



Martin Wong: Attorney Street: Handball Court with Autobiographical Poem by Piñero, 1982-84, oil on canvas, 35 1/2 by 48 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. All photos, unless otherwise noted, courtesy the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York.



Psychiatrists Testify: Demon Dogs Drive Man to Murder, 1980, acrylic on canvas, 36 by 48 inches. Photos this page Fred Scruton.

# A City of Bricks and Ciphers

Martin Wong emerged in the early 1980s with obsessively detailed paintings inspired by the architecture and street culture of New York City's Lower East Side. In a current retrospective, these urban reveries hang alongside Wong's sign-language paintings, prison allegories and nostalgic depictions of Chinese-American life.

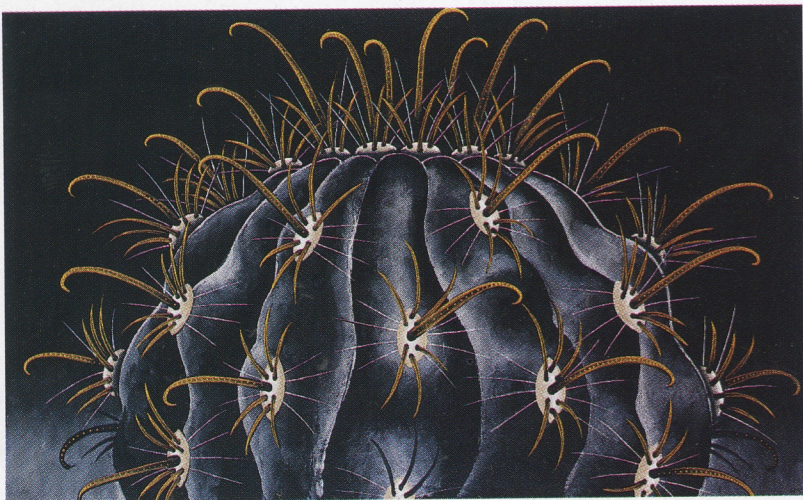
BY BARRY SCHWABSKY

At first, "Sweet Oblivion" looks like just the wrong title for the New Museum's recent retrospective of Martin Wong's work. Wong is a painter of memory and desire, one whose every brushstroke is tinged with a memorializing passion that never stops to ask whether its object is real or imaginary. His peculiar and highly literary synthesis of allegorical reverie and social realism, formal concision and memorial ardor is perhaps even more poignant today than when he first attracted notice in the early '80s as part of the emerging East Village art scene. The exhibition's co-curator Dan Cameron recalls: "Although, ironically enough, most of Martin Wong's artistic successes took place in SoHo, he represented an idealized composite of the East Village artist."<sup>1</sup>

Nobody talks much about the East Village anymore. It's as though the mere mention of it might revive memories of youthful indulgences best forgotten. Luckily, this exhibition's curators know better. Cameron, now the New Museum's senior curator, was one of the most active critics on the New York scene at the time. Barry Blinderman, now director of the Illinois State University Galleries at Normal (where "Sweet Oblivion" debuted), was co-director of the Semaphore and Semaphore East Galleries, where Wong's first one-man shows took place in 1984, 1985 and 1986. Wong turns out to be the opposite of our stereotype of the East Village artist: he is a coolly reticent painter



My Secret World, 1978-81, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 48 by 68 inches. Collection Diane and Steven Jacobson.



*Ferocactus Peninsulae V. Viscainensis, 1997-98, acrylic on canvas, 30 by 48 inches. Courtesy P.P.O.W. Photo Adam Reich.*

up with the persistent melancholia of Wong's paintings and, no doubt, to his admitted feeling of being a "tourist" rather than a native of the "Loisaida"<sup>3</sup> he so obviously loved and knew well, gives way to its own pleasures, those of the cherished surfaces of ordinary things, of streets and walls as well as faces and bodies.<sup>4</sup> And, of course, those of painting itself, insofar as the brick-by-brick construction of those walls is a figure for the careful, stroke-by-stroke construction of the painted surface. Wong's bricks are nearly as voluptuously described as the macho prison inmates, each one rendered at once as a type and in its specificity like a portrait, and their color is always that of something smoldering—recalling not the fire that baked them but the passion that sees them so intensely.

For whatever reasons, both the Loisaida and prison series seem to peter out after 1988, and in comparison, the Chinatown paintings that occupied Wong in the early '90s are disappointing. In many of them, he's become something much more like a conventional Pop artist than he was before, knowingly reproducing stereotyped images from mass culture, in this case a sort of homegrown chinoiserie—posterlike images of Bruce Lee as a Kung Fu star or as the Green Hornet's sidekick Kato in glaring colors that are very far indeed from the subdued, ferruginous tones that had once characterized his palette. A different, more successful group of Chinatown paintings retains the old coloristic reserve but now, for the first time (other than the special case of the prison pictures) depicting interiors with figures—mostly women, or men in drag. Among them is the 1992 tondo *In the Studio*, in which two female painters prepare to depict a nude male model in a space constructed of a complex set of flat interlocking planes. *Saturday Night*, also from 1992, offers an even more ambiguous scene in which the hedonistic depiction of two young women bathing each other—the kind of image that could have come right out of a (straight) soft-core porn magazine—is lent a strange solemnity by the austere composition and chaste tones of brown, white and gray with which the

bathroom setting is described.

I can only assume that works like *In the Studio* and *Saturday Night* represent the direction Wong's art would ultimately have taken, had not illness intervened to decree an unwelcome hiatus to his artistic activity. The good news is that, as shown by a concurrent exhibition of new work at the New York gallery P.P.O.W., Wong has recently begun

painting again. It's still too early to tell, however, what his new direction will be. So far, the uncertainties that bedeviled his efforts early this decade are still with him, perhaps even amplified. Some of the new paintings are street scenes much like those of the '80s but more graphic in execution and lacking their original depth of feeling; they strike me as recapitulations without much conviction. More promising are some quasi-abstract studies of plant forms. While they don't match the resonance of Wong's best work, they are forcefully composed, tough and unsentimental—and in any case they show the artist forthrightly venturing into new territory.

"I found Rome a city of bricks," boasted Augustus, "and left it a city of marble." So much the worse for Rome, perhaps, although beneath or behind the city of marble there remained an invisible city of bricks, one Calvino somehow left unwritten; but New York will always, I suspect, be a city of bricks. As beautifully as it's been recorded elsewhere—some of Alex Katz's cityscapes come to mind—Martin Wong is the painter who has most lovingly glorified certain otherwise ignored corners of this not quite imperial city, brick by brick. □

1. Dan Cameron, "Brick by Brick: New York According to Martin Wong," *Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong*, New York, Rizzoli/New Museum Books, 1998, p. 2.
2. Yasmin Ramirez, "La Vida: The Life and Writing of Miguel Piñero in the Art of Martin Wong," *Sweet Oblivion*, p. 38.
3. The nickname "Loisaida" evolved among the Lower East Side's many Spanish-speaking residents.
4. Wong's comments on the Lower East Side are quoted in Ramirez's essay in *Sweet Oblivion*.

*"Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong" was seen at Illinois State University Galleries, Normal [Jan. 13-Feb. 22] and the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York [May 28-Sept. 13]. The accompanying catalogue includes essays by the co-curators, Dan Cameron and Barry Blinderman, as well as Yasmin Ramirez, Lydia Yee and Carlo McCormick. A show of Wong's recent paintings appeared at P.P.O.W. in New York [June 4-July 3].*

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*La Vida, 1988, acrylic on canvas, 96 by 114 inches. Private collection. Photo Larry Lamay.*