

newmuseumbooks



sweet oblivion

the urban landscape of **martin wong**

The visionary paintings of Martin Wong, one of the unsung geniuses of New York's East Village art scene of the 1980s, are collected here and examined in depth for the first time. Entirely self-taught, Wong creates intricate compositions that combine gritty social documents, cosmic witticisms, and highly charged symbolic languages—customized manual alphabets for the deaf, street graffiti, Nuyorican poetry, hand-lettered signs, meticulously rendered brick facades, rearrangements of Zodiac signs—sometimes within a single painting.

The urban landscape of Loisaida, the Hispanic section of the Lower East Side where Wong lives, is the source of his imagery. Whatever the theme—the survival of a neighborhood besieged by drugs and crime, homoerotic fantasies of men in uniform, the multiplicity of meaning in language, the kitsch and ornamentation of Chinatown USA—Wong's work is visually startling and movingly autobiographical.

This mid-career survey of Wong's work accompanies an exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York and the University Galleries, University of Illinois, in Normal, which has been organized by Dan Cameron and Barry Blinderman. Their insightful essays and those contributed by Lydia Yee, Yasmin Ramirez, and Carlo McCormick connect Wong's oeuvre with popular culture, cultural heritage, and the history of painting.

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the urban landscape of martin wong



La Vida, (detail) 1988, Acrylic on canvas, 96 x 114". Private collection. Photo: Larry Lamay

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the urban landscape of martin wong

Marcia Tucker, Dan Cameron, Barry Blinderman, Yasmin Ramirez,

Lydia Yee, Carlo McCormick

Edited by Amy Scholder

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NEW YORK

Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong

Illinois State University Galleries, Normal, Illinois
January 13 – February 22, 1998
Organized by Barry Blinderman, Director

New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York
May 28 – September 13, 1998
Organized by Dan Cameron, Senior Curator

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Acknowledgments

For those of us who have the enormous pleasure of knowing him personally, Martin Wong is one of the most consistently inspiring members of the downtown New York art community. Not only do his paintings establish a bond between individuals and groups that reflects the very best of the art world's ideals, but Wong's remarkably open personality is capable of stripping away all pretensions with the carefully considered, although sometimes blunt, ironies that are woven throughout his conversations. My heartfelt appreciation, and that of the New Museum, goes to Martin Wong for being such a lively and generous collaborator, and for his unique way of sharing his artistic vision.

A number of collaborators have proved essential to this project since its earliest stages. In recognizing Martin's achievements, it is impossible to overstate the central role that the artist's mother, Florence Fie, has played in his life and career, particularly in Wong's courageous ongoing struggle with AIDS. Foremost on the list is Director Barry Blinderman of the Illinois State University Galleries at Normal, who has played a singular role in Wong's career for more than a decade, and whose unflagging support for this exhibition was a key factor in the New Museum's decision to take the lead in its organization. Jeannette Ingberman and Papo Colo of Exit Art/The First World, who first hosted a survey of Wong's paintings a decade ago, have been very generous in allowing us continual access to their photographic archives of the artist's work. A major grant from the Rockefeller Foundation for 1998 exhibitions and programs and a grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts have been vital to making this exhibition and catalogue a reality. Without the generosity of Wong's collectors, who have agreed to part with his work during the months the exhibition is on view, this project would not have been possible.

As the first in the series of New Museum Books produced by Rizzoli International Publications, *Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong* represents the culmination of prodigious labors on the part of several gifted individuals. Curatorial Administrator Melanie Franklin and Series Editor Amy Scholder provided the energy and skills necessary to produce this publication, while the graphic design by Rex Ray and the photographs of Wong's work by Fred Scruton form the backbone of the book's visual appeal. Collaborating with such skilled writers as Barry Blinderman, Carlo McCormick, Yasmin Ramirez, and Lydia Yee has made the editorial development of the catalogue a true pleasure, and I am grateful for the time and effort they spent on their insightful texts. Last but far from least, the enthusiastic support for the book from Barbara Einzig at Rizzoli helped to harness our energies and transform *Sweet Oblivion* into a labor of love for all concerned.

It is an ongoing pleasure to work with those talented colleagues who enthusiastically and repeatedly achieve the impossible at the New Museum, and I would like to express my particular gratitude for the outstanding professional support provided by John Hatfield, Charlayne Haynes, Sam Clover, Raina Lampkins-Fielder, Gerardo Mosquera, Greg Sholette, Dennis Szakacs, and Marcia Tucker.

Dan Cameron

Senior Curator, New Museum of Contemporary Art

This book and exhibition are the culmination of several years of planning, concern, and support by a number of individuals. First of all, I would like to thank Florence Fie, Martin's devoted archivist and fan, who supplied me with files full of slides, press copies and other documentation of his career. Annie Herron, a supporter of Martin's work since the early 1980s—and my former colleague at Semaphore and Semaphore *East* galleries—filled in information and memory gaps crucial to the arrangement of the exhibition. I am also grateful to James Shapiro, for his generous role during the Semaphore days; to Melanie Franklin and John Hatfield of the New Museum for their help and advice in coordinating the exhibition; to Scott Cato, Wendy Olsoff, and Penny Pinkleton of P.P.O.W. Gallery; to Jeanette Ingberman, Papo Colo, and Stuart Anthony at Exit Art; and to my friends Sach Takayasu and Michael Blaine.

Without the collaboration of Dan Cameron, Senior Curator of the New Museum, and one of the first critics to recognize Martin's importance, this project would never have been realized. At University Galleries, I am greatly indebted to Greg Bowen, Curator of Art, who deftly co-designed the exhibition installation and the publicity materials; to my assistant, Jean Luther, for editorial aid, encouragement, and much more; to graduate assistants Jonathan Liss and Chris Gray, and to Gallery Interns Michelle Bowars and Teresa Forbes.

Finally, I would like to thank Martin Wong for continuing to create astonishingly vivid and potent works of art, whether in or out of art world favor, and for providing some of the most colorful stories that can be told about life in the big city.

Barry Blinderman

Director, Illinois State University Galleries at Normal

Introduction

Martin Wong's artistic life has been spent swimming upstream against a changing current of fashionable artistic styles. That he is a painter at a time when this traditional medium is under postmodernist fire indicates how deeply rooted his iconoclastic vision is. Even when painting was the favored idiom, for example, during the heyday of the Neo-Expressionist movement in the 1980s, Wong stopped incorporating figures into his work and instead painted a series of nonobjective images of the facades of buildings, bricked, closed and locked away, devoid of human presence.

Wong's strengths as an artist imbue his work with the very factors that render it idiosyncratic, if not unfashionable: a deep and clearly critical engagement with the everyday; a love of detail and a penchant for obsessive ornamentation; an elegant incorporation of kitsch objects into images of an urban environment where, in their daily context, they are seen and used without ironic intent by ordinary folks; and the use of visual idioms that relate to the traditions of folk and outsider art.

It is particularly in the realm of popular culture, however—the quotidian urban world that Wong inhabits and concretizes in his work—that we are able to see the transformative power of what is, at least in my opinion, the most important aspect of his work. Wong's ongoing concern with popular culture is significant because it relates to a key issue in late-twentieth-century society: how the popular affects our social relations, how it “articulates [and constructs] . . . the spaces and places of everyday life.”¹ Popular culture is a sphere in which people struggle to define their relationship to reality and to each other, to institutions and to power, to their relative positions in cultural margins and/or the mainstream. Because popular culture constructs the social spaces within which these definitions are created and maintained, it becomes, as Stuart Hall puts it, a site of political struggle.²

Race and gender issues, gay and lesbian life and civil liberties, identity politics, vernacular and fine arts, the meanings of the urban environment—all are the “politics” inextricably woven into every aspect of visual culture today. The New Museum has long provided a venue for work which, like Wong’s, addresses these issues, although we have rarely presented a single body of work which deals with so many of them at once, and does so with such humor, curiosity, and candor.

This exhibition was organized by Dan Cameron, the New Museum’s Senior Curator, and Barry Blinderman, Director of the Illinois State University Galleries at Normal, both long-time supporters of Martin Wong, to whom we are indebted for providing this long overdue and comprehensive view of his work.

Above all, our appreciation and thanks to Martin Wong for his unique and substantive vision of a world replete not only with the darker realities of urban life, but with the warmth of human commonality and shared experience as well.

Marcia Tucker

Director, New Museum of Contemporary Art

FOOTNOTES

1. Lawrence Grossberg, *Dancing in Spite of Myself, Essays on Popular Culture* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 14.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 2-7.

Sweet Oblivion The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong



1. *Sweet Oblivion*, 1983, Acrylic on canvas, 84 x 108".
Collection of Rose and Morton Landowne, New York, NY. Photo: Fred Scruton

Brick by Brick

NEW YORK ACCORDING TO MARTIN WONG

Dan Cameron

Martin Wong's paintings embody a directness and fearlessness of purpose so conspicuously missing from American art today that his work often appears to be the product of a radically different place and time. Wong is one of the few truly original stylists to have emerged from the highly contentious New York art scene of the 1980s, and his paintings are now only beginning to become known to a wider audience. Although these two facts make it difficult to think of Wong's exerting a direct influence upon the artists of his generation, his relaxed and personal style as well as his openness toward the subjects of his paintings, mark him as one of the forerunners of today's resurgence of figure-based painting in the United States. Perhaps the key to the continuing fascination of Wong's work, however, lies in his tenacious exploration of the labyrinths of identity, his own and that of others. Long before it was fashionable to discuss art in terms of cultural identity, Wong had arrived at a thoroughly hybrid approach to depicting urban life, one which was further enriched by the fusion of a fervid imagination with his unique methods of constructing a painting. The results confirm Wong's growing status as an American original, the author of a vision that no one could have predicted, and which, once experienced, can never be ignored.

To understand why there is a compelling urge today to take a closer look at Martin Wong's artistic production, one can start by reviewing the reasons why the art world nearly let his work fall by the wayside. Because it would be difficult to do so without getting caught up with the art world's own belief-system about itself, and the particular ways that artists are embraced before being rejected (and then, much later, embraced again), it might be instructive to make some of those typically misleading comparisons between the ethos that prevailed during the 80s and the allegedly distinct times we are living in now. I would even suggest that something about Martin Wong's art causes these ideas to rise to the surface, and it is more than likely that this quality has to do with the raw power of myth that appears throughout his imagery. Echoing the work of certain other self-taught artists, Wong's art has always embodied a relentlessness of purpose, as if having once lent plastic shape to the products of his imagination, there was never any time left to be wasted on irony or self-doubt. This combination of reckless courage and naiveté is precisely what New York's East Village represented in its heyday.

Unlike both Soho, whose bohemian conventions it deplored, and Chelsea, whose entrepreneurial drive it pre-saged, the East Village was from approximately 1983 to 1987 an extraordinarily persuasive symbol of the art world's discontent. Beginning with the brash pioneering gestures of Fun Gallery (run by Patti Astor and Bill Stelling) and Nature Morte (co-owned by Alan Belcher and Peter Nagy), the East Village was far ahead of Soho in its recognition of, in turn, the graffiti/neo-Expressionist and neo-Conceptual movements. If the one served as funky spiritual clubhouse to hip-hop crossovers like Keith Haring, Futura, Kenny Scharf, Arch Connelly, and Lady Pink, the other was where black-suited aesthetes hovered in the corner mulling over the work of Sherrie Levine, Haim Steinbach, Barbara Bloom, Jennifer Bolande, and Steven Parrino. A virtual mecca of home-grown nightclubs like Limbo and 8 B.C., the neighborhood art scene painstakingly cribbed from the Warhol 60s in its emphasis on trendiness, hedonism, and what it tried unsuccessfully to pass off as cynicism. Despite its relatively brief flowering, the East Village played a significant role in the careers of a number of New York's most prominent artists: for example, Jeff Koons, Nan Goldin, Kiki Smith, Philip Taaffe, David Wojnarowicz, Fred Wilson, Judy Glantzman, Ashley Bickerton, and Sarah Charlesworth. One can draw up an equally impressive list of its most innovative galleries: Pat Hearn, American Fine Art, 303, Jay Gorney, P.P.O.W., Postmasters, Jack Shainman, and Gracie Mansion. In short, by 90s standards the East Village was almost embarrassingly idealistic, albeit steadfast in its refusal to admit it, and the only present-day art-world phenomenon that can be identified as its legacy would be the small but closely knit network of groundbreaking galleries in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn.

Although, ironically enough, most of Martin Wong's artistic successes took place in Soho, he represented an idealized composite portrait of the East Village artist.¹ Wry, lanky, and unfailingly garbed in his best space-cowboy attire, Wong in the mid-80s embodied the Lower East Side artist as self-made man: a throwback to the hippie archetype of the 60s (his hometown is, after all, San Francisco) and a precursor to the identity-driven culture of the current decade. Behind this laid-back exterior, however, his absolute belief in his art shone through. There were usually multiple layers of irony in the way he discussed what he was doing and why, but underneath his clarity of purpose was obviously unshakable. Perhaps over time, the public facade that was Martin Wong in the 80s has come to seem like an especially brave form of defense mechanism in the face of the New York art world's particular brand of competitiveness. At the core of this line of conjecture lies a more serious observation about the relationship between Wong's artist persona and his work. Although it is hardly typical for a self-taught painter—in this case, one whose closest artistic forerunners would have to be Grandma Moses, Ben Shahn, and Alice Neel—to move to New York and pursue a professional career, Martin Wong was not the first to do so. But for an artist to have hurled himself as completely as Wong did into the urban whirlpool that was the East Village in the height of the 80s remains an almost unprecedented act among American self-taught artists.

Although propriety suggests that caution be observed when discussing Martin Wong's paintings in language normally reserved for folk or naive artists, this is a characterization that the artist himself has made no effort to disavow. On the contrary, the more we allow our eyes to linger over the details of bricks, constellations, manual alphabets, and poetry in Wong's paintings, the easier it becomes to slip into a mode of critical thought that invites an explanation based on the model of obsessive-compulsive activity as evidenced in the work of such well-known outsider artists as Joseph Yoakum, Martin Ramirez, and Adolph Wolfli. Of course, Wong is anything but self-taught: he may not have known how to paint when he decided at the age of thirty to be an artist, but he had studied ceramics formally. More to the point, he has attained a remarkable level of connoisseurship in a



2. *Stanton Near Forsyth Street*, 1983, Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 64". Collection of James Dorment, Rumson, NJ. Photo: Adam Reich

broad array of subjects: Asian painting, calligraphy, and decorative arts; American antiques; and, as is well-known, the graffiti painters whose work he passionately collected throughout his years as a full-time New Yorker.² Like many artists before him, Wong has occasionally fallen back on his collecting skills as a means of survival, so his appreciation of beautiful objects (including the ones he makes) has tended to have a practical side. Worldliness and sophistication may not be the qualities we most expect to encounter in an artist who invented techniques of painting simply because he didn't want to submit to a formal course of instruction, but such paradoxes are invariably discovered when we consider the role identity plays in the process by which one artist's peculiar worldview gradually becomes irresistible to the rest of the world's occupants.

One of the characteristic features of Wong's paintings from the period covered by this exhibition, 1983 to 1992, is that as literal as his painting gets—and this is an artist known for meticulously rendering thousands of individual bricks to produce an image of a blank wall—his specific relationship to the scene that he is depicting manages to elude us. On the surface, Wong the visual diarist is clearly overwhelmed by the visual aspects of his surroundings, and he struggles to



reconstruct that experience for his viewer. But at a deeper level, Wong's paintings become a portrait of the artist in the unending process of analyzing and interpreting his environment, searching for points of access and identification that are resonant with his own experience. While the case can be made that Wong never quite finds this resolution of identity in his neighborhood, the power of his art resides in the symbolic and mimetic relationships that he creates along the way as a means of keeping his investment in the search alive. What is produced is a moving testament to the will to believe, even under the bleak circumstances that clouded urban America during the 80s.

Because his mission to find a personal correspondence with the heart of urban decay was so intense, we must take self-mythification into account if we are to understand the essence of Wong's art. As a starting point, let's consider *My Secret World, 1978-81* (1984; pl.16). Created at the end of his long period of self-instruction in painting, the subject of the work is entirely self-referential. In its disparate motifs we see how the artist grappled first with the process of representing each fragment of his immediate environment, then with the task of fitting it together into a harmonious whole. That Wong's handling of his composition suggests that he has not quite mastered either half of the equation is in part what lends the work its charm, as if to have already learned enough technique to completely pull off the illusion would have spoiled the viewer's empathy with the scene. This observation, however, brings up another possible interpretation: that Wong the author is a by-now-skilled technician trying to capture what it felt like a couple of years earlier to have been capable of producing only clumsy approximations of the world. Whatever the explanation, it is hard to brush off the picture's effectiveness as a psychological portrait of urban loneliness: a man alone in his dingy room, inventing a vision of the world that he will continue to remake until it finally conforms to his image of a worthwhile destiny.

Whether or not its popular significance as the year Orwell chose for the enshrinement of Big Brother had anything to do with it, 1984 seems to have been a watershed year for American art that expresses a sense of defiance.³ For Wong, it resulted in the first in a string of remarkable series of paintings, for which his subject was either the streets themselves or the lives taking place behind the crumbling brick walls. In *Stanton Near Forsyth Street* (1983; pl.2), Wong has organized the background tenement buildings so that they suggest masses of empty space, while the single dilapidated structure in the foreground hovers on the verge of disappearing. The bleakness of the scene is balanced by two quite different visual tangents: the narrative moment preceding a pickup on the street (a figure who resembles the artist faces us, while another saunters by), and a burst of celestial activity in the form of hands spelling out in manual alphabet the words of a poem and a tracing of the constellations in the nighttime sky. The image does not so much suggest that man is dwarfed by his surroundings as it affirms that the poetics of the scene produce a context that transcends the physical altogether.

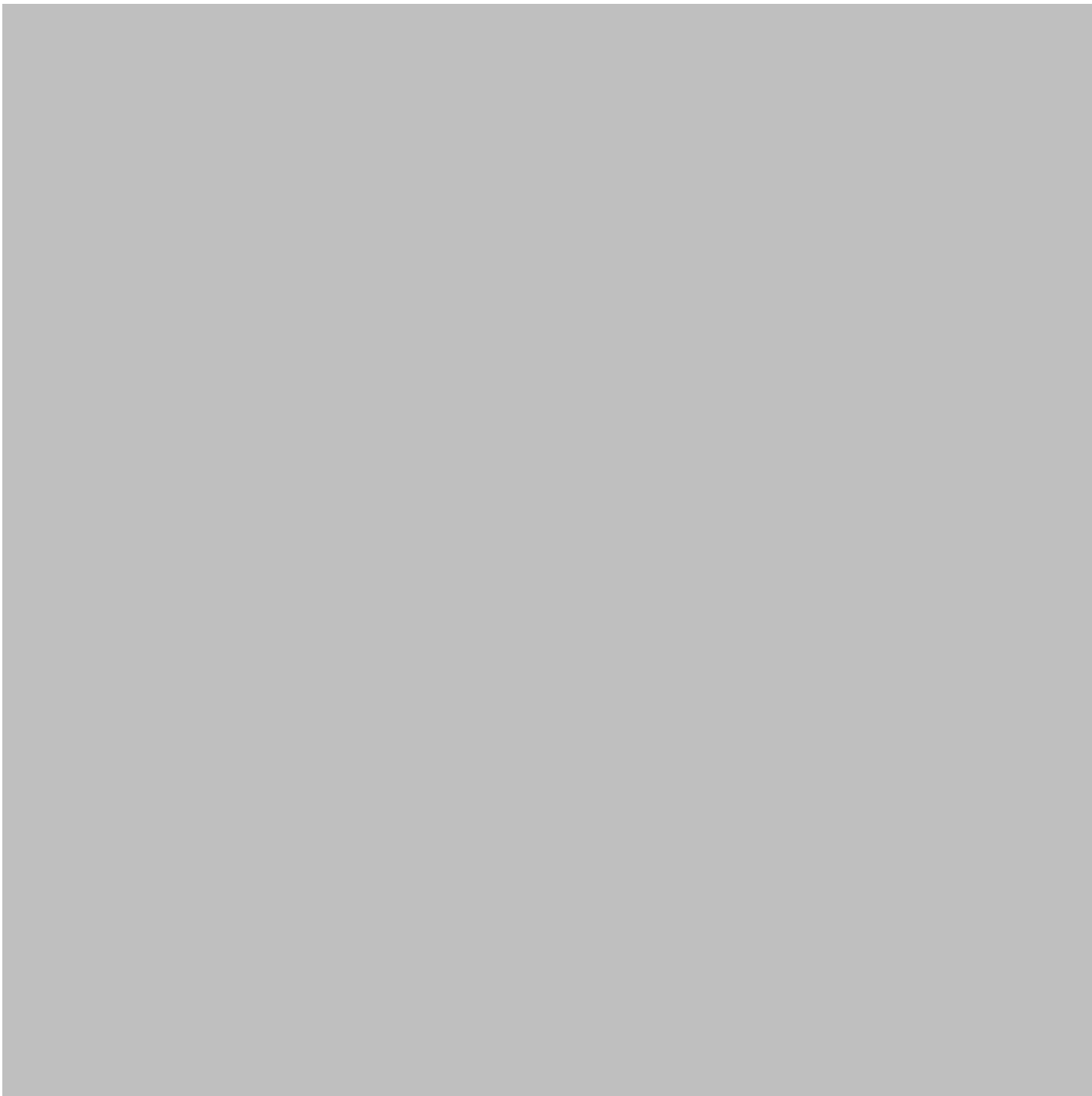
Sentiment and gruesomeness come together explicitly in Wong's *Chain Saw Valentine (Portrait of Joaquin Angaza)* (1984; left), which depicts an image taken straight out of horror comics: a massive gray heart, riven with spikes, dangles suspended by a chain and hook over an abandoned lot. Rendered as an allegorical portrait, the painting appears to refer to a failed romance, with the heart of the former beloved depicted as brutal, inorganic, and ultimately destined for the junk heap in which it was spawned. In comparison to Wong's canvases that were more directly influenced by his relationship with writer Miguel Piñero, *Chain Saw Valentine* is more indulgent in its deployment of a kind of violent recrimination from which no redemption is possible. But it would be hard to argue that this painting is about anything other than romance, as revealed in its lovingly



4. *Stripped Trans Am at Avenue C and 5th Street*, 1984, Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 92". Collection of Shelley Dark, New York, NY. Photo: Adam Reich

detailed representation of the watchband that grimly encircles the ruined heart. In a sense, it can be read as the flip side to a work like *The Annunciation According to Mickey Piñero (Cupcake and Paco)* (1984; pl.33), which immortalizes the moment when one man opens his heart to another in a declaration of love that is rendered all the more powerfully against cold white prison walls. Although this work deals explicitly with an aspect of prison life that Wong could have experienced only secondhand through Piñero, the placement of the viewer in a position that corresponds to that of the half-concealed listener in the background transforms the entire scene into the religious allegory referred to in the title. Just as the prostrate Paco submits to rejection by Cupcake as the price he must pay to be in the latter's company, Wong the listener becomes the excluded witness who, on hearing the story, assumes the responsibility of passing it on to future generations.

Although a great deal of significance has already been placed in Wong's position as an outsider within the social milieu he celebrates through his Lower East Side paintings of the mid-80s, the same can be said about the majority of his subjects. *Stripped Trans Am at Avenue C and 5th Street* (1984; above), with an apocalyptic red sky looming over a cluster of teetering buildings, appears ominous enough without the rusted auto shell spilling off the edge of the canvas. But if we consider the subject of the painting in relatively literal terms, Wong's immortalizing of an aspect of urban violence comes across as a kind of warning—both to himself and to the viewer—about the extremes that define his environment. The car, like the artist, is a bit player in a much larger social carnival, yet all of the narrative trappings surrounding it have been left out in order to focus on the detail that allows us to come away with a sense of bleakness in its most concentrated form.



5. *Orion*, 1984,
Acrylic on canvas, 36" diameter.
Collection of Diane and Steven Jacobson,
New York, NY.
Photo: Larry Lamay



6. *African Temple at 9th Street*, 1985, Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 96". Private collection. Photo: Adam Reich

An oddly related message seems to come through in the painting *Orion* (1984; pl.5), which shows a stack of hardcover books, the topmost having fallen open to an image of the constellation Orion. The same image fills the nighttime sky that serves as background, while a text encircling the tondo-shaped canvas explains that this particular arrangement of stars has so fascinated past astronomers that conquerors have often renamed it after themselves. Although these historical figures might be more real to us than the mythological figure of Orion, the new names have never stuck—a fact that strikes Wong as significant. This border text might seem to be a carefully wrought non sequitur were it not for the peculiar way it reverberates with the titles of the books in the center: *Washington Confidential*, *Wrestling*, *When the Rangers Were Young*, and *The Losers End*, for example. Whimsical with a Confucian bent, Wong's message here seems to be that the lives of immortals and those who are forgotten are more closely entwined than one might suspect. The respectable but fading tomes are thus brought into approximately the same outsider orbit as the stripped Trans Am.

People are not spared in Wong's vision of the outsider as a kind of prophet. One of his most compelling works from the mid-80s, *African Temple at 9th Street* (1985; above), above is the visual record of the artist's fascination with the two occupants of this makeshift storefront temple, and especially with the found calligraphy of their handmade signage, painted spontaneously on the outer wall, which conveys the directness of expression that Wong the urban anthropologist has always sought in invented systems—the manual alphabet, Chinese ideograms, graffiti, constellations, and even brick arrangements. In Wong's *Hot Wheels* (1985; right), a boy sits with his feet propped up on his bicycle handlebars, his eyes coldly following some distant activity from under his baseball cap, as a slight sneer plays across his mouth. Surrounding the boy is an endless maze of walls, link

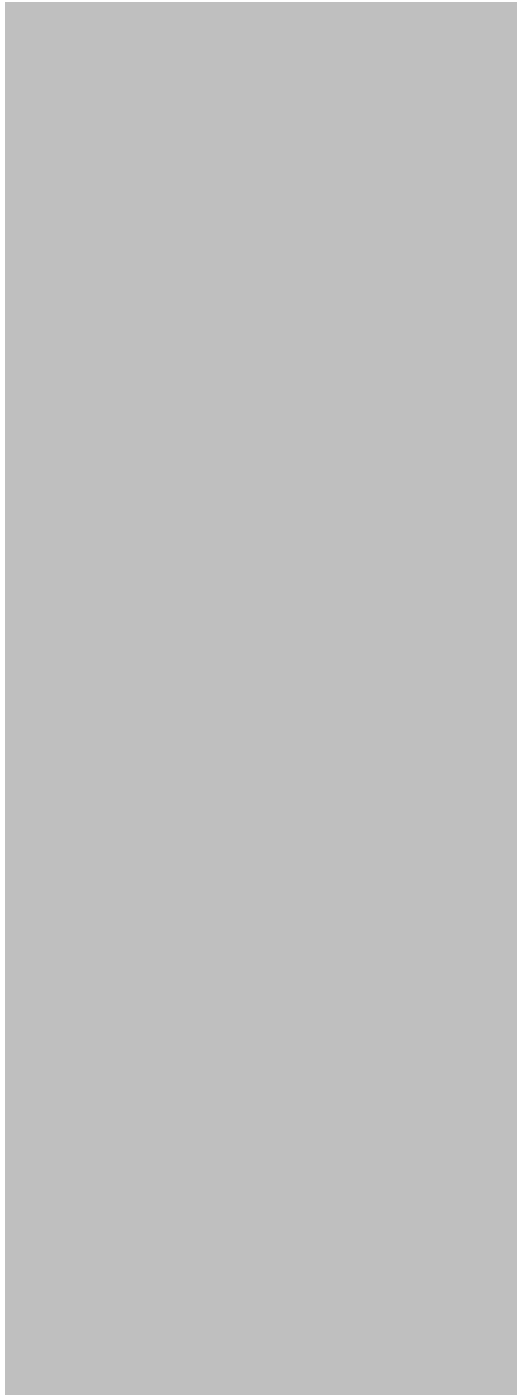


7. *Hot Wheels*, 1985, Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 72". Collection of James Beveridge, New York, NY. Photo: Adam Reich

fencing, and barbed wire—hostile environment for a child's imagination. His face is that of a child, but his years of innocence are already long gone, and he has settled into his streetwise role with a veteran's air of world-weariness.

Perhaps the most powerful visual statements in this series are the closed storefronts that permit the artist to fulfill a twofold mission: to capture the visual essence of urban abandonment and, simultaneously to linger over the details that hint at the possibility of renewed life. In the two major works of this series, *Closed* (1984-85; pl.17) and *Iglesia Pentecostal* (1986; pl.8), Wong at first seems to be minimizing his gift for dramatically shaping the visual field of his paintings around a single pictorial incident. What he gives us instead is a frontal view of the storefronts, on canvases that approximate the size and shape of their subjects. There is nothing to see around or behind the subject, and no visual perspective to offer us a sense of contrast. For all we know, the narrow white storefront depicted in *Iglesia Pentecostal* is closed only until services the next Sunday; or it's possible that Reverend Roberto Vasques, the pastor, departed months earlier, leaving his flock behind to fend for themselves. The fact that we don't know the circumstances that led up to the moment depicted makes the painting more psychologically compelling.





9. *Exile — This Night Without Seeing Her Passes Like an Eternity*, 1987-88, Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 24". Private collection. Photo: Larry Lamay

Closed, on the other hand, appears to suggest that the previous occupants have either vanished or were driven away. In addition, the grinding poverty that underscores the entire scene appears to be shared by the building's owner: despite the fewer than eight padlocks holding the flimsy chain in place, we have the impression that it would be easy to break in and reclaim the space inside. The statement about urban isolation and fear that Wong is making in these two works does not revolve around the obstacles that he has painted, but rather the sense of apathy that surrounds them. Passive and inert, the paintings nevertheless speak volumes about how a neighborhood can swing from vibrancy to decay without anyone taking notice.

Toward the end of the 80s, Wong's artistic mood shifted considerably as he began to focus his artistic attention on his own mechanisms for psychic survival rather than on the dramatic conditions offered by his environment. *La Vida* (1988; pl.26), possibly the outstanding work of this period, is discussed in detail by Yasmin Ramirez in this catalogue, in the context of Wong's integration within the Hispanic community of the Lower East Side. Two related paintings, *Exile—This Night Without Seeing Her Passes Like an Eternity* (1987-88; left) and *I.C.U.* (1988; pl.10), while apparently steeped in the more desperate atmosphere of the earlier paintings, nevertheless offer a subtle means of psychic escape. The first work, a narrow vertical canvas, is almost entirely filled with depictions of building fragments. The two exceptions are, at the top, a love poem in Spanish against a fragment of nighttime sky—"Esta noche que ha pasado sin verla ha sido como una eternidad" (This night without you has been like an eternity)—and, at the bottom, a young Hispanic man nodding off in a half-delirium. Although we feel at first compelled to view the latter in terms of an unfolding tragedy, Wong is more circumspect, leading us to entertain the possibility that even if the young man dies of an overdose in the street, his thoughts at least are directed toward the loftier heights of romantic love. In *I.C.U.*, whose title is both a pun and a reference to hospitals, the artist has created a beaconlike image of an all-seeing eye gazing out over sleepy tenements like a protective god. Not only is the image



10. *I.C.U.*, 1988, Acrylic on canvas,
40" diameter. Courtesy of the artist.
Photo: Larry Lamay

surprisingly benign, but Wong seems to have gradually transformed his own presence within his neighborhood from an alienated outsider to one who looks out for the well-being of everyone else.

The homoerotic aspects of Wong's mid-80s paintings move to the forefront of two works based on the secret erotic life of firemen, *Gemini* and *Big Heat* (both 1988; pls. 58 and 11). Whereas the first painting alludes to the protective spirit of *I.C.U.* in the image of the twin firemen standing side by side at the lower edge of the painting, *Big Heat's* central motif is much more startling: having successfully subdued the conflagration inside the charred buildings behind them, the same two firemen are so overcome with passion for each other that they don't even slow down long enough to remove their helmets and carbon dioxide tanks. This painting provides a tantalizing coda to the saga of Wong's life in the ghetto: enthralled though he still is with his surroundings, he is also beginning to assert his imagination in a more forceful manner. *Big Heat* is not someone else's narrative, recounted by Wong in the third person. On the contrary, the embracing firemen are obviously products of the artist's own fantasies, to which he has given visual form by using the people surrounding him as models. The dynamics of Wong's situation have changed, insofar as he is no longer dependent upon what is taking place around him to provide the material for his paintings. This is the first tentative step before the artistic leap that soon enables Wong to bring his unique perspective to bear upon the memories of his own childhood and the constructed life of the Chinese-American.

Although Martin Wong's paintings have not yet received the attention from museums and critics that his artistic vision merits, there are small but significant indications that the obstacles to a broader understanding of his work are no longer as prevalent as they once were. One obvious factor has been the sharp increase in an awkward, self-conscious style of figurative painting, in the wake of a period during which installation and video art had been the medium of choice. Another change in the discourse of taste has been the critical attention given to urban popular culture, as well as a heightened awareness of the role played by representation in determining how a community sees itself.

In any analysis of Wong's work, however, probably the more important shift in contemporary aesthetics is the increasing public interest in art that attempts to bridge cultural differences between disparate groups. Within Wong's artistic search for an interpretation of the world in which he has a vital role to play, the transformation from myth into visual reality becomes an almost heroic effort to revitalize the connection between art and everyday life. He has succeeded in bringing back to life a time and place neither long ago nor far away, which we suddenly recognize in his vision as having been more fragile and life-affirming than we ever suspected. But even this point does not quite sum up his artistic accomplishment, since in a very real sense Martin Wong has already done what too many of us can only aspire to do: rebuild the world in the image of our fondest hopes and dreams.

FOOTNOTES

1. Wong's most influential exhibitions were in 1984 and 1986, at Semaphore Gallery on West Broadway, in 1988 at Exit Art, and in 1993 at P.P.O.W.
2. In 1993 Wong donated approximately three hundred graffiti works, comprising the bulk of this collection, to the Museum of the City of New York.
3. Politically grounded artists like Jenny Holzer, John Ahearn/Rigoberto Torres, Tim Rollins & KOS, Hans Haacke, Barbara Kruger, Martha Rosler, and David Wojnarowicz achieved considerable prominence in the art world during 1984, while artist collectives such as ABC No Rio, Fashion Moda, Group Material, and the Guerilla Girls also became a fixture of the downtown New York art scene. Some of the exhibitions seen at the New Museum during 1984 were *The End of the World*, *Art and Ideology*, *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*, and a retrospective of the works of Leon Golub.

MARTIN WONG

Born 1946, Portland, Oregon

ONE-PERSON EXHIBITIONS

York College, Queens, New York. 1994
San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, CA. 1993
P.P.O.W, New York. "Chinatown USA." 1993
The Pyramid Club, New York. "Soap: Erotic Jail Paintings." 1991
Exit Art, New York. 1988
Frank Bernaducci Gallery, New York. 1988
Greenville County Museum of Art, Greenville, South Carolina. "Here and Now." 1987
Sacco's, Ridgefield, Connecticut. "Signs of Significance." 1987
The Saint, New York. "Living for the City." 1987
Semaphore, New York. "Martin Wong." 1986
Semaphore *East*, New York. 1985
Semaphore, New York. "Martin Wong: Paintings for the Hearing Impaired." 1984

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

Bruce Museum, Greenwich, Connecticut. "Reflections of Taste, American Art from Greenwich Collections." 1997
Museum of Chinese in the Americas, New York. "Sites of Chinatown." 1996
Avanti Gallery New York. "The Usual Suspects." 1996
Artists Space, New York. "Blood Fairies." 1996
Boston Center for the Arts, Boston. "Arts Communities/AIDS Communities: Realizing the Archive Project." 1996
Gallery (+) Positive and Visual AIDS, Fire Island Pines, New York. "Give Life to Art: The First Step." 1996
ISE Art Foundation, New York. "Our Dieties." 1996
The Palace Hotel, New York. "Art for Education: Public Art in the School System." 1995
High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia. "Art at the Edge: Social Turf." 1995
Thread Waxing Space, New York. "Murder." 1995
University Art Museum Berkeley, University of California at Berkeley. "In a Different Light." 1995
Randolph Street Gallery, Chicago. "Art as Dramatic Comedy: an exhibition exploring comic traditions as defined by literature in contemporary art." 1995
Herter Art Gallery, Amherst, Massachusetts. "Imperfect." 1995
Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut. "Drawn on the Museum." 1995
Odakyu Museum, Tokyo, Japan. "New York Realism: Past and Present," traveling exhibition. 1994
The Martin County Council for the Arts, Stuart, FL. "Fallen Idylls: American Figurative Painting," traveling exhibition. 1993

Fairfield University, Fairfield, Connecticut. "The New American Cityscape." 1992
 City College of New York. "Malcolm X Show." 1992
 Graham Modern, New York. "Contemporary Male Nudes." 1992
 Charles Lucien Gallery, New York. "Belly of the Beast." 1991
 Center for Book Arts, New York. "Your House is Mine." 1991
 Kenkeleba House, New York. "The New Depressionists." 1991
 Mint Museum, Charlotte, North Carolina. "In the Looking Glass." 1991
 New Langton Arts, San Francisco. "Queer Art Show." 1991
 New Art Ways, Hartford, Connecticut. "Hip-Hop." 1991
 CW Post Campus, Long Island University, New York. "Office Installations." 1991
 National Gay and Lesbian Conference, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey. 1991
 Islip Museum, Islip Long Island, New York. "Access (Art and Representing the Handicapped)." 1991
 Anne Plumb Gallery, New York. "Della Cova." 1991
 Exit Art, New York. "The Hybrid State." 1991
 Gallery 1199, New York. "Images of Labor: The 90s." 1991
 CBGB's, New York. "Brick Dicks and Swastikas." 1990
 Hong Kong Arts Center, Hong Kong. "Tiananmen Memorial Show." 1990
 Barbara Fendrick, New York. "Flaneur/Flaneuse: Out on a Stroll." 1990
 MOCHA, New York. "Decade Show 1990." 1990
 Charles Lucien Gallery, New York. "Inside the Beast." 1990
 Tompkins Square Park Library, New York. "Lower East Side Print Shop Retrospective." 1990
 Bullet Space, New York. "Your House is Mine." 1990
 Steve Mass, New York. "Bastille Day Show." 1990
 Wessel-O'Conner Gallery, New York. "Queer." 1990
 The Clocktower, New York. "AIDS Time-Line." 1990
 Studio Museum of Harlem, New York. "Jazz and the Blues Aesthetics." 1990
 White Columns, New York. "Brut 90." 1990
 Bennington College, Bennington, Vermont. "Interiors." 1989
 Bass Museum, Miami, Florida. "Future Now." 1989
 City Gallery, Columbus Circle, New York. "Uptown Downtown." 1989
 Madison Arts Center, Madison, Wisconsin. "Urban Images." 1989
 Black and White in Color, Bronx, New York. "Free Puerto Rico." 1989
 WPA, Washington, D.C. "The Blues Aesthetics." 1989
 Gay and Lesbian Cultural Center, New York. "Center Show." 1989
 Sally Hawkins, New York. "First Amendment Show." 1989
 Red Zone, New York. "Flag Show." 1989
 Dia Center for the Arts, New York. "Democracy." 1989
 El Castillo Cultural Center, New York. "Visions of Revolution." 1989
 Blum Helman Warehouse, New York. "China, June 4." 1989
 EXIT ART, New York. "The Social Club." 1988
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. "The 1980s: A New Generation, American Painters and Sculptors." 1988
 Cleveland State University, Ohio. "Acts of Faith." 1988
 Dia Center for the Arts, New York. "Politics and Election." 1988
 Dia Center for the Arts, New York. "AIDS and Democracy." 1988
 P.P.O.W., New York. "100 Years of the Lower East Side." 1988
 Tunnel, New York. "The Immoral Show." 1988

Karl Bornstein Gallery, Santa Monica, California. "Art of the Eighties." 1987
Gerstadt Gallery, New York. "Curators' Choice." 1987
Adelphi University, Adelphi, New York. "Urban Visions." 1987
Seventh Avenue Space, New York. "Bigger and Deffer." 1987
Milk Bar, New York. "Two Man Show." 1987
University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. "Constitution." 1987
Limelight, New York. "GNARLY-MO." 1987
Documenta 8, Kassel, West Germany. "The Castle." 1987
Asian Arts Institute, New York. "The Mind's I: Part 1." 1987
Art et Industrie, New York. "Art for Money." 1987
Galerie Paradis, Paris. "Freedom of Painting." 1986
Ground Zero, New York. "Text/Texture." 1986
Fashion Institute of Technology, New York. "The East Village." 1986
One Penn Plaza, New York. "Short Stories." 1986
Fine Arts Center, State University of New York at Stony Brook. "Eight Urban Painters." 1986
Chronocide, New York. "Strange Brew." 1986
Asian Arts Institute, New York. "Ten Chinatown." 1986
B-Side Gallery, New York. "Hard Cold Facts." 1985
Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York. "Benefit for Fashion Moda." 1985
Greenville County Museum of Art, Greenville, South Carolina. "Innocence and Experience." 1985, traveling exhibition
One Penn Plaza, New York. "Photosynthesis." 1985
Sande Webster Gallery, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. "Cross Currents." 1985
Randolph Street Gallery, Chicago. "Audacious: Some Extremist Tendencies in East Village Art." 1985
City Without Walls Gallery, Newark, New Jersey. "Urban Spirit." 1985
The Palladium, New York. "East Village Art Collection." 1985
Semaphore *East*, New York. "Works on Paper." 1985
Grey Art Gallery, New York University. "Precious," traveling exhibition. 1985
Kamikaze, New York. "American Occult." 1985
Kamikaze, New York. "Tight as Spring." 1985
Dramatic Personae Gallery, New York. "Illuminations." 1985
P.P.O.W., New York. "Auto da Fe." 1985
Nico Smith Gallery, New York. "The Monster Show." 1985
University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire. "Semaphore and Semaphore East Galleries." 1985
Centre Saidye Bronfman, Montreal, Quebec. "East Village at Centre." 1985
Semaphore *East*, New York. "Urban Landscapes." 1984
Zero One, Los Angeles, California. "East Infection." 1984
NOW Gallery, New York. "Small Works." 1984
Museo Rufino Tamayo, Mexico City. "New Narrative Painting." 1984
New York Public Library, Tompkins Square Branch, New York. "Bacchanalia." 1984
Nello Studio di Corrado Levi, Milan, Italy. "New York Now." 1984
Sensory Evolution Gallery, New York. "The Acid Test." 1984
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. "Aspects of the City." 1984
University of California at Santa Barbara. "Neo York." 1984
Real Art Waves, Hartford, Connecticut. "Street Politics." 1984
Kenkeleba House, New York. "Chill Out New York." 1984
Limbo Lounge, New York. "Conspiracies." 1984

Kamikaze, New York. "Carnival." 1984
Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, California. "10th St. & Avenue B/East Village Art Today." 1984
Dramatic Personae Gallery, New York. "Extravaganza." 1984
New York Public Library, Tompkins Square Branch, New York. "Psychology." 1984
Semaphore, New York. "In My End is My Beginning." 1984
P.S.1, Long Island City, New York. "The New Portrait." 1984
P.S.1, Long Island City, New York. "Limbo." 1984
Hal Bromm Gallery, New York. "Climbing: The East Village." 1984
Bess Cutler Gallery, New York. "Situation." 1984
Kamikaze, New York. "Dr. Mueller's Theotherapy." 1984
Cat Club, New York. "East Side Story." 1984
Limbo Lounge, New York. "Martin Wong & Sharp." 1984
Kamikaze, New York. "Urban Artists." 1984
Kamikaze, New York. "Gracie Mansion Presents." 1983
Jack Tilton Gallery, New York. "A. More Store." 1983
Danceteria, New York. "Science Fair." 1983
White Columns, New York. "Science and Prophecy." 1983
East 7th Street Gallery, New York. "Underdog." 1983
Danceteria, New York. "Lower East Side Polygon—Part II." 1983
Tibor de Nagy, New York. "Contemporary Prints." 1983
Brooklyn Army Terminal, Brooklyn, New York. "Terminal New York." 1983
ABC No Rio, New York. "Wish You'd Been Here." 1983
St. Mark's Intercollegiate Church, New York. "Resurrection." 1983
301 Houston Street Gallery, New York. "Group Show." 1982
ABC No Rio, New York. "Crime Show." 1982

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Barry Blinderman is the director of University Galleries of Illinois State University, where he also serves as a lecturer in art history. As gallery director, curator, lecturer, and writer since 1980, Blinderman has written many essays about art and organized over twenty-five exhibitions addressing diverse aspects of contemporary art. Exhibitions he has curated include: *Kenny Scharf: When Worlds Collide* (1997); *Alexis Rockman: Second Nature* (1995); *Keith Haring: Future Primeval* (1991); and *David Wojnarowicz: Tongues of Flame* (1990). An avid student of Wong's work since 1983, he organized the artist's first one-person show at Semaphore Gallery, New York, in 1984.

Dan Cameron, senior curator at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, has published over two hundred texts on art in various international art publications, including *Artforum*, *Arts*, *Parkett*, *Frieze*, and *Flash Art*. He has contributed to numerous museum catalogues for such institutions as the Royal Academy of Art, London; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow; and Berkeley Art Center, Berkeley. As an independent curator, Cameron has organized large-scale exhibitions of contemporary art at several major venues, including the *Aperto* at the Biennale di Venezia (1988), *Cocido y Crudo* (Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, 1994-95), and *Threshold* (Fundacao de Serralves, Oporto, 1995). He attended Syracuse University and Bennington College, where he earned a B.A. in 1979.

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Amy Scholder is an editor of art and literary publications. She was the founding Editor of High Risk Books/Serpent's Tail, and of Artspace Books. She has also edited books for Grove Press, Crown Books, and City Lights Publishers.

Lydia Yee is curator at The Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York, where she has organized numerous exhibitions, including *Tomie Arai: Double Happiness* (1998), *Against the Tide* (1997), *Division of Labor: "Women's Work" in Contemporary Art* (1995). She organized *Sites of Chinatown* (1996)—an exhibition sited in various public locations in Manhattan's Chinatown, which included the work of Martin Wong—for the Museum of Chinese in the Americas, New York. She is also pursuing a doctorate in art history at the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York.

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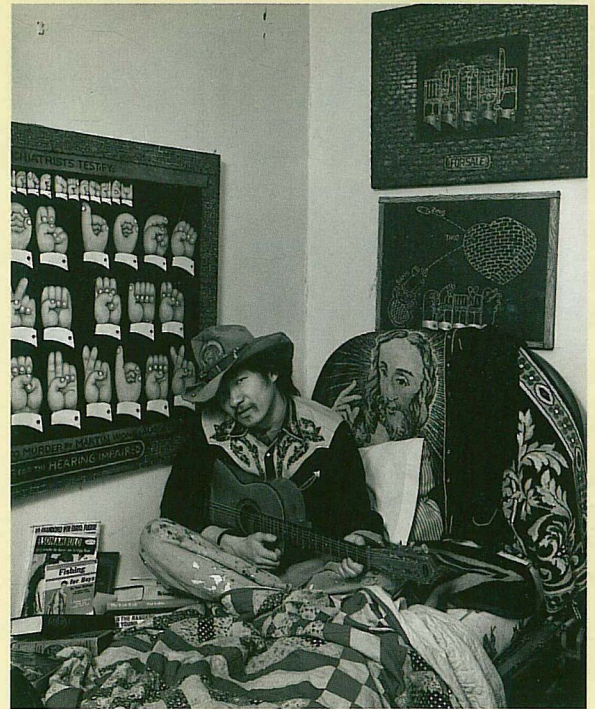
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Editor: Amy Scholder
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Martin Wong was born in Portland, Oregon, of Chinese parents and raised in San Francisco's Chinatown. During the 1970s he was involved with the Bay Area performance art groups Angels of Light and the Cockettes. In the early 1980s he moved to New York and began to make paintings. His work was first exhibited in a group show at ABC No Rio in 1982; he went on to have one-person shows at Semaphore Gallery, Exit Art, P.P.O.W., and the San Francisco Art Institute and has been included in museum and gallery shows internationally.

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