

Matthew Wong at the MFA: using external and internal inspirations to make artwork that's utterly his own

By Sasha Zirin, Assistant Living Arts Editor

Artist Matthew Wong's profound work, known for its distinctiveness and the ability Wong had to bare his soul on the canvas, is now on display for a limited time at the Museum of Fine Arts. The self-taught painter has received many accolades throughout his six-year career, which sadly ended following his death through suicide in 2019 at the age of 35. His work continues to be revered as his raw talent is displayed globally at museums.

Attendee Veronica described the pieces at the exhibit as "unusual" and said she was "blown away."

The MFA exhibit contained many gorgeous works, including his 2018 painting "Once Upon a Time in the West," named after the Sergio Leone film, and Wong's 2016 work "Solitaire," which portrays downtown Los Angeles.

Along with the inspiration derived from filmmaker Leone, the exhibition's short documentary screening on Wong's life and work expressed the artist's inspiration of filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky. Tarkovsky, considered one of the biggest names in Russian cinema, is known for the films "Stalker" (1979), "Mirror" (1975), and the film mentioned in the museum's short film itself: "Ivan's Childhood" (1962). Wong's inspiration for artists of entirely unrelated mediums adds to his distinctive persona.

According to the MFA exhibit, Wong was also inspired by Chinese ink painting, Post-Impressionism, Modernism, the work of other artists (in various mediums), and images he found in books and online. He depicted a variety of subjects, most often painting landscapes.

His work is considered to convey the mental health struggles he dealt with during his life, such as chronic depression. The Matthew Wong Foundation focuses on spreading awareness and eliminating mental health stigma.

Located in the Henry and Lois Foster Gallery, the exhibition showcases paintings from every era of his work, the aforementioned short doc, and opportunities to look into mental health resources.

"The exhibit is very interesting. I like his style," museum attendee Ethan Richmond said.

Hailing from Los Angeles, Richmond said he felt especially connected to "Solitaire." The painting depicts the infamous Los Angeles highway Mulholland Drive, which Richmond feels connected to as someone born and raised in the city.



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Matthew Wong's "River at Night" at the MFA

Wong's artwork is beautiful and varied, shifting from colorful work to chromatic pieces as his career progressed. Before becoming a painter, he was a photographer, creative writer, and journalist. He didn't start his professional journey as a painter until adulthood—he had almost finished his Masters in photography at the City University of Hong Kong when he began his career.

Following his graduation, he opened his first exhibition, "Fidelity," according to the Matthew Wong Foundation. He then became disenchanted with the photo medium and decided to buy a sketchbook, which led him to become a professional painter.

Wong's art sticks with you. He masterfully incorporated a variety of textures, colors, and influences in his artwork; one can view his art and try to determine what he may have been thinking about at that time. Seeing his art felt like a complex and exciting art history lesson while also feeling like an intimate view of Wong's headspace while he did his work.

Much of his art also feels like a mode of catharsis. Once the audience becomes aware of the struggles Wong endured during his life, it's easy to see how art was an important outlet for him.

Another MFA attendee, student Juan Lacoviello, also felt the artist's work was "evocative."

"He achieves a specific thing that few would've thought to do," he said.

Even the casual museumgoer, as he calls himself, can quickly see how Wong had a great artistic voice and undeniable talent.

The exhibit, which is incredibly vast and well-coordinated, is to be displayed until Feb. 14.

Wong's art is globally beloved, and his acclaim seems to only increase from here. According to the Matthew Wong Foundation, along with the MFA, Wong's art is en route to be displayed in museums worldwide. It is a worthy exhibit and an opportunity to see some of the most notable artwork of the 21st century.