

MARTIN WONG

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P. P. O. W.

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Near a Long Island beach I visit in the summer is a lovely New England-style house, white shingled, wide porched, run-down, that reminds me of Edward Hopper. Chatting on the sand with its owner once, I decided to compliment him by telling him so, and got the reply, "Ah yes. Edward Hopper. Does he live around here?" This might have been a dry joke on the quality of art education in America, but coming from this particular man I doubt it. In any case, what surprised me with Hopper would not with Martin Wong: if New York's '80s generation of gallery-goers, seeing a certain building type, may think of Wong reflexively, he is scarcely a household name.

In the catalogue for Wong's winning retrospective "Sweet Oblivion," the New Museum's Dan Cameron (cocurator, with Illinois State University's Barry Blinderman) makes meat of this relative obscurity, attributing it to, oh, all that's wrong with today's art world. The truth is, though, that any number of good artists of the East Village era are just as poorly advertised (a personal favorite, for example, being Arch Connelly, once associated with the Cockettes, the '70s gay-oriented San Francisco performance troupe that Wong was involved with too). In fact, short of the

work of comet-type stars like Keith Haring, Wong's '80s work is as fondly recalled as any of that time and place. His current paintings (seen at P.P.O.W.), including an interesting group in a new botanical vein, continue to impress; but Wong will probably always be associated with the walls of the Lower East Side, about which he was as melancholically lyrical as Hopper was about the clapboard architecture of Cape Cod.

Actually, Wong recalls more readily the Hopper of Greenwich Village, the painter of *Early Sunday Morning*, 1930. His work has precedents in the urban visual journalism of Hopper's Ash Can School cousins, and he often sounds a chord of Hopperesque big-city loneliness—which, however, he tempers with a warmer heart than Hopper ever pretended to. Through much of Wong's time in New York (he has now returned to San Francisco), he specialized in describing East Village tenements, fixing the walls of these often derelict buildings as fine grids, each brick an uneven, individually depicted rectangle. Although he is quite capable of rendering figures, faces, and even portraits, his walls have as much character as any human presence, which in fact they tend to overshadow. The result is that the paintings powerfully convey the literal hardness of the '80s EV as a place to live.

For all their detail, Wong's paintings are something other than realist. By his own description, he was a devoted tourist in Loisaída, the Hispanic Lower East Side, to which he had an inspiring guide in his late friend Miguel Piñero, its strong poet and playwright. So his art is full of Loisaída life, from its flowerings in graffiti art and in writing like Piñero's to its depths of poverty and violence. At the same time, Wong's work is full of visual knowledge of different kinds—a grab bag of devices for dealing with his experience. He has said, for example, "If you look at all the Chinese landscapes in the museum they . . . write a poem in the sky, and I do that too." So writing (often by Piñero) may hang in the skies of Wong's EV works, now in English, now in Spanish. It also appears as his own version of sign language—regular rows of gesticulating hands surmounting stylized shirt-cuffs (a roman-alphabet translation is never far off on the canvas). Those skies may also show the constellations in the connect-the-dots style of a star chart, setting the city's frantic temporality against the unchanging cosmos. To these codes that declare themselves as such, Wong often adds codes of visual literacy: frames-within-frames, basically flat subjects shown flush and contiguous with the picture plane, a vocabulary of tricks to



Left to right: Martin Wong, *Iglesia Pentecostal*, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 108 x 84".
Martin Wong, *Big Heat*, 1988, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 48".

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mess with the picture's picture-ness.

Wong is no naïf, clearly (Cameron makes something of a hash of deciding whether or not to call him self-taught), and you might find his devices in John Frederick Peto or Jasper Johns. But where Johns was innovating against the high pressure of Abstract Expressionism, Wong's drive

seems less forceful intellect than romantic sweetness. The mood of his work is set by his care for his neighborhood, and also by the firemen who kiss in *Big Heat*, 1988, by the love of Paco for Cupcake in *The Annunciation According to Mikey Piñero*, 1984 (one of several prison scenes), and by Wong's own obvious feelings for Piñero himself. Even the '90s Chinatown paintings, which have been discussed persuasively in relation to ideas of stereotype (sexual as well as racial), retain a boy's wide-eyed awe in the face of his own complex heritage.

I love the sign-language pictures. They are wonderful puzzles, visually luxurious yet decipherable as text. Most revealing, though, is their inclusiveness, at once generous, knowing, and witty: Wong invites the deaf into the painting as if it spoke its language aloud. □

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