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THE ART WORLD REMEMBERS MATTHEW WONG, SELF-TAUGHT PAINTER OF VIBRANT LANDSCAPES, WHO HAS DIED AT 35

By Nate Freeman



Matthew Wong outside his solo show at Karma in 2018.
Photograph courtesy Matthew Higgs

Jonas Wood, Matthew Higgs, and others share memories of the artist.

On Sunday, the New York gallery Karma announced in an Instagram post that Matthew Wong, one of the artists in its stable, had died on Wednesday October 2. He was 35. The cause was suicide.

Trained as a photographer and practicing as a poet, Wong began using his Facebook page while living in Hong Kong to engage artists, dealers, and collectors on the nature of painting, and how one develops a painting practice. By 2014, he was making canvases himself, and posting them to the same Facebook page, where participants in the dialogue could jump into the comments section and opine on the work.

One of those participants was John Cheim, the owner of Chelsea gallery Cheim & Read, who then introduced his work to White Columns director Matthew Higgs. By 2016 Wong had set up a studio in Edmonton, Canada. There, he devoted himself to painting, creating lush landscapes that nodded at Milton Avery while not shying away from his self-taught status.

In the summer of 2016, Higgs placed two paintings by Wong in a show he

arranged at Karma Amagansett. During that show, Wong met Brendan Dugan, Karma's founder, and they began to work together.

In 2017, one of his works was acquired by the Dallas Museum of Art during the Dallas Art Fair, and later that year he was featured in a group show at that city's Galerie Frank Elbaz. In 2018, he made his solo debut at Karma, which was rapturously received. Jerry Saltz called it "one of the most impressive solo New York debuts I've seen in a while."

It was also around the middle of 2018 that I met Matthew, having been introduced to him by Dugan, and had the pleasure of hanging with him and his mother, Monita, at art fairs where he had works for sale. In February, during Frieze Los Angeles, the two of us bombed into the Chateau Marmont after a dinner at the Beverly Hills Hotel and stayed until late in the evening, commandeering a couch and talking about his show that was currently up at Massimo de Carlo in Hong Kong.

During Art Basel in Basel earlier this year, he came to the annual fondue dinner I host, and I was delighted to single him out in my toast as an artist at the dinner among a sea of dealers and journalists. We spent the whole night sparring with the other attendees over what was the best work up in the city while everyone drank schnapps and dunked hunk after hunk of bread into molten cheese. A perfect evening.

While he was not in London last week during Frieze, he was represented by a gorgeous landscape painting from 2019 at the Karma booth. It depicted a solitary figure walking out into a snowy expanse. The title was *See You On the Other Side*.

Here, a few dealers, collectors, and fellow artists share memories of Matthew Wong.

Jonas Wood, artist

So sad that Matthew took his own life. He was a great guy, him and his mom were inseparable, they came to the studio a few times. We spent time together in NYC, and wrote to each other a lot.

He knew everything I ever made. He stood in front of my Japanese landscape painting when I had just finished it in my studio and he said, "This will be Japanese Garden 3." Ha! He knew what I was gonna title the painting before I had signed it. I asked Brendan about this later and he said he had studied all my work. And that just blew me away. He had a huge appetite for looking and studying art he was interested in. And not just art—fashion, music, poetry. He will be missed dearly by many and I believe will influence generations to come. He was the modern day Van Gogh.

Claudia Albertini, director, Massimo De Carlo Hong Kong

I was indeed deeply saddened to know about Matthew, and I still cannot believe he has gone.

I met Matthew in 2014. At that time I was working for a different gallery, Platform China, and I used to run their project space in Hong Kong.

I remember Matthew reached out to me, he was very curious about an artist I was working with and had just exhibited at the gallery, Ma Ke. Matthew really liked his works, especially his paper works. Not long after I knew Matthew was a painter and poet. He then showed me some of his early works, which were very unique and extremely intriguing.

Unfortunately, soon after then, I lost touch with him. I knew later Matthew and his family moved from Hong Kong, but wasn't able to contact him. It was not till two years ago when Mr. De Carlo asked whether I knew an artist called Matthew Wong that I immediately went back to my memory. I tried to find him, and here he was, at his fabulous solo show at Karma.

On January 10th we opened his solo here in Hong Kong. I remember the day after the opening Matthew came back to the gallery, and he came back every single day for the time he was in Hong Kong. He would spend minutes in front of his paintings and he would remember perfectly clearly in his mind the moment and every single brush stroke he did. He would look at these infinite landscapes as if he was re-running them through...

It was one of the most touching moments. Matthew was so sensitive, and very, very deep. Matthew was real—a pure, real soul. Such a loss for this world. And I do really mean it.

John Cheim, owner, Cheim & Read

Apparently Matthew touched many people's lives. He certainly did mine. The first time we communicated was through Facebook. He asked me if I could recommend an oil paint brand as he was going to begin to paint. This must have been 4 or 5 years ago . I suggested Williamsburg Paint—a paint that had its beginnings in the studio of Milton Resnick, a painter Matthew admired. Subsequently, he showed me some of his beautiful large black ink drawings and I acquired one. Over the years he would continue to ask my advice and I enjoyed his conversations about all subjects—art, film, politics—and he was extremely bright, sensitive, and knowledgeable. And from that first foray into oil paint he quickly mastered the medium and began to make intensely beautiful paintings . Only a week ago I sent him a picture of our dog Ella. He asked if he could make a gouache of it and within the day he sent back an image of beautiful work on paper.

It pains me greatly to have lost him. Somehow I feel that if I could have just picked up on something he inferred I might have diverted his path.

Frank Elbaz, owner, Galerie Frank Elbaz

I'm very sad. I had very good moments and big fights with him but he was a genius, really. He drove me crazy and gave me a really hard time, but I will love him forever.

Matthew Higgs, director, White Columns

I think I was the first person to show Matthew's work in the 2016 exhibition "Outside" that I curated for Karma in Amagansett. Matthew came down from Canada for the opening, which is where he met Brendan Dugan—the beginning of their friendship/collaboration. This is what I said about the exhibition in the press release:

"The 'outside' alluded to in the exhibition's title is as much a physical place (i.e. the world around us) as it is a psychological state (as evidenced by the mercurial sensibilities of so-called 'Outsider' art.) It is in this liminal space—between what can be measured or depicted and that which remains unknowable—that Outside seeks to operate. The artists in Outside, of many generations, both conventionally and unconventionally trained, subscribe to no recognizable ideology or tendency. If Kippenberger had his 'psychobuildings', Outside has its 'psychogeographies' or perhaps more accurately its 'psychotopographies.' Outside ultimately suggests that our sense of 'place'—like our sense of 'self'—remains elusive: a shape-shifting terrain, constantly in flux."

I think this still describes how I feel/felt about Matthew and his work. He was a very special person and a truly brilliant artist...

Jonathan Travis, art collector

Matthew and I connected first after I bought one of his paintings in 2017, before his solo show at Karma. He was so appreciative of the support, and it was immediately clear we had similar taste in art. We ended up becoming friends, texting often about art and pop culture, and whatever else was on our brains at the moment. We shared a bunch of great laughs. He had a childlike innocence to him, but also clearly a brilliant mind. I will miss him greatly. I already do.