

# NATIONAL REVIEW

## Savant of the Beautiful, Matthew Wong, in Amsterdam



Matthew Wong, *The Kingdom*, 2017. (© 2023 Matthew Wong Foundation, Pictorights Amsterdam 2023)

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March 28, 2024 6:30 AM

## The Van Gogh Museum shines a light on the ravishing work of an artist who died tragically in 2019.

**I**N 2018 I visited friends in Dallas and spent some time at the Dallas Museum of Art. The DMA's a hit-or-miss place. The exhibition on view was about Paris circa 1900 and from the museum's permanent collection. Not exactly inspired, and a hackneyed topic, so I visited its contemporary-art gallery and saw Matthew Wong's *The West*, purchased by the museum in 2017 at the Dallas Art Fair. A group of donors — certainly inspired — contributed money to the DMA, restricting it to the purchase of new art at the fair each year. It's the grandest art fair between the East and West Coasts and a glittering cultural event in a city that has mastered the fine art of glitter. Dallas people know how to support the arts.



Matthew Wong, *The West*, 2017. (Van Gogh Museum, Michael Floor)

And divinely inspired was the curator and director who acquired *The West*. Wong, a Chinese-Canadian artist I didn't know well, was born in 1985 and had just acquired a New York dealer at the time of that art fair. *The West* is a fantasy landscape but with two raw, rough hills made from walnut-brown and black-brown strokes of dense paint. A near faceless and abstract figure in white looks out into a flat, sienna-brown field dabbled with hundreds of black dots. There are two abstract trees, possibly cottonwoods. A narrow road leads from the figure in white through the field. It disappears in the distance as it meets one of the hills, flattening as it recedes, and a vast sky between black and cobalt with countless dots signifying stars.

I thought it was luminous, if so brown a thing could be luminous, starry-night dazzling, and more mystical than mysterious. I saw serenity in its open space, not sadness. At 39 by 31 inches, it has presence but would sparkle even if it were much smaller. Wong might have had big Western skies in mind. He'd lived in Edmonton, I learned later, and Saskatchewan has big, open skies. But, I also learned, Edmonton is a big city, Wong spent almost all of his time in his studio working, and *The West* depicts what he imagined a wild Texas landscape to be. I also learned that he frantically repainted *The West* in Dallas the day after he arrived for the fair.

Wong lived a savant and died a suicide in 2019. His painting career was short — seven or eight years — but prolific. He did indeed work fast and constantly but, aside from *The West* and one painting each at the Met and MoMA, I'd seen his work off and on at art fairs and at auction previews. Almost everything belongs either to private collectors who cherish his work or to Wong's parents and the foundation they've established to steward his renown.

Alas, I missed the retrospective of Wong's work that the DMA mounted in early 2023, so, while visiting Amsterdam, I definitely didn't want to miss Matthew Wong / Vincent Van Gogh: *Painting as a Last Resort* at the Van Gogh Museum. It's about 60 paintings and works on paper by Wong alongside five paintings by Van Gogh owned by the museum. Wong's work, covering his short career, is beautiful, and I left ravished by its beauty, but it's melancholic, strange in its harmony and dissonance, innocent, buoyant, spooky, and a mirror of Wong's idiosyncratic take on art history.





**Left:** Matthew Wong. (© 2023 Matthew Wong Foundation) **Right:** Matthew Wong, *See You on the Other Side*, 2019. (© 2023 Matthew Wong Foundation, Pictoright, Amsterdam, 2023)

The sheer beauty and magic of Wong's work are examples of what drew me to art history and what keep me looking at art and loving art. There's no irony or easy-sleazy cant. His art goes far beyond mundane, dumb preoccupations. It kindles a love of the beautiful as well as reflection and dreaming. Isn't this always the art that lasts?

The intelligently arranged exhibition has six themes over two floors. It begins with a good introductory video that draws from interviews with New York magazine art critic Jerry Saltz, a savvy, venerable presence who spotted Wong early in his short career as a clairvoyant artist. The wonderful Los Angeles–based artist Jonas Wood is also in the video, as well as Joost van der Hoeven, the Dutch curator of the show. Wong's work stands on its own and bewitches without biography, but his autism, severe anxiety and depression, and Tourette's syndrome are part of his sad life as well. Once his mental health is raised in the video, it's mostly and wisely dropped. Wong isn't a poster child.

The sections of the exhibition examine his artistic self-education, his palette, his bold handling of paint, his early Chinese-inspired black-and-white pictures, usually in ink, the terrain of his imaginary landscapes, and his final works, which are a collective suicide note. The organization of the show makes sense, offers something for everyone, and keeps the focus on the art without abolishing his persona.

On Wong's self-education, the exhibition and catalogue navigate, more or less well, a sticky state. Wong had an MA in photography, so he wasn't untrained. He's called an outsider artist but he's far from being a folk artist. He's fringe in that he's Chinese-Canadian but, more correctly, he was born in Canada to Chinese parents who lived in Hong Kong but moved back to Canada. His education is American, at the University of Michigan, where he studied anthropology. He's not Chinese and he's not American and, goodness, he's far too fascinating to be Canadian. If we look at anthropology as the study of origin stories, which are usually blurry, we get a path to Wong.

We get hints but never figure him out. That mystery is an essential ingredient in any great artist. *The Kingdom*, from 2017, isn't a problem picture — it's a gorgeous challenge picture. It asks, "Where is this artist coming from?" on the one hand and then answers, "Don't get bogged down in where he's coming from." I looked at this luscious thing and, as an art historian in good standing, thought *Klimt*. Klimt painted the famous *Woman in Gold*, but his landscapes and lake scenes are often made from dense verticals and dabs of jewel-like color.



Close-up of Wong's brushstrokes. (Brian Allen)

I could have thought *Klimt* and called it a day, but Wong was his own thing. His work is refined and raw at the same time. His handling of paint is sure, but he's not a slasher like Sargent, though he did go through what I'd call a de Kooning phase. Wong's dots, dabs, and strokes are often persnickety, not fastidious or painstaking and not laborious but disciplined to the point of fretfulness. Even his big strokes of paint are more like sculpture. *Painting as a Last Resort* is the exhibition's subtitle. Wong had serious mental problems from childhood. Painting gave him purpose, stability, and calm. Looking at his work, I feel he has an architect's sensibility. With paint, he's building a refuge, to exacting specifications. Van Gogh's handling of paint is delicate, even melodic, compared with Wong's.

*The Kingdom* depicts an imaginary world, though Edmonton has lots of birch forests. For all its order, Wong's world is a pagan one. He's got Monet's yen for complementary yellows, blues, and oranges. It's a lush kingdom, ordered and wild. Birches thrive in New England forests and along roadsides. They're very hardy. I love their clean whiteness. Tucked in the forest, and this is a standard Wong passage, is a tiny figure, far tinier than the figure in *The West*, housed in what looks like a shrine with a royal blue background. The structure and figure are set in a matte blue-green forest floor. The figure, whatever it meant to Wong, found a calming, cosseted spot.



Matthew Wong, *The Realm of Appearances*, 2018. (© Matthew Wong Foundation, Pictoright, Amsterdam, 2023)



Wong looked at Klimt but, in walking through the exhibition, I saw touches of Milton Avery, Edvard Munch, Joan Mitchell, Lois Dodd, Alex Katz, Henri Rousseau, Yayoi Kusama, Chinese screen painters, and the Fauves as well as artists such as Jonas Wood and Peter Shear, who introduced him to the art dealer John Cheim, who networked Wong in the New York art market. I've never used Facebook for more than sending birthday greetings, learning about friends' kids, and knowing who's on vacation where, but in the early Teens, Facebook facilitated a worldwide, intense artist community in which Wong was an inquisitive, absorptive presence. He probably learned a lot from Shear, an enigmatic, spare abstract artist and also a fine colorist.



Vincent van Gogh, Wheatfield with a Reaper, 1889. (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam)

Wong looked closely at Van Gogh as an artistic role model and surely saw his own troubled life and Van Gogh's heading in the same direction. For the Van Gogh Museum, these two facts make it a sensible home for a Wong survey show, the first in Europe. It's an accommodating host. The exhibition looks great. With only five Van Gogh paintings and one drawing, Van Gogh is not much of a presence. I was there for Wong and didn't think about Van Gogh much at all, and the museum seems fine with visitors thinking as I did.

Here and there, the two artists paint similar subjects. Thick radial beams of sun in Van Gogh's skies appear in Wong's, but more insistently. Wong is modern and had a century on Van Gogh in deploying paint for paint's sake. I'm happy that the museum forbears, regarding Van Gogh, for another reason. One of the worst exhibitions I've ever seen was the Van Gogh Museum's 2018 show comparing David Hockney and Van Gogh. The museum, a private one that needs money from admissions, wanted Hockney's art and fame to goose its visitorship.

Hockney wanted cachet. Most of the Hockney art in the show was owned by Hockney or his foundation. "Compared to Van Gogh" isn't a bad line on a work of art's résumé. The Hockneys were recent pieces showing that he's well past his prime. All of this was under a different director. Emelie Gordenker, who runs the place now, isn't a mercenary, grasping art historian. For her, splash is nice but not at the expense of sound academic ideas.



Matthew Wong, *The Journey Home*, 2017. (Courtesy of HomeArt © Matthew Wong Foundation, Pictoright, Amsterdam, 2023)



Sometimes Wong's pictures yearn for peace or solitude, but sometimes they're vibrant, even jazzy. The Journey Home, from 2017, is a small triptych. It's one of many blazing-sun pictures, but I see it also as a voyage-of-life series, with calm seas and a scene that's user-friendly to the point of the touristical. The middle painting is turbulent while the third is a sunset. Were periods of cheerful colors signs that Wong tried to pull himself from depression? We don't know.

One of Wong's artist friends, discussing Wong's debilitating anxiety in the catalogue, said there's goal-oriented anxiety, which most of us feel at one point or another, and then there's what she called "existential haste." This was Wong's condition in 2019, when his palette turned blue, basically cobalt blue, with other colors secondary if he used them at all. Path to the Sea, one of his last paintings, is 79 by 70 inches, and, as his work goes, it's big. It's art noir as well as a nocturne, with what had become a standard Wong motif — a path — leading either to an abstract sea or to nothingness.

Wong was not a lonely genius oblivious to the outside world. He studied art history, not as an academic but as an artist seeking motifs, paint handling, or colors that intrigued him. And though he might have positioned himself as a naïf, he wasn't one. He understood the art market better than he seemed to and subtly located a niche. That the niche is art of beauty and mystery is fine with me.



Installation view of *Matthew Wong / Vincent van Gogh: Painting as a Last Resort*. (Van Gogh Museum, photo: Michael Floor)

The catalogue is unusually good. It's only 170 pages and softcover but feels substantial. Illustrations are big and comprehensive. Joost van der Hoeven, the curator, wrote a thorough, part-biographical, part-art-historical essay. Richard Schiff's essay is more philosophical. John Yau considers Wong's Chinese identity and his passion for Chinese art. There's also a good interview with Sofia Silva, a young Italian artist whose social-media correspondence with Wong was the deepest. The book is closely aligned to the exhibition on view, which is becoming rarer and rarer. Exhibition catalogue essays often have a tangential relationship with the art and interpretation served to the public. Van der Hoeven is a very good curator. I'm looking forward to his next project. Schiff and Yau are sensitive, smart critics.

*Path to the Sea* is the last thing in the exhibition. The rest of the art is displayed against standard white walls with standard museum lighting. *Path to the Sea* is alone in a room with dark walls, dark-blue carpeting, and plush seats covered with velvety blue fabric. Visitors are told to look and absorb as long as they want. Though we know how Wong's story ends, I can't call the painting depressing. It's too beautiful, as is all of Wong's work. Enigmatic, bizarre, and impenetrable, too. There's only so much of Wong's work that art historians can till and probe. It's so seductive that it will always invite anyone and everyone with a heart and soul. - Brian T. Allen is National Review's art critic.