

ARTFORUM

OCTOBER 17, 2019

MATTHEW WONG (1984–2019)

by Brian Calvin



Matthew Wong, *The Bright Winding Path*, 2017, oil on canvas, 72 x 48". Courtesy of Karma, New York.

I FIRST CAME ACROSS IMAGES of Matthew Wong's paintings on Instagram some years ago. The platform is hardly ideal for transmitting the nuance, scale, and physicality of painting, but it does allow for the discovery of artists outside the traditional parameters of the contemporary art world. I don't recall exactly what those early images were, only that their bold and charged simplifications of landscape brought to my mind the work of Milton Avery. As the images multiplied, so did the references: the unmistakable influence of Chinese landscape painting alongside Vuillard, Munch, Matisse, Alex Katz, Lois Dodd, Forrest Bess.

After a time, Matthew and I began corresponding regularly about painting, poetry, music, philosophy, and the intersection of them all—the art life, as Matthew once called it. We discussed painters who create a visual language and world of their own. We shared the belief that limitations can open things up for an artist rather than shutting them down. "Your exploration with different notions of what constitutes a picture, using the building blocks of a pictorial vocabulary developed over time speaks to me very much," he wrote me once. Those reassuring words mean a great deal to me.

Although Matthew had been painting for a relatively short amount of time—only a few years, by the time I first saw his pictures—he quickly fashioned his own visual language, passionately exploring its parameters. Upon encountering Matthew's work, you quickly experience the sensitivity and depth of his vision. His was a

vibrant and sincere romanticism more reminiscent of William Blake's poetry than contemporary art's dominant voices. The tiny figures populating his landscapes invite you to wake up to the pulsating world around you.

A few days before Matthew ended his life, we were messaging about Manet's late paintings. I sent an image of an old still life I had made in dialogue with the Impressionist. Matthew's response was the last I heard from him: "That's beautiful, Brian. Thanks for sharing." As I read the tributes to Matthew, poring over his images and rereading our past conversations, my heart aches to think of his suffering. His generous, inquisitive spirit will continue to unfold through his living images. He has left a breadcrumb trail for countless other fellow travelers to follow. I'm sorry you couldn't stay, Matthew. We miss you. Thanks for sharing.

Brian Calvin is a painter who lives and works in Ojai, California.