

## Painting as a Last Resort: Matthew Wong at the Van Gogh Museum



**Words by Jessica Hartley**

Amsterdam's Van Gogh museum pioneers an epic exhibit by possibly the most prolific contemporary painter you have probably never heard of – who also shares some uncanny similarities to Van Gogh himself.

The Van Gogh museum is one of the most famous art venues in the world, visited by approximately 2.2 million people of 199 nationalities every year – most of whom come to see one thing and one thing only: iconic works by the great artist himself. So in that sense it's possibly less known for featuring contemporary art. However, since the innovative Dutch/American art historian Emilie

Gordenker (New Jersey, 1965) joined as museum director in 2020, she's been on a mission to take more risks and to diversify the scope of this Dutch national institution.

*"I wanted to give the programming more oxygen"* explained **Emilie Gordenker** when CULTURALEE was given an exclusive tour of the exhibit.



*Matthew Wong, Unknown Pleasures, 2019, Museum of Modern Art, New York © 2023 Matthew Wong Foundation / c/o Pictoright Amsterdam, 2023, Digital image via MoMA*

So how does a gallery honour and preserve, but also innovate on the legacy of one of the greatest – and most famous – painters in the world? In this case, by taking a leap of faith on a virtually unknown, self-taught talent – who could be seen as a Van Gogh for our modern times.

Even the revered museum director, **Emilie Gordenker** hadn't heard of Matthew Wong (1984–2019) – as she candidly admitted. It was the show's young curator, museum researcher Joost van der Hoeven who came up with the idea of spotlighting Wong. Gordenker said: *"It was a leap of faith for the Van Gogh museum. We generally show artists that people know."*

The must-see exhibit, which is showing all summer until September 1st this year, presents the fantastically varied, prolifically expressive and emotive work of this cult contemporary artist alongside iconic pieces from Van Gogh, who was one of Wong's greatest inspirations.

As well as presenting a huge collection of Wong's work – previously unseen in Europe and generously loaned by private collectors – the show also explores the artist's psychology and process. As well as the sometimes uncanny parallels between Wong and Van Gogh.





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

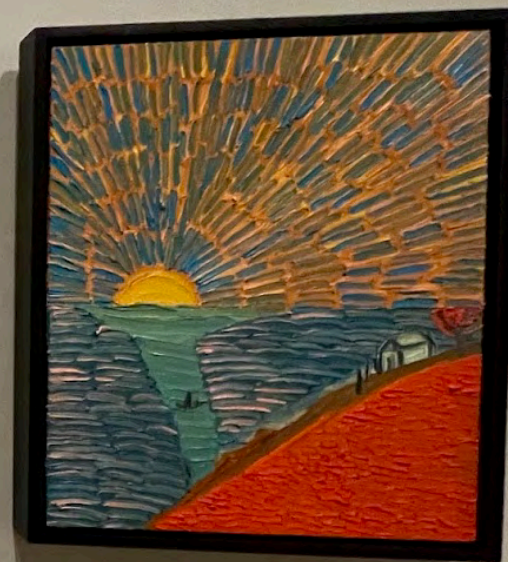
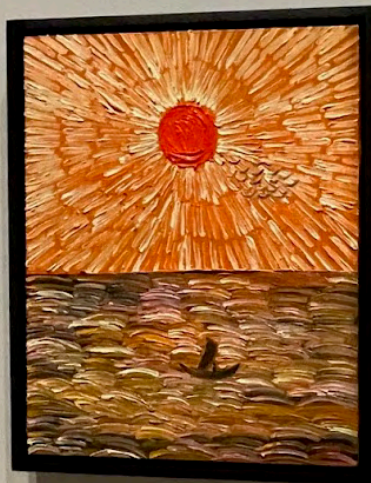
### ***A Van Gogh of the Digital Age?***

Wong and Van Gogh are of course separated by over a century, yet they share some uncanny symmetries in their both lives and styles of painting. Both started painting after trying other things – as “a last resort”. Both started painting at 27. Neither had formal or traditional art training and were essentially self taught. Both suffered from depression and other mental health problems, and – most tragically – both committed suicide.

‘I see myself in him. The impossibility of belonging in this world’, said Wong in 2018.

As well as similarities, the show also shows the differences and makes it clear that Wong is very much his own man: a fresh, original talent in his own right. Wong was catapulted into fame almost immediately after he started painting and suddenly became “hot as a pistol” . He sold everything he touched. Whereas, as far as we know, Van Gogh only sold one painting in his entire lifetime.





*Image credit: Jessica Hartley*

The show's curator, rising talent Joost van der Hoeven expanded on this when CULTURALEE spoke with him.

*“What's quite unique about Wong, alongside his obvious talent, is his life story and his level of success. Once he started painting the wheels turned incredibly fast. He was in the right place at the right time. He created a following. He surrounded himself with people who were important in the art world’.* **Joost van der Hoeven**

### ***Painting as a Last Resort: The Exhibition***

The exhibition itself is set over a number of rooms and tells Wong's story and influences through his work. It consists of different sections, each led by an incredible original Van Gogh painting to introduce the different movements of Wong's work.

The sheer emotional force of his works hits the viewer straight away: beauty and melancholy seamlessly co-exist. It's the emotive power, and Wong's beautifully inventive use of colour – along with his life story – that make the show genuinely unforgettable.





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Small text label below the painting on the right, likely providing information about the artwork.





Curator Joost van der Hoeven. Image credit: Jessica Hartley.



*"It took three years to put this show together" continues **van der Hoeven**, "In which time we became good friends with Wong's mother, who connected us to many people involved in his life and work. We did Zoom calls with every collector to secure all the paintings on in the show."*



Matthew Wong, *The Kingdom*, 2017 © Matthew Wong Foundation c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2023



The paintings and drawings in the show are undeniably powerful. But the other fascinating thing about this show is the exploration of Wong's life – and especially how he approached becoming an artist, which feels particularly of this time. He had no formal art school experience, and was completely self taught using the internet and social media to guide and inspire him. Most of his friends and connections were through social media, which also means that through his digital channels we have a clear record of his life and artistic progress – as well as his struggles.

Also, style-wise, he adopted an interesting way of synthesising many different artistic styles. Inspired by a wide range of artists, he combined examples from both European-American and Chinese art history in an original way – and created an interesting tension between these references and a deeply personal signature, with very much his own style and atmosphere. Uniquely, his works never feel derivative, but always fresh.





*Image credit: Jessica Hartley.*

### ***The Transience of Success***

As is indicated by the exhibition's title, painting was indeed Wong's 'last resort' – not only because he embraced painting as the 'last' chance to express himself in the way that he wanted, but also as a redemptive force. But this, in turn, raises some very interesting questions about belonging, entitlement, happiness, and the meaning – and ultimately the transience – of success. Tragically, Wong's astronomical success as an artist – and the sheer volume of his output – did not prevent him from taking his life.

*The exhibition's curator, van der Hoeven says: "Of course it's incredibly sad for Wong's mother and his friends who are all grieving."*



*Matthew Wong © 2023 Matthew Wong Foundation*