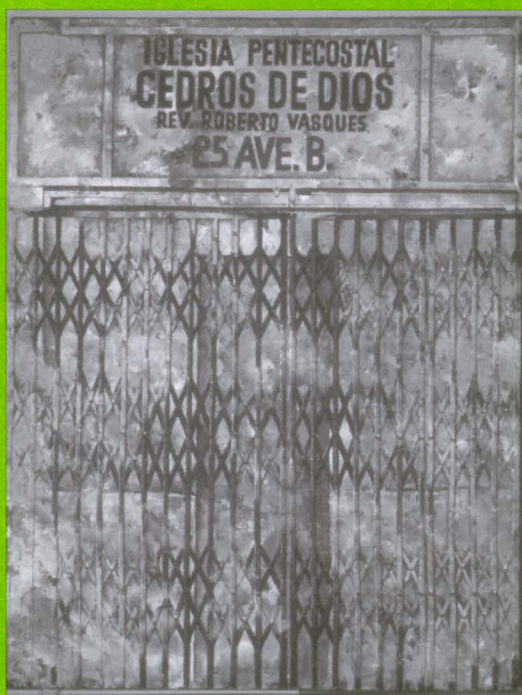


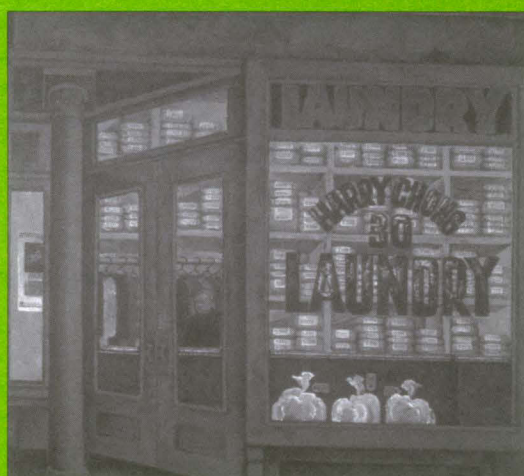
28.may.98—13.sep.98

A black and white photograph of a tenement building, likely in Hong Kong, showing many people on balconies and windows. The building has multiple stories with arched windows and fire escapes. People are seen in various poses, some looking out, some sitting, and some standing. The overall scene depicts a dense urban environment.

Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong



Iglesia Pentecostal, 1986. Acrylic on canvas, 108 x 84".
Collection of James Shapiro, Bois d'Arc, MO



Harry Chong Laundry, 1984. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48".
Collection of Howard Rubenstein, New York, NY



My Secret World, 1978–81, 1984. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 68". Collection of Diane and Steven Jacobson, New York, NY

Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong

28.may.98—13.sep.98

Organized by Dan Cameron in cooperation with
Barry Blinderman, Director, University Galleries of
Illinois State University

Impelled by a deep sense of memory and a passion for narrative, Martin Wong explores the manifold realities of a vibrant urban culture, conveying his wonder at the vividness, even splendor, of dense environments outsiders might otherwise dismiss as destitute or garish. *Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong*, organized by the New Museum and the University Galleries of Illinois State University, where it was shown earlier this year, is the first museum retrospective of Wong's work.

Wong's paintings of the 1980s and early 1990s constitute an ongoing visual adventure in which writing and language are constantly contrasted with the physical existence of objects, buildings, and people. Bringing together such elements as street poetry, crumbling tenement facades, gilded constellation diagrams, and the stylized symbols of the hearing-impaired alphabet, Wong develops a complex exchange between representation and reality at the same time as he charts a world of seemingly unquenchable desire.

Born in Portland, Oregon, in 1946, Wong grew up in a middle-class home in San Francisco's Chinatown and started painting as a child. After briefly studying architecture at the University of California at Berkeley, he received a degree in ceramics from Humboldt State College. In the late 1960s he became actively involved with the Angels of Light, a street theater group which specialized in drag spectacles. In 1978, when he made his first visit to New York, Wong decided to stay and found a job as a night porter in the old waterfront hotel where he lived and painted. Over the next few years, he gradually abandoned the cartoon-like, Tibetan-influenced style he had developed previously in favor of a more urban-inflected vocabulary.

Wong's first New York paintings featured sign language based on the alphabet cards handed out by deaf people in the subway. Though these found an eager public in the coffee shops and restaurants where they were first shown, the style for which Wong is now recognized first emerged in a work entitled *My Secret World, 1978-81* (1984). In this painting, Wong depicts his room as seen from outside the window looking in, providing a glimpse of the struggles in his earlier paintings. Hanging on the wall inside his room are canvases that spell out sensationalist newspaper headlines like *Courtroom Shocker / Jimmy the Weasil Sings Like a Canary* (1984), using a highly stylized version of the manual alphabet.

By 1981, Wong had moved to a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood in the Lower East Side and began making the paintings for which he is best known today. *Stanton Near Forsyth Street* (1983) and *Attorney Street: Handball Court with*



Autobiographical Poem by Piñero (1982–84) are extraordinarily detailed renditions of his new neighborhood, in which hundreds of individually painted bricks become a virtual mosaic of visual expression. Writing in his catalogue essay about Wong's laborious process of painting each brick individually, co-curator Barry Blinderman compares the task to that of a bricklayer, observing that the artist is "building the paintings as much as he is painting the buildings."

Crucial to Wong's work was his intimate friendship with Miguel Piñero, a flamboyant neighborhood poet, ex-con and hustler who would later achieve renown as the author of the prison play *Short Eyes*. Piñero's colorful tales about the neighborhood, not to mention his experiences in prison, inspired some of the artist's most vivid canvases. One of these, *Portrait of Mickey Piñero at Ridge St. and Stanton* (1985), is directly based on a poem by Piñero, and features a portrait of the poet reciting. Another, *The Annunciation According to Mickey Piñero (Cupcake and Paco)* (1984), depicts a scene in *Short Eyes*.

Wong's ongoing homage to his neighborhood, which grew in depth and intensity over the next several years, recalls the Ashcan School of painting in the 1920s and 1930s, which also depicted the teeming New York streets and tenements with unprecedented richness. But Wong's vision is more extreme, often bordering on the apocalyptic. In *Sweet Oblivion* (1983), a sky filled with menacing dark clouds looms over a cluster of teetering buildings, while the ground is covered by deep piles of rubble that suggest an urban terrain as inhospitable as the moon. *Closed* (1984–85) documents Wong's fascination with the minutia of a boarded-up building, its flimsy chains and padlocks providing the only trace of humanity in an otherwise bleak facade. Both paintings record transitional moments in an ever-changing urban landscape, expressing Wong's awareness that such moments are quickly swallowed up and forgotten.

After Piñero's death in 1988, Wong's artistic focus shifted. In *La Vida* (1988), an entire tenement facade seems to be bursting with human exuberance. The dozens of characters depicted include Piñero (shown three times) and other friends, living and dead, that Wong had met in the neighborhood. This work is both a summing-up and a statement of the desire to move on, signifying that the artist is no longer constrained by the perimeters of his adopted world. He soon began work on the

Chinatown series, which has engaged his attention ever since. A videotape by Charles Ahearn showing Wong at work on this series can be seen in the mezzanine gallery.

Although the Chinatown paintings from the early 1990s are as rich as Wong's tenement paintings, the exacting details were no longer taken directly from life, but rather from the Chinatown souvenirs that Wong had been collecting since his boyhood. On the surface they appear to pander to stereotyped notions of the exotic, but on a deeper level these paintings restate the artist's quest for identity in terms of the double cultural standard by which many Chinese-Americans live out their lives. In *Chinese New Year's Parade* (1992–94), for example, the diminutive figure of the artist as a boy, seen from the back, sums up the outside / insider paradox in the same way that *My Secret World* narrows its point of view to that of someone standing on the outside looking in.

Martin Wong's paintings embody a directness and fearlessness of purpose missing from much American art today, so much so that his work seems to be the product of a radically different place and time. Carlo McCormick, writing in the exhibition catalogue, states that "Wong gives us an existential frame (a lonely window, an endless brick wall, the void of night) through which one may never pass physically but through which desire may always travel." Within Wong's artistic search for an interpretation of the world in which he has a vital role to play, the transformation from myth to visual reality becomes an almost heroic effort to revitalize the connection between art and everyday life. In a very real sense, Martin Wong has already done that to which many of us can only aspire — he has rebuilt the world in the image of his fondest hopes and dreams.

— Dan Cameron, Senior Curator

COVER *La Vida* (detail), 1988. Acrylic on canvas, 96 x 114". Private collection.

TOP LEFT *Kato*, 1992. Acrylic on linen, 48 1/4" diameter. Collection of Jayson Edlin

BELOW *Sweet Oblivion*, 1983. Acrylic on canvas, 84 x 108". Collection of Rose and Morton Landowne, New York, NY



Hours

Mon closed
Tue closed
Wed 12.noon—6.pm
Thu 12.noon—8.pm Free 6.pm—8.pm
Fri 12.noon—8.pm
Sat 12.noon—8.pm
Sun 12.noon—6.pm

Admission

\$5 general; \$3 artists, students, seniors. Free for members. Free for visitors 18 and under through the support of The Chase Manhattan Bank.

Directions

Subway 6 to Spring Street or Bleecker Street; N, R to Prince Street; A, C, E to Spring Street; B, D, F, Q to Broadway / Lafayette Street.
Bus 1, 5, 6, 21 to Houston Street or Broadway.

Membership

To join and receive information on special events and programs, please call the Membership office at 212.219.1222 or Email us at newmu@newmuseum.org

Visit the New Museum's *Visible Knowledge* web site at vkp.org

Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong is made possible by a grant from The Rockefeller Foundation to support the 1998 exhibition program and by the Director's Council and members of the New Museum.

The New Museum of Contemporary Art receives general operating support from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, New York State Council on the Arts, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services, a federal agency.

© 1998 New Museum of Contemporary Art. Design by Jason Ring.

newnəsnw
NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

583 BROADWAY
NEW YORK, NY 10012
212.219.1222