

# ArtReview

## Matthew Wong, Vincent van Gogh, *Pas de Deux*

Martin Herbert   Reviews   29 April 2024   ArtReview



Matthew Wong, *Coming of Age Landscape*, 2018, oil on canvas, 152 × 178 cm. © Matthew Wong Foundation c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2023. Courtesy Home Art

**By pairing the artists, *Painting as a Last Resort* at Van Gogh Museum cuts past many arguments about linear art history**

A painter of intensely colourful yet tormented canvases kills himself in his mid-thirties, having only begun painting at age twenty-seven after trying various other trades. This artist has suffered from mental health issues, has had unhappy dealings with the artworld and finally found in painting the best way to articulate his tumultuous, uncontrollable inner life. Such, of course, is Van Gogh's story. It's also that of Chinese-Canadian artist Matthew Wong, who died in 2019 after a brief, rocketing career that brought him about as much happiness as Van Gogh's commercial failure did him. *Painting as a Last Resort* is how Wong described his chosen medium to a friend, and this, his first European survey show, combines 62 of his canvases with six by Van Gogh, one of his chief influences.

You walk in with suspicions: are there vested interests, invisible hands, behind this speedy would-be canonisation? (The show appears to have been driven by an in-house curator's enthusiasm and is part of an ongoing series pairing Van Gogh with contemporary artists.) Will it backfire anyway? And then you look, and all kinds of perceived distances – between Wong and Van Gogh, deep and recent past, Wong and us – fall away.

Wong, who struggled with severe depression and Tourette's syndrome and was autistic, first studied anthropology and gained a master's in photography before turning to painting circa 2011, primarily using Facebook to self-educate and to correspond voluminously with other artists. The show's opening phase shows him, like any diligent art student, working through influences, mainly Postimpressionism and gestural abstraction: a highlight, 2014's sensuously smeared *Valley*, filters aspects of de Kooning and Joan Mitchell through a tangerine-and-toothpaste-green haze. Within a year, though, Wong had found a pained confessional mode: in the ink-on-rice-paper portrait *Untitled* (2015), against a quivering forest backdrop, we see a face wrapped in constraining black straps, eyeballs staring out anxiously, mouth bound. Around this time, Wong started selling work – figures like White Columns director Matthew Higgs had begun positioning him as a notable outsider artist, which he claimed to feel ambivalent about – and, as he kept painting and researching, his work gained an itchy, Vincent-infused radiance. In *The Sun* (2016), multicoloured impasto lines laser explosively from the buttery titular orb at the painting's centre. *The Other Side of the Moon* (2017), which the catalogue cross-references with a similar Forrest Bess painting, feels like a colour photo-negative: a deep green moon hangs in a marmalade sky above a fervid, mottled landscape of psychedelically coloured flora in black fields. Like so many of Wong's landscapes, it doesn't feel so much like a physical place as analogous to an interiority both rich and saturnine.





Vincent van Gogh, *Wheatfield with a Reaper*, 1889, oil on canvas, 73 × 93 cm. Courtesy Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Where, given the ostensibly double-headed nature of the show, is Van Gogh in this? One answer would be ‘nowhere much’: his paintings generally preface the chapter divisions (with training-wheels titles like ‘Bold Brushwork’ and ‘Learning by Doing’), avoiding explicit compare-and-contrast. Another answer, though, especially as we steer into Wong’s final two years, is ‘everywhere’, as the younger artist’s envisioning of and clinging to nature – painted, in his case, from imagination – becomes increasingly intense, even as secondary influences like Alex Katz streamline his brushwork. With its central luminary presiding over an expanse of golden yellow countryside, Van Gogh’s sunbaked 1889 *Wheatfield with a Reaper* is formally comparable with Wong’s moonlit *Coming of Age Landscape* (2018), over which calligraphic marks spell out a mysterious gazetteer of trees. It being neither day nor night but some strange, pregnant, insomniac interstice becomes, in his final years, key: see the almost-surrealist silence of *A Dream* (2019), where a cornflower-coloured trail tracks through midnight-blue woodland towards a beach, above which the sun or the moon casts a martini-glass-shaped reflection in near-black water.

This motif, a route leading towards somewhere you can never really get to or, conversely, know you're headed down whatever you do, repeats piercingly through Wong's late canvases. The wristy *Dark Reverie* (2018), a smudgy crooked path into an almost lightless, spooky-branched forest that finally disappears round a bend, is perhaps Wong at his most resigned. In *Night Crossing* (2018), a small figure in a canoe, going sideways across the canvas, is forever stalled halfway under vast hills made of swiped deep-blue paint, while the moon passes behind a big broccoli-shaped navy tree under a numinous pointillist night sky. As a painting, it's both magical and hurts a bit to look at, and like so much here it cuts past any arguments about linear art history – that certain approaches are 'done', or whatever – because people aren't done with experiencing psychic pain, with trying to find compensatory beauty in the world or with looking for solace and wherewithal in the past. And for as long as you're in front of Matthew Wong's best work, you wonder why anyone thinks that painters should be either.