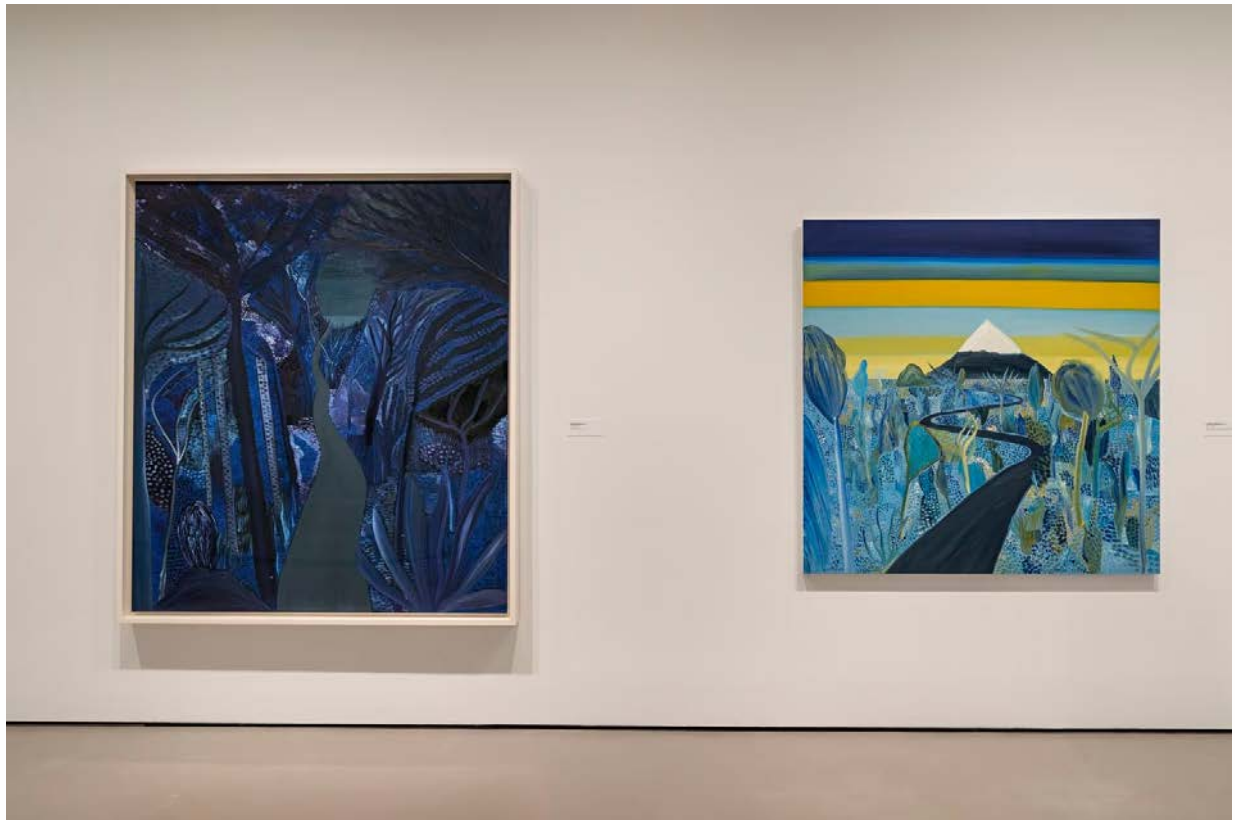
The Boston Globe

ART REVIEW

In his scant six years of painting, Matthew Wong built a vision all his own

A new exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston traces the self-taught artist's path toward breathtaking originality

By [Murray Whyte](#) Globe Staff, Updated July 6, 2023, 3:43 p.m.



Matthew Wong, "Path to the Sea," 2019 (left) and "Unknown Pleasures," 2019. From "Matthew Wong: The Realm of Appearances," a retrospective exhibition of the artist's work at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

Matthew Wong painted for just six years, under any other circumstance an impossibly brief time to consider mounting something you could call a career retrospective. In those six years, something near to impossible *did* happen to merit it. The proof, “Matthew Wong: The Realm of Appearances,” which just opened at the Museum of Fine Arts, hangs in plain sight.

Wong, who split time between Edmonton, Canada, and Hong Kong, died in October 2019 in that northern prairie city. The cause was suicide. He was 35. He had struggled with depression and Tourette syndrome, and had recently been diagnosed with autism; his final, abruptly posthumous exhibition at Karma Gallery in New York, which represented him, opened a little more than a month later. Roberta Smith, chief art critic of The New York Times, began her review of it by calling Wong “one of the most talented painters of his generation.” The gallery and his mother, Monita, decided that none of the works would be sold.

Wong only began painting — feverishly, compulsively — in 2013; it became as necessary to him as water or air. “The Realm of Appearances,” organized with the Dallas Museum of Art, is a sparse but revealing record of a career that moved in fast forward and then stopped abruptly, just as Wong appeared to have honed a vision entirely his own.



Matthew Wong, "Unknown Pleasures," 2019. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Monita and Raymond Wong in memory of their son Matthew Wong, 2020. © 2023 MATTHEW WONG FOUNDATION/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK; DIGITAL IMAGE © THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART/LICENSED BY SCALA/ART RESOURCE, NY; COURTESY MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

That last exhibition at Karma, entitled “Blue,” showcased the artist’s final works, all of them moving explorations of the color’s vast tonal range in enveloping nocturnes and moody interior scenes, a height achieved as the artist himself spiraled ever deeper downward. “Path to the Sea,” made in 2019, distills much of the artist’s short painting life in a frame rich with mystery and painterly bravura: A slim ribbon of steel-blue wends

through a dense glade in varying degrees of cobalt; some are stippled with energetic dabs and blots, others the product of robust strokes. Significantly, I believe, there's a way out, round like the end of a tunnel, hovering near the top of the frame where the foliage parts and the simple, horizontal clarity of shore, water, and sky stack in gradient hues, light to dark.

Wong's story, like that of other gifted, troubled artists before him, prompts a desire to explain the tragedy of his death through his achievements in paint. His death appears to have had a predictably vulture-ish impact on the market for his work, which has skyrocketed to almost \$5 million for a single painting.



"Landscape with Mother and Child," 2017, by Matthew Wong. Brooker-Pardee Family © 2023 MATTHEW WONG FOUNDATION/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK; COURTESY MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

Separating the work from an overwhelming narrative is rough business. You can't detach an artist from his or her lived experience, but Wong's painting, I think, is less a record of inner turmoil than it is an expression of his life unfettered by those struggles — the space where, for him, freedom reigned. A recent posthumous profile of the artist in *The New Yorker* draws significantly on Wong's almost daily text exchanges with his friend, the Indiana-based painter Peter Shear, with whom he was in near constant contact. (Wong, very online, connected with artists all over the world through the buffer of social media, and maintained relationships through text.) "Not painting," he told a friend, "is pain."

The show at the MFA is an abbreviated spin through Wong's output — in those few years, he painted thousands of pieces — that nonetheless tracks a clear evolutionary arc. Only 40 pieces in all, the range of work here is dizzying, a point-form elucidation of Wong's self-driven research through the history of painting at breakneck speed (he completed an MFA in photography in 2013, but as a painter, was self-taught).

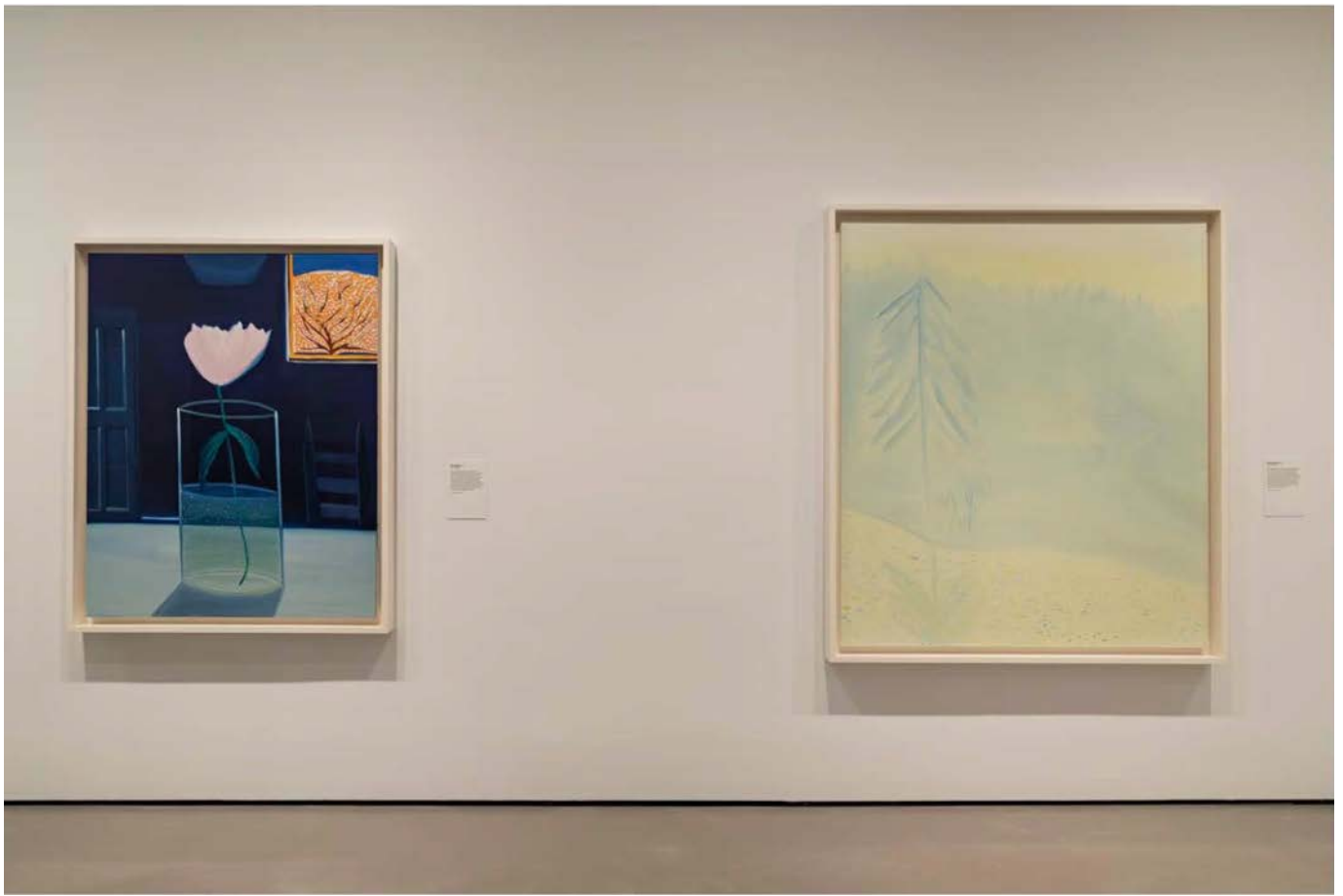
"Sanctuary," 2015, a stand of trees erupting in a geyser of shadowy color, put me immediately in mind of the tortured and ghoulish landscapes of Edvard Munch. In "Landscape with Mother and Child," 2017, thick bands of paint constructing scene as though brick by brick, echo the material heft of Van Gogh. "Somewhere," 2018, with its thicket of spindly, mottled birches anchored in a forest floor sparkling with colorful squibs of grass and flower, feels almost like direct homage to Gustav Klimt.



"Old Town," by Matthew Wong, 2017. Green Family Art Foundation; Courtesy of Adam Green Art Advisory. © 2023 MATTHEW WONG FOUNDATION/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK; COURTESY MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

Wong was a keen synthesizer of towering figures in art history, but he was moving somewhere all his own. He started painting after an epiphany at the Venice Biennale in 2013, where he was working as docent at the Hong Kong pavilion; he saw inky abstractions there by Christopher Wool that moved him to his own experiments. Back in Hong Kong, he began making abstract ink sketches every morning; eventually, he abandoned abstraction — a proliferating field among young painters at the time — and began to absorb the ancient traditions of Chinese ink painting.

At the MFA, early abstractions like “Heaven and Earth,” 2015, an anxious tangle of black tendrils stained on rice paper in brisk, hectic strokes, lead to a figurative evolution. “Landscape of the Longing,” 2016, a dense and stunning vertical mountainscape built in bulky volumes of unruly texture, overwhelmed me with its emotional force, like raw feeling put to paper. Wong’s work often has that effect on me; it emanates intimacy, a frank humanity that feels raw and guileless. His reference points are often clear; the compressed perspective of Chinese landscape painting emerges time and again, in the intense electric-orange-on-blue landscape “Somewhere,” 2018, or in the blunt and truly joyous “Old Town,” 2017, with a pale wisp of tree arcing high over an ebullient riot of color and texture in the village below.

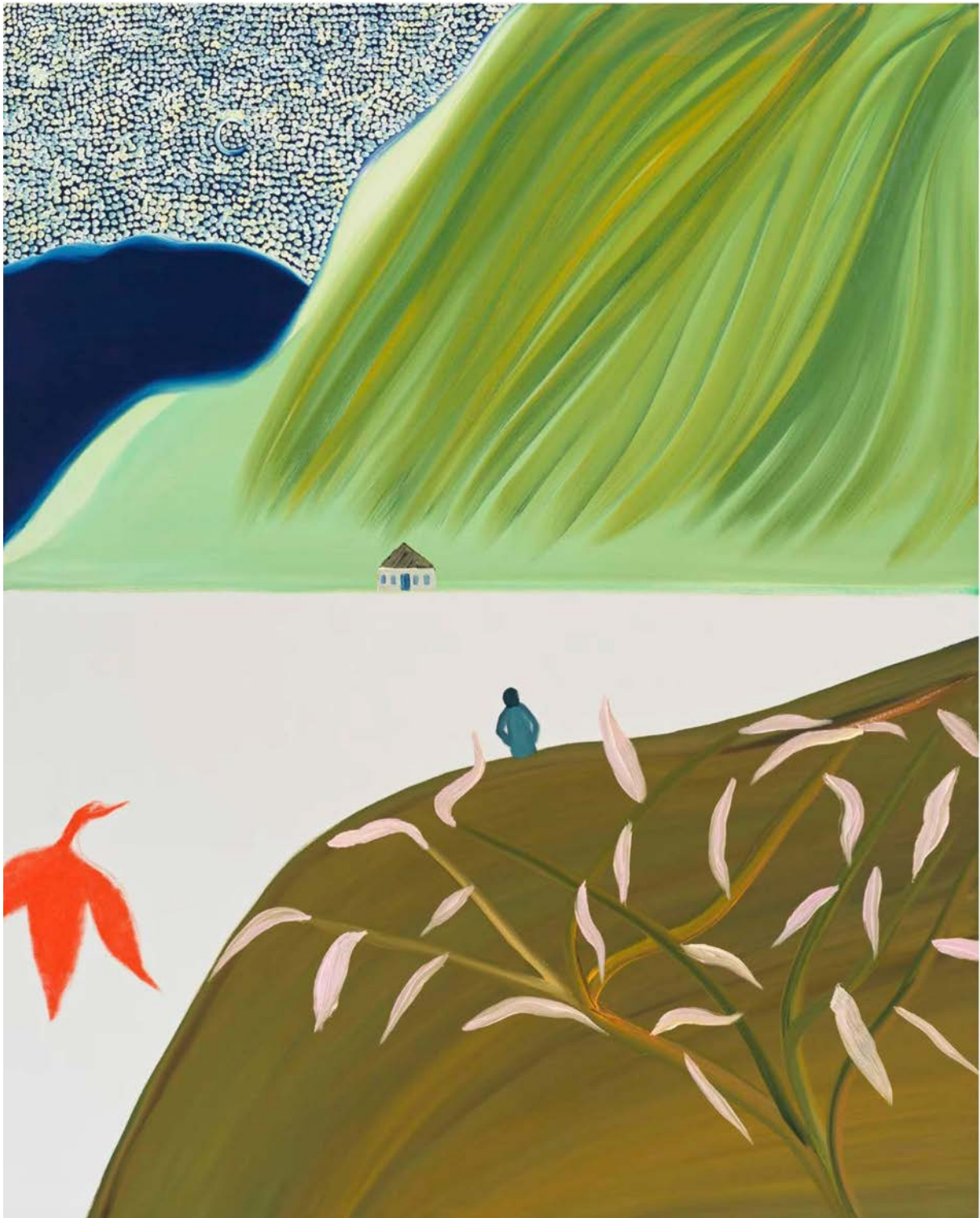


Matthew Wong, "Blue Night," 2018 (left); and "Morning Mist," 2019. On view at "Matthew Wong: The Realm of Appearances," a retrospective recently opened at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

But Wong's hectic crash course in art history, east to west, led ultimately to a captivating style that feels deeply his own. As he leapt forward, Wong pared down his palette, simplifying to focus his work both formally and thematically. Two monochrome works open the MFA's exhibition, "Day 4," 2018, a searing near-abstraction in blinding tangerine; and "River at Night," from the same year, a cool evening scene of a river unfurling through an indigo forest.

Pathways often wend through oblique and mysterious landscapes; "Morning Mist," 2019, creamy and obscure, depicts a wisp of tree and a small line snaking to a barely perceptible cabin mid-frame; "Unknown Pleasures," 2019, is its textural and chromatic opposite, with a broad roadway traversing a glittering landscape of blue and gold forms that, Alice-in-Wonderland like, evokes sentient flora bursting with personality. A snow-capped peak dominates the horizon against bright bands of sky in a restrained palette of cobalt, ochre, and gold. With its textural rift between sky and ground, it reads like pure

jubilant on the part of a painter just coming to grasp his vast and virtuosic range. It leaves you wondering what might have been.



Wong made "See You On the Other Side," 2019, the same year that he died. © 2023 MATTHEW WONG FOUNDATION/ ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK; MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

I'd like to end there, but I can't. A final 2019 piece here is far too inviting, too leading, to leave out. Wong takes full ownership of Chinese tradition here, with three layers of mountain pressed flat against each other. In the foreground, earthy brown is flecked with bright stabs of pink leaves; a towering peak beyond it cascades torrents of olive green. A bulky blue-black form shoulders up behind it, under a dark sky speckled with an impossible density of stars; a gulf of white separates foreground from background, with a tiny cabin perched on its edge. A lone figure, back turned, looks out across the rift from high above; the picture is heavy with ominous intimations, rich compositional masses shouldered up to the void. "See You on the Other Side," Wong called it. It would be haunting, even without a ghost.

MATTHEW WONG: THE REALM OF APPEARANCES

Through Feb. 18. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 465 Huntington Ave. 617-267-9300, www.mfa.org

Murray Whyte can be reached at murray.whyte@globe.com. Follow him [@TheMurrayWhyte](https://twitter.com/TheMurrayWhyte).