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*"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"*

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**Matthew Wong: Blue View at Art Gallery of  
Ontario**



*Matthew Wong, Starry Night, 2019. Oil on Canvas, 152.4 x 177.8 cm. © 2019 Matthew Wong Foundation.*

*Matthew Wong: Blue View*

Art Gallery of Ontario (<https://ago.ca/>)

August 13, 2021 through May 15, 2022

Curated by Julian Cox

**BY SIBA KUMAR DAS, April 2022**

That great sage of twentieth-century modernism, Gertrude Stein, said in 1926 that “the creator of the new composition in the arts is an outlaw until he is a classic, there is hardly a moment in between.” When self-taught Chinese-Canadian painter

Matthew Wong died by suicide in 2019, he was a young person - but he had already shot to international fame. Will he soon be celebrated as a classic?

This question might spring to mind when you see, at Art Gallery of Ontario, *Matthew Wong: Blue View*, the first-ever museum show of the artist's work. In the twentieth century, but even earlier, path-breaking painters began to see that paint was more than a medium; it had an expressive potential of its own. The artist's task was to free this latent energy. Which is what Wong did with paint and gouache, releasing emotional effects with colors such as cerulean, cobalt, navy, indigo, ultramarine, and azure. (Prior to the blue period of his final years, Wong employed a wider range of colors, including orange, golden yellow, earth-brown, violet, green, and red. And, even during this period, he strategically retained these colors in non-dominant ways to create drama and impact.)

Wong married his growing command of color with an ability to depict the known world as something so hypnotically strange he made you see it afresh. The result: a painterly equivalent of the very estrangement or defamiliarization that the Russian formalist critics, working in the twentieth century's first half, called *ostranenie* ('making strange'). The term is not dissimilar to *dépaysement*, the descriptor often applied to Surrealist imagery. In an essay for a 2015 show on the Surrealist landscape, Ara H. Merjian suggests that the term implies interruption of habit by "(dis)placing an individual in an unfamiliar land (*pays*)."

When Wong ended his life, he was merely 35 and had battled depression since childhood. He also had Tourette's syndrome and was on the autism spectrum. Born in Toronto, he finished high school in the city with an International Baccalaureate and then, in 2007, took, from the University of Michigan, a bachelor's degree in anthropology. Attracted to the creative arts (he wrote poetry), he studied photography at the School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong, earning an M.F.A. in 2013. Photography did not sufficiently absorb his creative energies, and he switched to drawing and painting, which he discovered was his true *métier*. He taught himself to paint through intense, wide-ranging online and social media activity. He spent time, too, in libraries, studying the masters, including the modernist greats.

Wong began to be noticed by the art community very quickly and, already in 2018, New York's Karma Gallery crowned his art with a solo exhibition. A second Karma solo followed in 2019, but Wong died a month before the opening.

Just over three years ago, reviewing *From the Douanier Rousseau to Séraphine: The Great Naïve Masters* (Musée Maillol, September 11, 2019-February 23, 2020), the *Financial Times* called it a “glorious Paris exhibition [that showcased] the diverse work of isolated artists who followed in Rousseau’s footsteps.” Most writings addressing Wong reference multiple modernist and contemporary artists as well as a few earlier ones, including van Gogh, as collegiate models with whom the artist interacted virtually as he taught himself to paint. Henri Rousseau is not prominent in these accounts. Yet, this post-Impressionist self-taught master crossed “the border to modernism,” as a 2001 retrospective suggested. He not only influenced other self-taught artists; he gave revelatory ideas to many modernist masters, including Picasso, Robert Delaunay, Léger, Kandinsky, and Miró. May I suggest that Wong followed their example?

While Rousseau aimed at a smoothness of finish following the official art of his time, he also flouted the norms of conventional representation. Shadowless illumination, distorted juxtaposition of scales, “perspectival nonsenses”, and spatial disjunctions created in Rousseau’s paintings [1] such contradiction between appearance and subject matter they became enigmatic and strange. Estrangement, too, spellbound Wong. See Rousseau’s *A Carnival Evening*, *The Walk in the Forest*, and *The Sleeping Gypsy*. And then, in the AGO show, see Wong’s *Stairway*, *Round About Midnight*, and *The Old World*.



*Matthew Wong, A Dream, 2019. Oil on canvas, 177.8 x 203\_2 cm. © 2019 Matthew Wong Foundation.*

Consider also *A Dream*. The enormous tree on the right of the painting is seen close-up while to the left, beyond the strange pale-blue path, what we see is a dense mixed-species forest. The tree seems to possess a flame-like movement that is so dynamic you think of van Gogh's cypresses. The forest, on the other hand, is pregnant with silence and stillness. Beyond the tree and a second tree that you glimpse behind it, beyond the forest, beyond the pink sand beach, is a blue-black body of water reflecting a shimmering sun lighting up a yellow and orange-yellow sky. Save for the tree, it is a flat picture that you see. But, if you keep looking at the area above the water, it suddenly acquires a life of its own, and you might then feel transported to a

Profoundly mysterious experience. Wong employs technical stratagems akin to Rousseau's, but he achieves *dépaysement* with a total effect entirely his own. You are in the grip of an enigma, a palpable interiority that seems to permeate the scene in front of you.

In the previously-cited writing on Wong's influences and collegial connections, the symbolist Edvard Munch featured more than Rousseau. He, too, illuminates Wong's achievement. As Øystein Ustvedt says in a new biography, as Munch developed as an artist, he wished to confront Realism (from 1850-1880 the dominant European cultural movement), and pursue "a more subjective, emotional art based on existential life experiences." Between this pursuit and Wong's artistic purposes, the congruence was compelling. Blue and its hues appealed to Munch for their allegorical connotations. See his *Night in Saint-Cloud*, *The Kiss*, *Evening on Karl Johan*, and *Melancholy*. Then conjoin this with looking, in the AGO show, at most of Wong's *Blue* paintings. You will see startling connections - now, gaze intently at his *Starry Night*, keeping in mind Vincent van Gogh's iconic masterpiece as well as Munch's painting of the same name. Each is unique. But they also belong to the same dynasty.



Matthew Wong, *Autumn Nocturne*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 121.9 x 182.9 cm. © 2019 Matthew Wong Foundation.

In a 2018 review of a show of Wong's art, John Yau suggests that Wong's work transcended a West-East binary and coherently drew upon both Western and East Asian traditions. Yau sees a link between Wong's monochromatic brushstrokes and the incised surface of carved Asian lacquerware. In an essay accompanying a 2021 exhibition of Wong's ink drawings, Dawn Chan discusses his indebtedness to Shitao and Bada Shinren, two Qing-dynasty painters who began their careers under the Ming dynasty. "Both artists were famous for pushing the envelope in their ink painting towards surprising moments of expressive abstraction," she writes.

Let's turn now to the oil painting *Autumn Nocturne*—a work replete with disjunctions of scale and perspective. We're deep inside a forest night scene. On the painting's left, an enormous, out-of-scale full moon seems to have descended into the forest, silhouetting a violet tree together with its sparsely-leaved branches as well as a few similar branches of an adjoining tree. The remaining leaves are disproportionately

large so much so you might think they are biomorphic objects. Wong is here riffing on a moon and tree branch motif you often see in East Asian landscape painting. In depicting the unusually tilted forest floor, he uses dots and dashes of various violet hues in a pointillist way, applying a strategy he developed in his ink drawings, in which too coalesce his Western and Asian influences. Transcendence, yearning, nostalgia, a dark bewitchment---in his depiction of an autumnal night, Wong is near the limits of paint's expressiveness, yet he magically evokes such things for you.

Winnie Wong---in yet another exhibition essay---calls Matthew Wong a “genius from nowhere.” Wong created in his paintings a world so enigmatic, so haunting, so strange in its beauty, you may be uplifted beyond yourself as you delve deeper into each painting, absorbing their emotionally-charged symbolism. Lingering in the AGO show, you may even feel you are in the presence of sublimity. **WM**

[1] See Christopher Green, "The Exotic in the Banal: The Other Side of the Douanier's Charm," in Henri Rousseau, exh. cat., Fondation Beyeler, Riehen, Switzerland, 2010. Trade edition, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, Germany.



#### SIBA KUMAR DAS

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