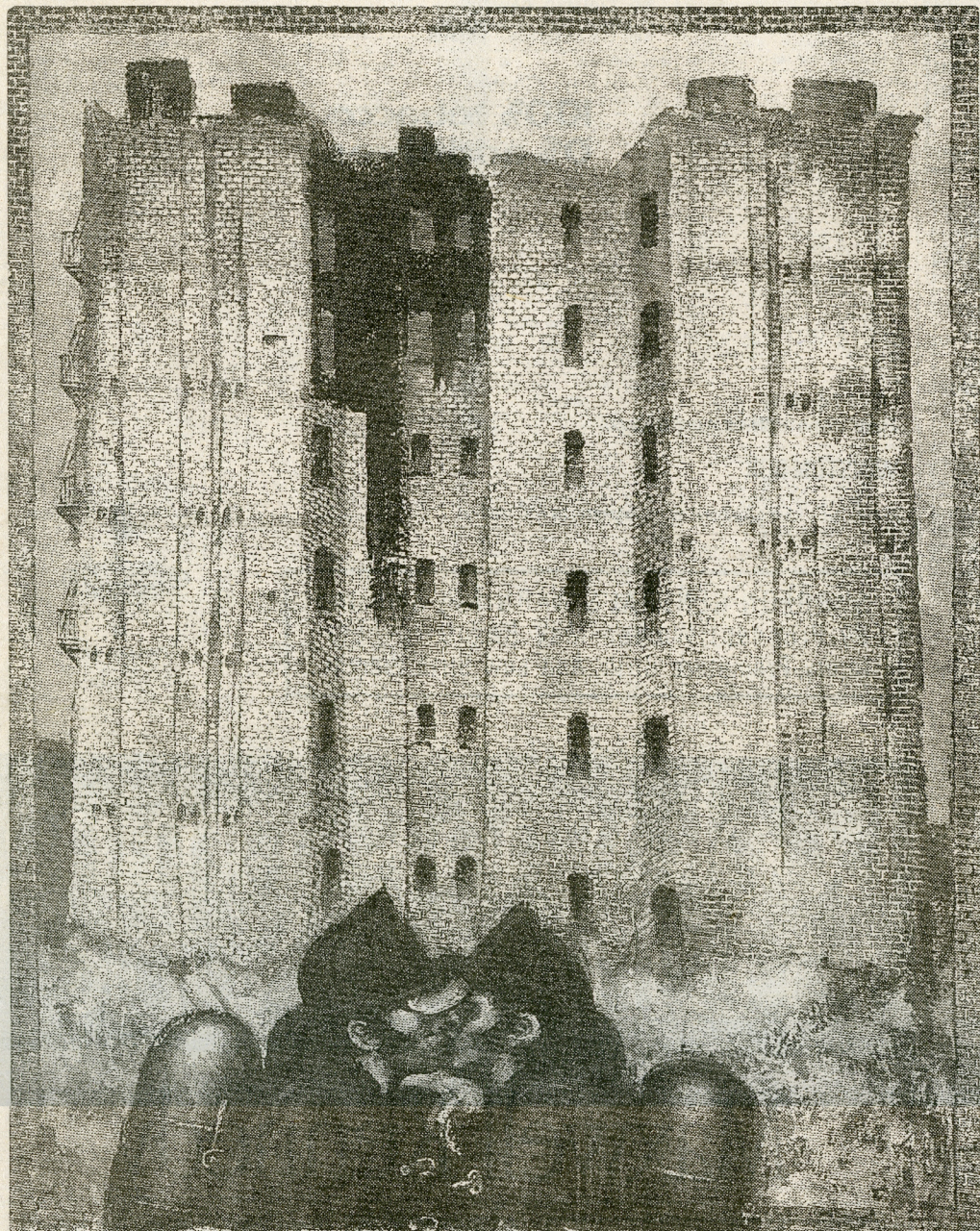


GUY TREBAY

Martin Wong's Return
From Oblivion

The Bricklayer's Art



Big Heat, 1988

Webster's calls *oblivion* the "condition or state of being forgotten or unknown" and, until recently, this condition or state would have well described the painter Martin Wong.

Among observers of the late-'80s art scene, Wong was celebrated for cityscapes that, as the critic Elizabeth Hess once wrote, grappled with "urban oppression" and yet, unlike the work of some politically motivated artists, were "more interested in painting the town than proselytizing."

His work was widely exhibited and cautiously admired by an art press uncertain of how to categorize him. His pictures were bought by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and also made into posters for the gay disco, the Saint. He attracted a coterie of dedicated curators and collectors.

The part of the town Wong painted was primarily the Lower East Side, a sea of rubble that was also the site of New York's last great bohemian flowering. As curator Dan Cameron points out in *Sweet Oblivion*, the catalogue for the New Museum's Martin Wong retrospective, which opens May 28, the East Village

scene from 1983 to 1987 was hedonistic, trendy, and sometimes "embarrassingly idealistic." It was a period of "clubhouse to hip hop crossover," of black-suited aesthetes, of superstar graffiti artists, and of Super-8 auteurs.

If there was no obvious place amid the hipsters of the day for a queer Asian ex-San Francisco hippie who painted meticulous pictures of urban decay, that didn't deter Wong. He asserted himself in quiet ways, first with paintings incorporating tabloid headlines in sign language, later in depictions of burning tenements set against gilded diagrams of the constellations, and then in scenes of jailhouse blocks framed in poetic texts by collaborator and friend Miguel Piñero.

"Martin really doesn't fit in anywhere," says Cameron. "I always got a guilty charge from enjoying his work because it's crazy and queer and into scrambling identity and not couched in the kind of reference that would get it approved by *October* magazine." Wong's painting has few of the hallmarks of critically certified late-century art production. "It's not coy or ironic or mediated or tongue-in-cheek. He's never been in a Whitney Biennial." With "little critical apparatus" to support his reputation, there was a danger of Wong "being typed a curiosity," and of the work disappearing.

THE ARTIST HIMSELF has at times been in peril of disappearing. He's been battling AIDS for over a decade. For the past two years, though, the 52-year-old Wong has been in good health and living in San Francisco with his mother, Florence Fie. Reached by phone there last week, he talked about his times:

"People are always saying I'm self-taught," said Wong, "but I have a ceramics degree from Humboldt State College. I've been painting since I was 13. After I got out of college in 1974

I settled down in Eureka, California. I made ceramics and did drawings at arts fairs. I was known as the 'Human Instamatic.' It was \$7.50 for a portrait. My record was 27 fairs in one day.

"Friends said to me, 'If you're so good, why don't you go to New York?' On my first visit, I went to the top of the Empire State Building and then to the top of the Statue of Liberty and then I walked back along the waterfront on the East Side. I spotted this classic old waterfront hotel. I went in and asked, 'Do you have any rooms?' The manager said, 'The ceiling collapsed in three rooms on the top floor. If you clean up all three, we'll give you one free for three months.'

"I ended up living in Meyer's Hotel for a long time. I started doing the sign language paintings there. I'd seen tabloid headlines for the Son of Sam murders—'Demon Dogs Drive Man to Murder'—and I kept thinking they would make good paintings.

But I didn't exactly know how. Then a guy on the Lex gave me a card with sign language on it and I gave him a quarter and I thought, 'That's it. I'll spell it out.'

"At a certain point the hotel was sold and the new owners paid me \$2000 to leave. That's how I ended up on the Lower East Side. Nobody told me you don't go shopping for real estate at night but, believe it or not, I got shown three apartments the first night I went looking. I was outside one building where these teenagers were hanging out—I didn't realize they were drug dealers—and I asked if they knew of any apartments. They pointed to the top floor of one building: 'That apartment's vacant but the landlord doesn't want to rent it.' I came back and the landlord asked me, 'What do you do for a living?' I said, 'I paint.' He gave it to me immediately.

"The only people who had money then were the dealers. And the dealers never left, really. They used to rent the stairwell outside my door as a shooting gallery. I had to walk past them to get to the apartment. But it was a very nice walk-up with 20 windows facing Stanton Street and there was a Puerto Rican super, an ex-boxer named Pedro Rodriguez, who sort of came along with the deal.

"When I was doing the sign language paintings, I heard about the 'Crime Show' at ABC No Rio. I brought some paintings over and they put them up. There was actually no room left on the walls, so they hung them on the ceiling. I met Miguel Piñero when he was doing a reading there. Besides being a playwright and a poet, he was supposed to be this big criminal. I used to think I really knew Piñero, but now I think I didn't. He had a big gay following, and he had these boys, but he never said he was gay. Even when he was staying with me, he was also always living with a woman. Piñero also had people convinced he was still doing holdups. It only occurred to me later that he was too famous to be pulling off crimes. It would be like John Leguizamo committing robberies. Someone calls the police and says, 'Hey, I just got robbed by Mambo Mouth.'

"My day job was at Pearl Paint. I made extra money stretching canvases. I also had a little scam where I bought antiquities at Christie's East and then sold them at Sotheby's. I'd go to auctions and find things. I bought a Sixth Dynasty gilt bronze dragon head for \$50 and later sold it at Sotheby's for a lot of money. I found an album that I realized was an original of the Ten Bamboo Studio, a book of poems illustrated with the first attempts at color-block printing, and paid \$30. I got \$1800 for that.

"It was an exciting time. There was hip hop and Afrika Bambaata and the Roxy. I met Ramelzee and Lee Quinones and Daze and Lady Pink and started collecting their work. Eventually I donated my collection to the Museum of the City of New York. I got to know Keith Haring and Basquiat. There were so many shows and parties, but mostly I was at home painting those goddamn little bricks. I got the image from a toy railroad station I bought at the Canal Street Market. The way the bricks were rendered made me

think of how ubiquitous they were on the Lower East Side. For 18 years, until I moved back to my parents' house, my bathroom window looked out on this devastated landscape. I always thought it was beautiful. In the afternoon, the bricks were covered in beautiful gold light and that's what I painted. It doesn't look like that anymore. Everything's stuccoed over now."



Wong at rest