

# ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

## NOVEMBER 9, 2019

### MATTHEW WONG, ARTIST ON THE CUSP OF FAME, HAS FIRST EXHIBITION SINCE HIS UNTIMELY DEATH

by Nick Mafi



*Unknown Pleasures* by Matthew Wong, 2019 oil on canvas, 65 × 65 inches.

*Blue* at New York's Karma Gallery consists of nearly 30 paintings that prove why leading art critics compared the young talent to Henri Matisse, Vincent van Gogh, and Georges Seurat

In Paris's Père Lachaise Cemetery, the tombstone of the famous Italian artist Amedeo Modigliani reads, "Struck down by death at the moment of glory." Much the same can be said of the late Matthew Wong, a self-taught artist who took his own life last month in Edmonton, Canada. He was 35. Today, *Blue*, Wong's first solo exhibition since his untimely death, will begin at New York's Karma Gallery.

Born in Toronto, Matthew was on the autism spectrum, suffered from Tourette syndrome, and struggled with depression. He eventually enrolled at the University of Michigan, where he studied cultural anthropology. After graduation, he took on several desk jobs. But there was something stirring within the young man. This creative energy finally burst like a Roman candle in 2013, when the then 29-year-old first began seriously experimenting with painting. "Honestly, we didn't notice the creativity of his mind until he first started painting," says his mother, Monita (Cheng) Wong. "But after he began down this path, I would always discover something new each time I'd look at his work, as if the painting would take on a new meaning with each viewing. That's when I first began to notice he had an extremely talented mind." His mother wasn't the only one. Soon after he began painting, the art world quickly took notice as well.

Two years later, in 2015, Wong had his first of several breakthroughs: The Hong Kong Visual Arts Centre arranged a solo exhibition of his work. While the modestly sized show was a significant mark in his young career, it was more of a launching point for his paintings to be shared and studied throughout the Internet. It was on art forums and through Facebook channels that his name began to take root. By 2018, Matthew was gaining significant steam, which manifested itself with a solo show

at the Karma Gallery. The critics were smitten. (One reviewer said, “He synthesizes stylized representations, bright colors, and mystical themes to create rich, evocative scenes.”) His name was suddenly being compared to giants of yore: Henri Matisse, Vincent van Gogh, and Georges Seurat (the latter two also died in their 30s). Indeed, Wong was creating consequential art, accomplishing what all great modern art must: bowing to the past while also providing a path for a different future.

The forthcoming show *Blue*, which begins tonight, is a collection of nearly 30 paintings that have never been seen by the public. Wong spent the last year of his life working on the pieces that make up the exhibition. “Much of the show consists of sights Matthew witnessed on walks while traveling through Sicily with his mother during the fall of 2018 and winter of 2019,” a gallery representative told *AD*. The name of the show comes from a place of nostalgia, a fluidity in identity. “Matthew wanted to present the blueness of blue in this show,” said the gallery representative. Viewers will quickly see why Wong has been compared to Van Gogh and Seurat. His mastery of pointillism, his granulation of atmosphere, is unrivaled by many of his contemporaries. There’s real movement in his quick, deft strokes, yet he also has such command over his form. He forces us to take, to be absorbed by the room or landscape he’s created. There’s a delicate, if not classical showmanship to his work—a shadowy combination of curving and straight-edged forms that has the softness of a soprano’s voice.

*Blue* consists of an impressive tonal range of works, from quiet country life inside a kitchen to a nighttime landscape under a starlit sky (one of the paintings is even titled *Starry Night*). By implementing velvety blues, gossamer paint strokes, and methodical crosshatchings, his work creates real personality, both intimate and abyssal.

During the summer of 1882, two years after Vincent van Gogh began his short and wildly prolific venture into painting, he wrote a letter to his younger brother, Theo. In it the Dutch painter explained what he hoped his art would do for others. “I want to reach the point where people say of my work, ‘That man feels deeply, that man feels subtly’.” It takes but one walk through Wong’s forthcoming exhibition to come to the same conclusion about his vision. *Blue* will be at Karma Gallery (188 East Second Street, New York, NY 10009), November 8–December 22, 2019. According to the gallery, “Every detail of *Blue* was conceived of by Wong and proceeds according to his wishes.”