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MATTHEW WONG'S HALLUCINATORY PILGRIMAGES: WONG PROCEEDS MARK BY MARK WITHOUT KNOWING IN ADVANCE WHAT WILL HAPPEN OR WHERE HE WILL GO.

By John Yau



Matthew Wong, "Another Day" (2018), oil on canvas, 72 × 70 inches
(all images courtesy of the artist and Karma, New York)

I first saw images by Matthew Wong when he posted them on social media. Like others who read his posts, as well as read his interviews, I learned that he was living in Hong Kong and that he graduated from the University of Michigan (2007) with a degree in Cultural Anthropology. In 2012, after graduating from the City University of Hong Kong School of Creative Media with a MFA in photography, he began painting, initially starting with a sketch book and a bottle of ink and making "a mess every day randomly."

In the online magazine *Altermodernists* (October 29, 2014), where I read the the previous citation, I also came across this statement by Wong:

Art is all-encompassing in my daily life. When I'm not working, I'm at the library doing research into the history of art, figuring out where I can fit into the greater dialogue between artists throughout time, or on the internet looking at art-related websites and engaging in dialogue on social media with artists and art-world figures around the world.

In 2013, Wong and I had a brief exchange through the back channel of Facebook. He was trying to find a copy of my book, *In the Realm of Appearances: The Art of*

Andy Warhol (1993) and wrote to me. We agreed to make a trade. I sent him a copy of the book and he sent me a pencil drawing.

I was reminded of this exchange when I went to see the exhibition Matthew Wong at Karma (March 22 – April 29, 2018), his first solo show. For the sake of transparency, I feel that I should mention our exchange. especially because Wong titled one of his paintings “The Realm of Appearances” (2018).

Wong’s exhibition is divided into two groups, oil paintings and watercolors. Given that he has been painting for a little more than five years, I am struck by where he has gotten himself. The oil paintings strike me as more adventuresome than the watercolors. I think this has do with differences in scale , as well as well the particular challenges presented by the materials. In both sets of works, he uses small marks of paint to define his forms, but there is a much bigger expanse to fill and with his canvases. than in the modestly-scaled watercolors.

In the paintings, Wong proceeds mark by mark without knowing in advance what will happen or where he will go. In the watercolors, the subject seems determined in advance. The marks are larger in relation to the format, and more descriptive. As a result, the subjects tend to be more conventional — an interior or a still-life, which is what we might expected to find in a work of this size. The best watercolors evoke a particular atmospheric light, such as “Night” (2017) and “January’s Window” (2018). They might be what you would see in an exhibition of an artist influenced by Richard Diebenkorn, Paul Wonner, or Elmer Bischoff when they were painterly realists.

Something else happens in the paintings. Wong makes myriad lines, dots, daubs, and short, lush brushstrokes, eventually arriving at an imaginary landscape that tilts away from the picture plane at an odd angle. A painterly cartographer, Wong literally feels his way across the landscape, dot by dot, paint stroke by paint stroke.

If he adds a sky and mountains in the distance, as he does in “The Realm of Appearances,” he offers two contrasting points of view. The foregrounded landscape is tilted upward so that the red ground, activated by blue, white, and green dots and lines, spreads out before you until it reaches the base of the frontal planes of the blue mountains (or are they rolling waves?), gray-blue sky, and a butter-colored moon.

Each dot and line is distinct, and every bit of the red landscape is filled. Our attention shifts back and forth between landscape (depiction) and brushstroke (the single mark). It is impossible to detect any irony or boredom within the marks. The changing of their size, direction, and color underscores Wong’s active engagement with the painting. This is particularly evident within certain clusters of similar brushstrokes, where tonality changes with the introduction of white. These shifts prevent the painting from becoming entirely flat and airless.

Although not immediately evident, the landscapes are populated by at least one figure and sometimes more, all isolated from each other. While others have pointed out that Wong’s method of mark-making links him to Vincent van Gogh, Georges Seurat, or to Gustave Klimt, I think that these readings are too weighted towards Western art. The paintings of Peter Doig have also been frequently mentioned as a touchstone. These views fail to mention how important Asian art is to Wong’s development, particularly carved lacquerware.

In the orange-dominated, square landscape, “Somewhere” (2018) and the black-dominated, horizontal landscape, “Figure in a Night Landscape” (2017), the monochromatic brushstrokes against a contrasting ground are comparable to the incised surface of lacquerware. Also, the hallucinatory optical power of Wong’s paintings seem to be inspired by lacquerware’s attention to detail and repletion of marks, especially when it comes to depicting dragon scales, waves, or feathers. Wong’s engagement with Western and Eastern art, from painterly painting to highly stylized, labor intensive craft, seems to me to be central to his work.

As much as one might detect connections to other artists and traditions, Wong’s packed scenes are his own. The figures, which disturb the landscape, can be read as surrogates for the artist working his way through the landscape of art; he is both embedded in the paint and having a dialog with it. In each scene, it is clear that the figure cannot see that far into the landscape, that he or she is literally surrounded by paint.

The lush dots and short, blended brushstrokes of “Figure in a Night Landscape” underscore Wong’s growing strengths: he is simultaneously visceral and optical, responsible for every inch of the surface while arriving at an improvised composition that strikes this viewer, at least, as necessary and insistent. The lone figure, which seems to be gender indeterminate, wearing a red, hooded robe, appears to have been plunked down into this wooded landscape, the ground littered with what could be leaves or stones. There is no sign of the path the figure took, nor any indication of where that person will go. The tilt of the head evokes many different readings, from perplexed to slightly mournful.

Wong’s paintings implicitly challenge a long-held prejudice summed up by Rudyard Kipling’s poem, “The Ballad of East & West” (1889), which opens with the hoary line: “East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet.” In his paintings, Wong has brought together distinct strands of Western and Eastern art and made them into something that is recognizably his. It is not about adapting to one culture or another, but about absorbing as much as he can until the source becomes less and less important to point out. That seems to me to be the future of painting.