

MATTHEW WONG

By Eric Sutphin



Matthew Wong: The Kingdom, 2017, oil on canvas, 48 by 72 inches; at Karma.

When I stumbled onto Matthew Wong's Facebook page, in 2013, his timeline was like a virtual salon, with artists, dealers, curators, and critics carrying out spirited painting-centric discussions on his posts. Wong (b. 1984) is self-taught in his medium, and social media gave him access to valuable dialogue and a sense of artistic camaraderie while he was living in Hong Kong. In the years since, Wong has moved to Edmonton and deleted his Facebook profile. But although he might have chosen to shutter the account, his recent work suggests that the conversations that took place there were productive and helped catapult him into the most fruitful period of his career to date.

Displayed in Karma's main room for Wong's first solo exhibition in New York were seven medium-size to large-scale paintings depicting forests, glens, and groves, mostly in vibrant Fauvist colors. The Beginning (2017) is a patchwork landscape built from robust, lozenge-shaped marks in shades of red, yellow, and green. A small figure in a canoe appears on a pink-and-orange body of water, anchoring the viewer in the vertiginous spatial arrangement. Inventive vegetal forms are rendered throughout the work, including a cluster of blue shapes evoking van Gogh's cypress trees and a massive dark green plant with serpentine leaves. While compositions of dense mark-making and contrasting patterns and colors can easily overstimulate, Wong's elicit a meditative calm. The Kingdom (2017) is an Edenic tableau portraying a grove of birch trees. The forest floor is abundant with flowering plants painted in short, thickly applied strokes. A pink path cuts through the trees and leads the eye to a little white head-dressed figure housed in an altar-style enclosure. This detail is like an offering, giving the viewer a focal point and lending the busy composition a ritualistic quality.

The second room of the gallery contained twenty-two small, radiant watercolor paintings on paper—mainly still lifes, landscapes, and interiors. The simplified forms in these works recall those found in Milton Avery's paintings. An untitled piece from 2018 features a figure reclining on a bed in a room with a boldly patterned wall and floor. Some marks on the figure (whose sex is ambiguous) at first register as a breast, but then morph into a yellow creature being cradled. In the still life *Bowl of Cherries* (2017), the wonky edges of the bowl and the cherries' pert little stems animate the humble arrangement. Each of the watercolors is in its own way a meditation on the perfect simplicity of ordinary subjects.

Wong can be considered a kind of nouveau Nabi, a descendant of Post-Impressionist painters like Édouard Vuillard and Paul Sérusier. Like his forebears, he synthesizes stylized representations, bright colors, and mystical themes to create rich, evocative scenes. His works, despite their ebullient palette, are frequently tinged with a melancholic yearning. While Wong might have once sought to alleviate feelings of isolation through his Facebook forum, he has since found a way to use a sense of solitude as a key ingredient in his work.