

EDMONTON AUTISTIC ARTIST REMEMBERED FOR ACHIEVING 'IMPROBABLE TERRITORY'

by Peggy Lam



A photo of one of Wong's paintings, sitting in his Edmonton studio. (Peter Evans/CBC)

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Colleagues, family and friends are mourning the death of Matthew Wong, an Edmonton artist diagnosed with autism who was recognized internationally for his landscape paintings.

Wong, 35, died on Oct. 2. Family and friends confirmed he died by suicide.

"I am in total shock," said Monita Cheng, Wong's mother.

"He's an extremely talented person. He's a lovely son. He's extremely kind. He cares about people; he loves to help people," she said.

"He was voracious in everything that he did in life," said Brendan Dugan, the owner of Karma, a gallery in New York City that represented Wong.

"He accomplished more in the short time he was painting and making work than most people probably do in their whole lives," he said.

'Instant recognition of his talent'

According to Dugan, Wong wasn't trained as a painter; his artwork started from poetry and then translated into photography. He taught himself how to paint.

Wong earned a bachelor of arts degree in cultural anthropology from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor in 2007. In 2013, he completed a masters of fine arts in photography at City University of Hong Kong.

"Matthew was very unusual in a lot of ways, his presence was kind of uncanny," Dugan said.

He first met Wong through Outside, a group art show hosted by Karma on Sept. 3, 2016.

"Once Matthew was included in this group show, there was kind of an immediate and instant recognition of his talent," Dugan said.

"There was always this kind of layering of symbolism and poetry, within the idea of a landscape or nature."

'Improbable territory for a young artist'

By 35, Wong had three solo exhibitions — two in Hong Kong and one in New York City. He has one more with Karma that's forthcoming. Wong was also featured in 13 group exhibitions and two publications.

David Moos, the owner of David Moos Art Advisory, said he came across Wong's work at Karma.

Moos was also the modern and contemporary curator for the Art Gallery of Ontario from 2004 to 2011.

"Painting is an extremely challenging medium. It's a demanding and difficult medium today to make meaningful and relevant paintings, and I think Matthew accomplished that at the very highest level which is remarkable for a person his age," Moos said.

"I think he brought his life experience to bear on what is improbable territory for a young artist to tackle."

Moos said Wong's paintings allow people to "step aside from our everyday realm."

"To look to Van Gogh is almost anecdotal at this point," he said. "It is utterly contemporary. There's there's a plain spoken beauty in his work that I think is genuine and earnest."

Mental health struggles

Wong was born in Toronto on March 8, 1984, though he and his family moved frequently between Hong Kong and Toronto.

Wong began seeing a psychiatrist at four years old.

He also saw child psychologists to help him with his social skills, Cheng said, adding it was difficult for Wong to make friends because they moved often.

By 16, doctors diagnosed Wong with Tourette syndrome, a brain condition causing people to make involuntary sounds and movements.

“He’d try different jobs and he says it’s not possible for him because he always had problems. His interpersonal skills were very, very poor,” Cheng said.

Cheng said her son loved North America and disliked Hong Kong, but he continued to live there because collectors there supported his paintings.

In 2016, Wong relocated to Edmonton with his parents. They lived closed to the High Level Bridge.

“Even when we were travelling, he would have have a sketchbook, he would sit down by Starbucks, get coffee [and] he would just sketch and draw,” Cheng said. “He said he loved Edmonton.”

It was in Edmonton that Wong met Matthew Higgs, director of White Columns, a gallery in New York City, which later featured Wong’s art.

‘He felt that he’s very lucky’

Cheng said despite her son’s struggles, he knew he was “lucky.”

“Even though he suffers a lot because of the mental issues, he felt that he’s very lucky,” she said. “I think Matthew really wanted to be recognized as a great Canadian artist.”

“Me and my husband, we are extremely proud of our son. He had a lot of struggle, but he also has a very strong mind.

He’s like rock solid, you know.”

Wong’s family and colleagues are holding a memorial service at the Connelly-McKinley Funeral Home, at 100th Avenue and 114th Street on Oct. 21 at 1 p.m.

The Karma gallery in New York City will also host an exhibit featuring Wong’s work, planned before Wong’s death. The exhibit is called *Blue* and runs from Nov. 8 to Dec. 22.