

LOSING MYSELF IN THE PAINTINGS OF FACEBOOK-EDUCATED  
MATTHEW WONG

By Jerry Saltz



By Matthew Wong's Somewhere, at Karma. Photo: Matthew Wong/Courtesy of Karma

Matthew Wong's show at Karma is one of the most impressive solo New York debuts I've seen in a while. The Edmonton-based, 34-year-old former Hong Kong resident is showing nine bright, mystically post-Impressionist oil paintings and 22 glowing watercolors of subjects ranging from nudes and landscapes to a Chardin-like bowl of cherries and a Matisse-ian woman standing in a doorway. With them he promptly takes his place among a group of recent talented young painters who also make witchy figurative work with vivid color and wobbly compositions charged with psychological spirituality. He's also a little bit Chris Ofili and Verne Dawson (who should be better known) by way of visionaries Forrest Bess and Charles Burchfield.

This isn't to compare Wong to these artists, only to provide a visual context for his unfamiliar work. Wong brings a focused flickering tightness and absorbing intensity to his paintings, something closer to the talismanic delights of Grandma Moses or, on the hazier side, Vuillard (who seems very much in the DNA of many young artists of late). What really makes Wong his own painter is his preternatural feel for pattern; every painted area becomes a graphic field that allows us to see changing shapes and luminosities, allowing a consciousness of otherness to settle into the work. This puts me in mind of Sung dynasty ink drawings, with their expansive landscapes peppered with strange small figures. Space solidifies, then becomes metamorphosing mirage.

The Golden Age is an all-yellow semi-depiction of what looks like a tree seen

through a crevice. A sun hovers on a horizon; a nearby personage stands in a field of marks. The whole picture can turn into a Picasso-esque mask. (It looks a little Schnabel-esque.) This entire painting was made with only one color distributed in different values and shades, giving the work a formal grounding. Somewhere, my favorite painting here, is an orange-and-dark-blue scene of woodsy undergrowth. Look longer, and little robed figures come into focus, also wells, animals, someone riding a horse, a river. I imagined philosophers and prophets in some mythic garden. The painting works like a tapestry, where every part of the surface has its own retinal speed, making it difficult to read, which allows parts to come into and out of focus. Blissfully. The Realm of Appearances is an almost Hockney-like jigsaw puzzle of yellow-ocher, orange, and blue, a hilly horizon beneath a green night sky with a full pale-green moon. Spending time with it produces dreams of otherness and faraway places. Soon, I spotted trees, someone looking into a barrel, maybe a curving road and a dwelling.

While looking at this debut I had a euphoric sense of déjà vu. The gallerist eventually told me that I'd seen a wall of Wong's work at the last Frieze New York art fair. I had immediately tweeted a picture of his work — and then, this being an art fair, I soon forgot his name and where I'd seen it, and was left with some remembered aura. Wong's only other New York appearance was in a group show at White Columns organized by another of those incubators of original vision, Matthew Higgs — who, it seems, had seen Wong's work on the Instagram feed of Cheim & Read's John Cheim. (I told you, artists: Post your work, and not just food and your dogs.)

Now, depending on your point of view, is where things turn embarrassing, thrilling, or horrifying. I accidentally met Wong at his show. After saying hello, he said, "I learned about art from your Facebook." It seems that about eight years ago, Wong was eating up and processing all the discussions and painterly references that used to take place on my page. It was there that he "met" gallerist John Cheim (a regular commenter, back then). Now Wong is here in person, and his bumpy patterned paintings and abstract configurations put a spell on me. Let them do the same to you.

*Wong's show is at Karma through April 29.*