

# ARTFORUM

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MATTHEW WONG; KARMA | NEW YORK

by Katherine Siboni



Matthew Wong, *Look, the moon*, 2019, oil on canvas, 70 x 60

The art career of Matthew Wong (1984–2019) was brief but brilliantly accelerated, considering he only began painting in earnest six years ago. Working predominantly in landscape, Wong harnessed the genre’s conventions as a framework around which to build impossible spaces. Coding earth and trees with nonmimetic, calibrated mark-making, and painting in vibrating Fauvist hues, he created feverish, labyrinthine canvases. In “Blue,” which includes his final body of work, Wong pivots slightly toward observational painting. Drawing inspiration from a specific site—Sicily, during the fall and winter—Wong locates psychological affect where it is external and universal, and generously leaves a tribute to the natural world.

In this exhibition, Wong’s articulation of pattern is at times more selective, such that real surfaces seem to undergo hallucinatory activation. In *A Dream* (all works cited, 2019), a writhing, tendriled hedge partly obstructs an otherwise smoothly rendered sunset. Positioning his art, however loosely, within chromatic restrictions, Wong produces rich tonal variation and describes nuances in retinal sight. In *Path to the Sea*, a person in the lower left corner faces a dark thicket of ultramarine, through which winds a matte-gray path, a spatially indifferent, seemingly magical itinerary to an open horizon line. When he strays from crepuscular blue, it is often toward its symbolic inverse, light. Illumination is dazzling in his handling, largely owing to his preoccupation with vastness, a fascination previously established with the lone figures navigating his earlier topographies. Across his watercolors and oil paintings are dots of lamplit windows on remote skylines, glints emanating from ocean crests

and rain. In *Look, the moon*, a flurry of marks from the brush's edge drift toward and congregate around the full, glowing orb, before a pair of tree trunks. There is a sense of communion and awe, and with this title, Wong reminds us of the intimacy of observation as a shared act.