

**IGLESIA PENTECOSTAL  
CEDROS DE DIOS**

**REV. ROBERTO VASQUES**

**25 AVE. B.**





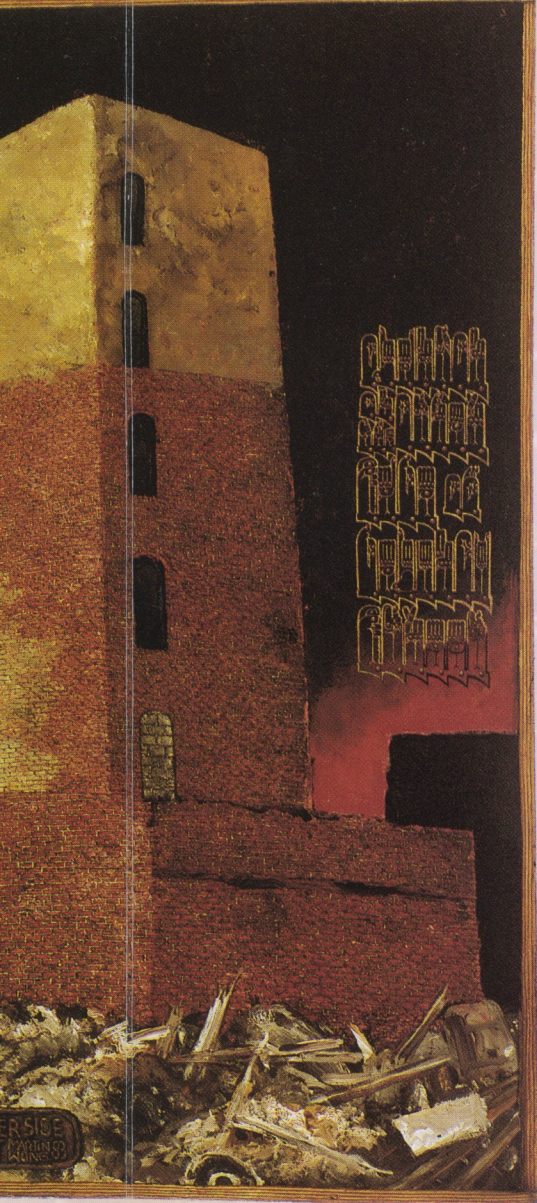
## The Writing on the Wall (Every Picture Tells a Storey, Don't It?)

*Even now it's like the moment in these paintings never existed. (M. Wong, 1986)*

By 1984, six years after moving to New York from San Francisco, Martin Wong had become notable for his paintings of crumbling tenement façades in fantastic landscapes featuring gilded constellation diagrams, stylized hearing-impaired symbols, and street-beat poetry by Miguel Piñero. Even within the quirky, flashier-than-thou East Village arts scene in the 1980s, Wong's paintings always stood out. An eccentric character in the artworld—a Chinese-American portraying an Hispanic neighborhood—he revitalized traditional landscape painting with bricks, iron gates, chain link, sign language and verse. His paintings charted a world of unquenchable desire—the steadily burning flame of unrequited love, the junkie's endless craving for oblivion, the poet's wheel of misfortune, and the alchemist's or astrologer's quest for meaning in the elements and the stars. From 1982, when he began his paintings based on Lower East Side tenements, until around 1988, he painstakingly reconstructed from memory the ghostly façades of neighborhoods where a pervasive Latin beat commingled with shouts from the street, the mantras of heroin hawkers, the strident screams of fire engines, ambulances and police sirens, and the spicy

aroma of *arroz con pollo*.

Wong installed himself in a studio on the sixth floor of a tenement building on DeLancy Street. There was no door leading to his studio either too immersed in his work or too shy to come from the street. You'd have to call the artist for an elevator, or if the line was busy, you'd have to knock on the door, you'd have to dodge the door, you'd have to hold your breath to escape the apartment, you squeeze through a room hung floor-to-ceiling with paintings, to the artist's studio, which was big enough to accommodate four or five canvases, either one he was working on. In an earlier work—he was through the buildup of texture this morning—the studio window was of the same size as the one that was more than a few yards away. B



pollo.  
 himself in the heart of this cacophonous state, living  
 the sixth floor of a walk-up on Ridge at Stanton  
 doorbell at the building's entryway, and he was  
 in his painting or too far up to hear a visitor's cry  
 d have to wait in line at the pay phone on the cor-  
 for entry, that is if the telephone hadn't been sab-  
 wasn't busy. (Martin loved "bricking in" a paint-  
 er hours with a friend on the phone.) Then, once the  
 down the six flights of stairs to unlock the front  
 dodge folks shooting up dope on the stairway and  
 escape the stench of stale urine. Finally in Wong's  
 squeezed past paintings crowding a narrow hall,  
 g floor to ceiling with his impressive graffiti art col-  
 st's studio. This central room was barely large  
 odate his biggest paintings, and there were often  
 s, either finished or in progress, stacked behind the  
 on. More often than not, he'd be painting over an  
 as thrifty and circumspect, and loved the natural  
 his method afforded him. The direct view out the  
 of the window of the facing tenement, not more  
 way. But from an oblique angle, you'd notice brick

buildings in the distance resembling ones the artist commonly painted.  
 Wong's art historical influences are diverse. The frontality and dis-  
 regard for linear perspective in many of his compositions, the inconsis-  
 tencies in scale, as well as the gold-outlining the artist has used on  
 hand signs, figures, and windows alike, link Wong to medieval and  
 non-western artists, intent on showing what they know, and thus pro-  
 viding more detail than meets the eye. In addition, Wong's integra-  
 tion of writing – be it stylized sign language characters, constellation  
 configurations, descriptions, titles, or poems in English or Spanish –  
 relates the artist to sources and traditions such as Persian and  
 Christian illuminated manuscript painting, Chinese painting from the  
 Sung dynasty to the present, and American folk art. There is also a  
 more than passing reference to fortresses and church towers as por-  
 trayed by Late Gothic Italian painters.

*"You shall by no means lessen your daily number of bricks." – Exodus 5.19*

Earth, presumably the least ethereal of the four elements, dominates  
 both the appearance and symbolism of Wong's work. What little sky  
 is visible in the paintings is either black or grey, or stained reddish  
 brown by the blaze and smoke of a tenement fire. The closest we get  
 to water is a jail cell sink and toilet. There are no trees or grass to give  
 us any indication of season. Only mineral compounds – brick, stone,  
 concrete, iron gates, barbed wire – flourish in his barren landscapes.  
 Wong's representation of the biblical reference "from dust you were  
 made, to dust you shall return" is manifest in the brick buildings, which  
 are bearers of transients, landlords and tenants alike. Until, of course,  
 they, too, are torn or burned down. Unlike the Dutch still life and  
 landscape masters, Wong needs no skulls, peeled fruit, dead animals,  
 or graveyards to allude to our ephemeral existence here on earth.  
 The buildings and storefronts say it all.

When considering Wong's technique and earthy palette, it is inter-  
 esting to note that his art degree was not in painting, but in ceramics,  
 a practice directly involving earth (clay) and metallic pigments which  
 transform when fired in a kiln. Wong continues to place great empha-  
 sis on the choice of pigments for his paintings. Although he paints in  
 acrylic, the colors in this man-made medium consist of naturally occur-  
 ring minerals. He uses red iron oxide mixed with white for his under-  
 painting. The burnt siennas and umbers that figure so prominently in  
 his paintings are just what their names imply – toasted dirt from Siena  
 (terra di Siena) and Umbria.

Bricks imply, quite simply, matters of the earth, humanity, toil. Brick  
 gets its red color from its iron compound content, which when heated  
 – in ancient times by baking in the sun, and later in kilns – turns into iron  
 oxide. Next to stone, brick is one of the oldest building materials, dat-  
 ing as far back as 4,000 B.C. in Babylonia, Assyria, and Egypt.  
 Cuneiform characters were drawn into clay tablets in Sumeria around  
 the same time. Bricks, like language, are building blocks of civilization.

Each of the hundreds or even thousands of bricks per painting is indi-  
 vidualy rendered – there are no impressionistic shortcuts or aerial per-  
 spective tricks obviating the need for detail. Add the red iron oxide  
 content of his paint to the labor intensity of such a task, and part of  
 Wong's project can be seen as bricklaying: He is building the paintings  
 as much as he is painting the buildings. Punctuated only by the dark  
 corridors and alleyways between tenements, the view in many of his  
 paintings is an undulating sea of brick bathed in imaginary golden sun-  
 light. (The only real sun you can get in Lower Manhattan is on rooftop  
 "tar beaches.") If, as the artist quips, these walls cannot speak, they  
 certainly appear to emanate light. In highlighting the mortar in gold,  
 perhaps Wong, like alchemists of old, seeks the transmutation of iron  
 oxide into gold brick. After all, in alchemical symbolism, the sun con-  
 trols gold, which represents immortality – the only way out of the  
 inevitable oxidation involved in our lives.

Anyway these were all functioning storefronts back then, even the apparently abandoned ones. Some sold religion. Some sold drugs. "The bodega sold dreams," as Mikey [Piñero] once said. (M. Wong, 1986)

In 1985 and 1986, Wong began painting nearly actual-sized frontal views of single storefronts. Encompassing the entire rectangle of the canvas, these included *Closed*, a gated, chained and padlocked Lower East Side storefront, the scissor-gated *Iglesia Pentecostal*, and several paintings of the metal roll-up gates which are ubiquitous in Manhattan. His program at the time was brilliantly simple: one painting = one store. Recalling the texture and concept of Jasper Johns' flag paintings, which condensed image, symbol, and painting into a single entity, no sign language, constellations or illusion of depth were needed. Wong was zooming in for a large-screen close-up, seating us front and center in the theater of his obsession — only this time, with the curtains closed. These were paintings of a scale you could walk into, but no such invitation was being offered — the bodegas, pentecostal churches, and poetry stores were all inexorably closed.

Beyond their art historical allusions, Wong's façades can be interpreted in the sense of the term implying "masks," or illusory personae. In a ten-year span, many of the storefronts in neighborhoods he portrayed had changed from Baptist churches to bodegas, from bridal shops

to laundries, from shooting galleries to art galleries and back again. In the building-as-canvas format, Wong found the ultimate solution to parallel quests: to relate painting and architecture in an inventive way, and to express "chains of desire, be they financial, chemical, karmic." Everything is transmutable and anything can be bought or sold. Painting is an exception, as it is created, acquired, exchanged, and even written about to serve some spiritual or material need.

—Barry Blinder

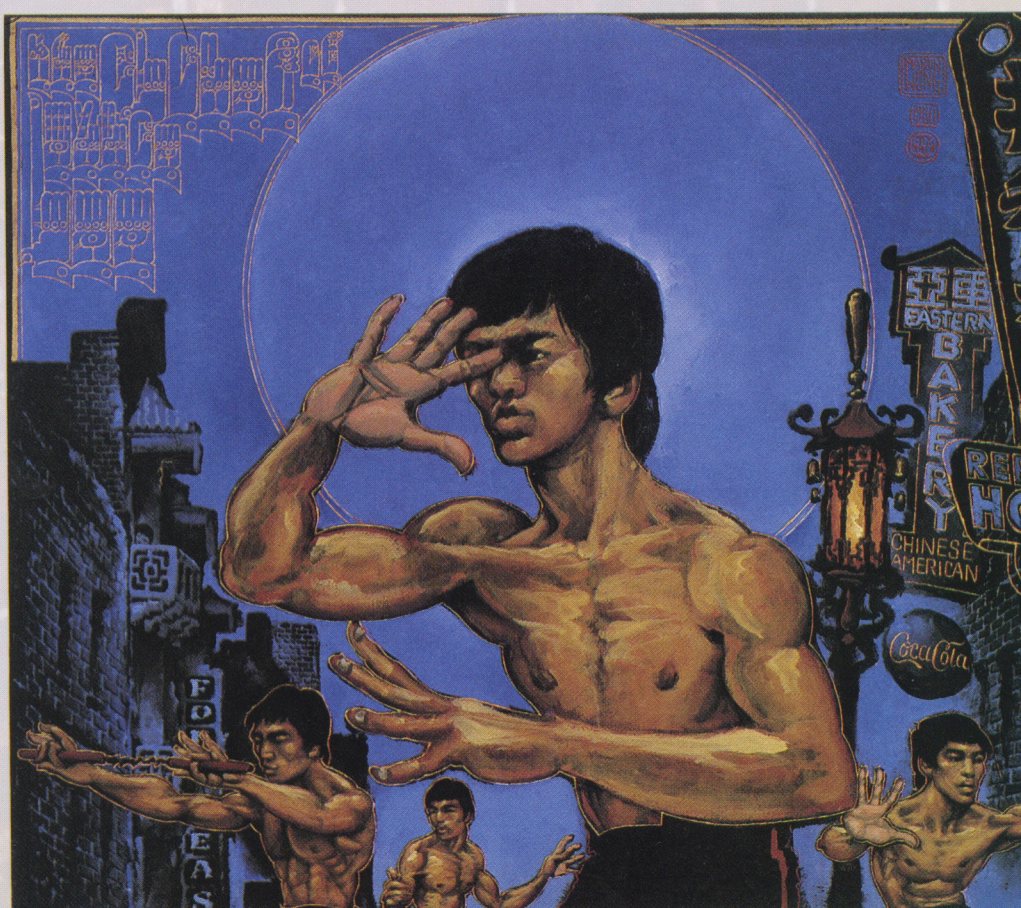
Front: **Iglesia Pentecostal** (detail), 108" x 84", 1985  
Verso: **Orion**, 36" diameter, 1984

Left: **Sweet Oblivion**, 84" x 108", 1983

Below: **The Clones of Bruce Lee**, 45" x 55", 1986  
courtesy of P.P.O.W.

Screen: **Untitled** (detail), 1986

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# SWEET OBLIVION:

The Urban Landscapes of

## MARTIN WONG

January 13, 1998 - February 22, 1998

University Galleries of Illinois State University

Opening Reception: January 20, 7:00pm

Video screening and lecture by Barry Blinderman:

Tuesday, January 27, 12:00 pm.



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