

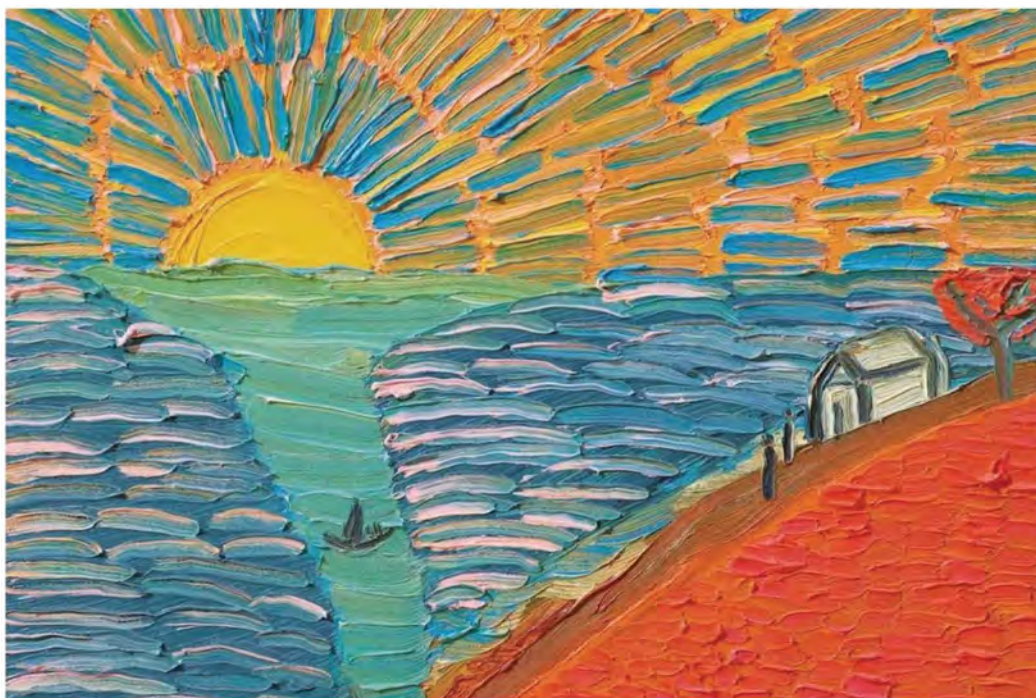
APOLLO

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The dazzling paintings of Matthew Wong

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The Journey Home (2017; detail), Matthew Wong. Private Collection, Courtesy HomeArt; © Matthew Wong Foundation c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2023

Born in Toronto in 1984, Matthew Wong grew up mainly in Hong Kong and spent his adult life moving between continents, eventually settling in Edmonton, Alberta, in his early thirties. He wanted first to become a banker, then a photographer, then settled on painting, producing pictures at a prodigious rate and destroying much of the work he made. He loved the poetry of William Carlos Williams, the music of Drake and, especially, the paintings of Vincent Van Gogh, mostly discovering them online. The internet was his teacher, his inspiration and his primary means of contact with the outside world and, while seeming bullishly confident on social media, he experienced extreme difficulties with autism and Tourette's, which rendered most social interaction agonising. His inarguable talent was recognised and rewarded, but he never surmounted the challenges he faced. In 2019, at the age of 35, he took his own life.



Coming of Age Landscape (2018), Matthew Wong. Private Collection. Courtesy HomeArt; © Matthew Wong Foundation c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2023

A self-taught, self-identifying ‘outsider’ – the quotation marks are his – Wong was possessed of a breadth of imagination and technique rarely matched in contemporary painting. Up close, subtlety of texture and the jarring contrasts in brushstrokes – broad bands of declarative colour, impasto thick as a baby’s arm, thorny dots of paint against royal blue, standing in for the sky at night – lend his works a mesmerising edge. His line is one moment controlled, the next teetering at the edge of incoherence, throttling across the canvas like a jet aircraft in a death spiral. Then, in the nick of time, he pulls it back to conjure pictorial meaning from what should, by rights, be utter pandemonium. You’ll never grasp the tension of Wong’s paintings without looking at them closely and, apart from a few shows and fairs, European audiences haven’t had much of chance to do so. For most of us, then, this exquisite but crushingly sad retrospective at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam is a first.

The exhibition mixes Wong’s work with a small, judicious selection of paintings by Vincent Van Gogh, a recurring visual reference. Thus the latter’s *Trees and Undergrowth* (1887) is set against Wong’s own, Kusama-inflected mediations of birch forests outside of Edmonton. In some instances, the relationship is explicit: his direct homages include a reimagining of *The Painter on the Road to Tarascon* (1888), substituting the figure of his hero with a municipal park bench, the original’s agrarian landscape making way for a subtopian, light industrial backdrop. Yet the juxtaposition is never laboured, no tenuous parallel forced. Van Gogh plays a strictly-imposed – indeed, barely necessary – supporting role. Even so, one imagines Wong would have been delighted.

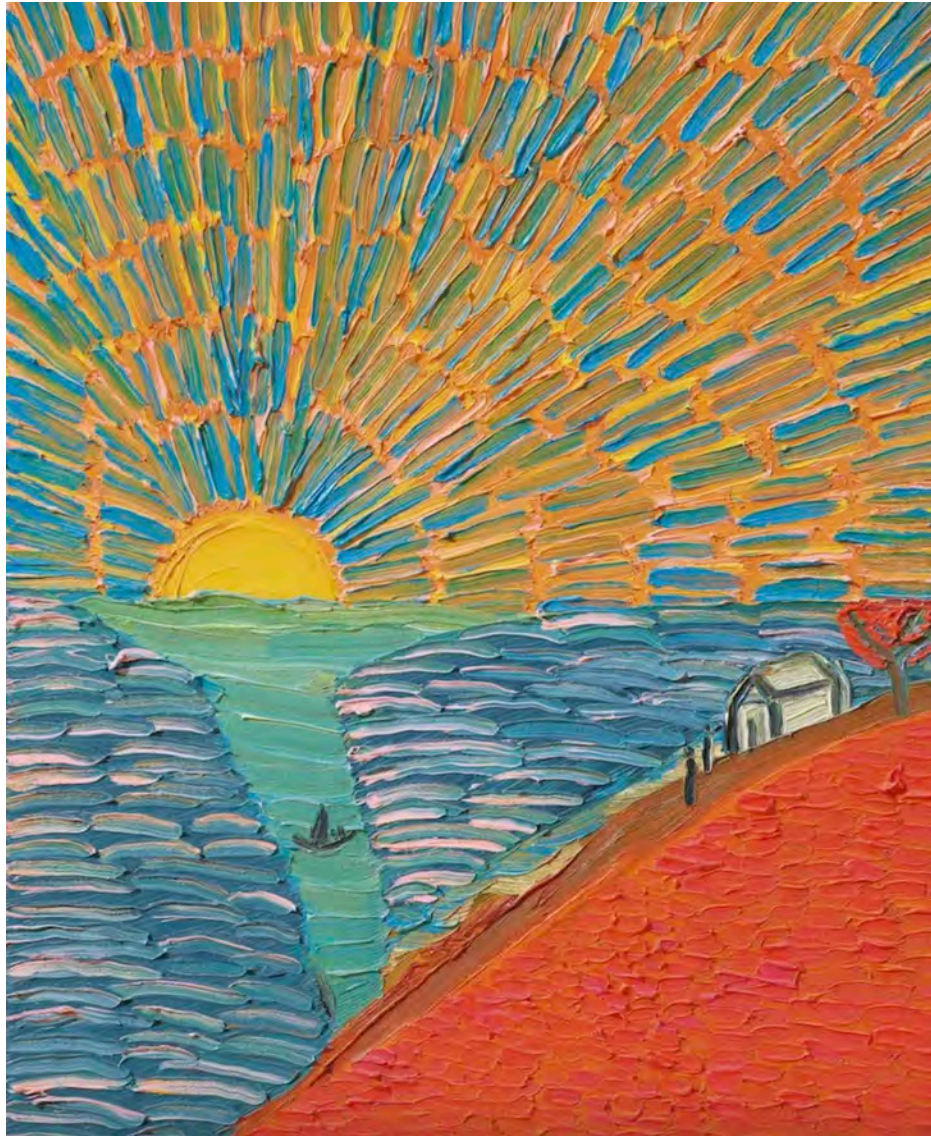


The Space Between Trees (2019), Matthew Wong. Private Collection. Courtesy HomeArt; © Matthew Wong Foundation c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2023

Wong came to painting relatively late, after seeing paintings by Christopher Wool and Julian Schnabel at the 2011 Venice Biennale. Quite what he found so revelatory about their art is unclear, but it clearly sparked something. He made his first drawings shortly afterwards and soon became confident enough to graduate to oil painting. The earliest canvases here are impressively assured, abstract compositions: *Valley* (2014), a deliberate nod to Joan Mitchell, is particularly compelling: in reproduction it resembles nothing so much as an extreme close-up of a dirty breakfast plate; in the flesh, the effect is violent, an irradiated recipe of oranges, greens and yellows so forceful as to shock.

Soon enough, Wong arrives at a transitional moment, in which recognisable imagery begins to emerge from the (admittedly, often thrilling) slop of colour and texture with which he had hitherto occupied himself. *Contemplating Infinity* (2015), a breakthrough for him, is a yin/yang sign of a picture, one half filled with a wheat field formed of jagged, Auerbach-ish directional gestures in green and yellow, the other with hillocks of racing green impasto, their curve carved out with a palette knife to expose an underlying coat of school bus yellow. A distinct pictorial lexicon begins to emerge, one composed of a distinct blend of naif figuration and unfashionably loud colour, the kind of palette reminiscent of a child's paint box. Wong found the confidence to create novel atmospheric effects from visual shorthand: the eponymous downpour of *Blue Rain* (2018) is articulated with a veil of diagonal strokes; in *Solitude* (2018) half-filled grids of horizontal white flecks distinguish the Edmonton skyline from a blue-black night sky.

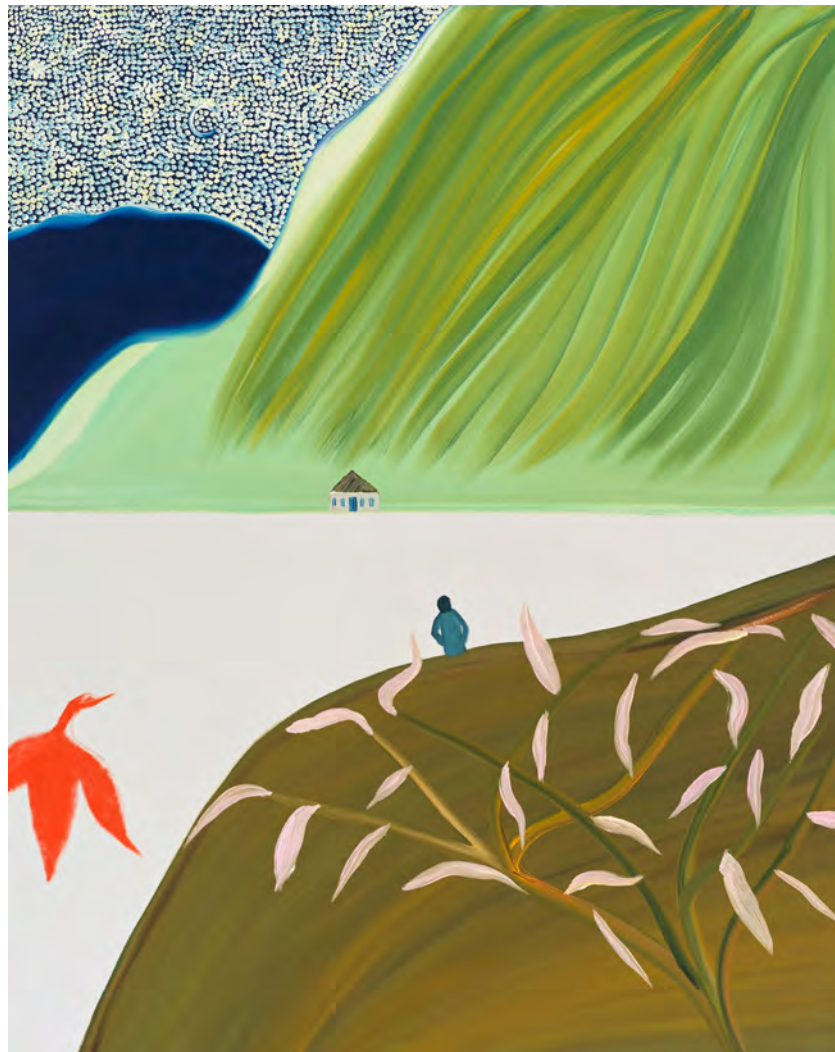
There are misfires: Wong was an instinctive painter, starting work early every morning and often pouncing on the first idea to come to him. His go-to repertoire of imagery – impressionistic foliage, conical mountains, crudely-daubed, faceless figures swamped by their surroundings – can be repetitive, occasionally verging on the winsome. Passages of *Unknown Pleasures* (2019), for instance, appear almost like parodies of Peter Doig or late Hockney. Such upsets are rare: what becomes difficult to ignore, however, is the increasing volume of disquietude creeping into the work.



The Journey Home (2017), Matthew Wong. Private Collection. Courtesy HomeArt © Matthew Wong Foundation c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2023

By 2019, Wong had tasted success. His first solo show, at Karma gallery in New York, attracted the attention of art criticism power couple Roberta Smith and Jerry Saltz, the latter giving it a rave review. His work travelled to major international fairs, leading to acquisitions by museums. The artist had always been prone to depression and had imagined that recognition might serve to stabilise this. Yet his newfound status as an art world commodity made life only more confusing, prompting him to question the sincerity and intentions of the milieu whose approval he had craved.

He gradually began to jettison the exuberant palette that had become his signature in favour of sombre tones: in one ink self-portrait, he conceals his handsome face behind a horror-movie hockey mask; night scenes became the norm; and titles grow ever more foreboding. Looking at works such as the aforementioned *Solitude*, or *Dark Reverie* (2018) – one of several, harrowing scenes depicting a path leading through a barely-illuminated forest – it is all but impossible to swerve a psychological reading. By the time he created *See You on the Other Side* (2019), one of his final paintings, it seems his mind was made up. The foreground of the composition gives us an isolated figure, his back turned to us, staring out across a lake-like void of blank canvas. In the distance, a small building is dwarfed by a vast mountain range, itself overlooked by a typical Wong night sky.



See You on the Other Side (2019), Matthew Wong. © Matthew Wong Foundation c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2023

Even beyond the inevitable ‘what if’, the show will likely leave visitors with questions. The idea that Wong struggled to place himself between Chinese and Western art historical traditions is raised, but not far pursued. Similarly, his decision to confine himself to Edmonton in his last years is barely broached. Most of all, I was left unsure quite how to think about the work of an highly-educated artist – Wong had a degree in cultural anthropology, and a masters in photography – who early on determined his ‘outsider’ status. The term has always been a slippery one, not least at a moment when the critical and commercial spotlight had briefly settled on non-canonical, non-academic art making.

What was Wong trying to communicate with those quotation marks? I’m not sure I’ve ever exited an exhibition so desperate to address a question to its subject. Nor have I ever felt quite so depleted by the knowledge I never will.

‘Matthew Wong | Vincent Van Gogh’ is the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, until 1 September.