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A VISIONARY ARTIST, GONE TOO SOON

by Jana G. Pruden



Matthew Wong's paintings in his studio in Edmonton. Photography by Amber Bracken/ The Globe and Mail

Jana G. Pruden on the exceptional life, work and legacy of Edmonton's Matthew Wong, 35, who was on the cusp of a big New York breakthrough

Matthew Wong arrived in the evenings, after supper, and sat by himself at a red booth bathed in dim yellow light. He was very tall and thin and elegant in understated designer clothes, a striking figure walking into a bustling restaurant in downtown Edmonton to have a coffee and dessert alone, while around him music blared and beautiful people chattered and laughed.

The staff there didn't know that his paintings were held in the collections of some of the art world's most prominent and powerful people. They didn't know that, only 35 years old and till very early in his career, he was being hailed as a rare talent, a visionary and even a genius, his work mentioned alongside that of some legendary artists. They didn't know that, in the early fall of 2019, the Toronto-born artist was working on a show that promised to be a breakthrough in a career already marked by an exceptional and meteoric rise. Like many others, they would only learn about Matthew Wong later, after he was gone.

"He really was that spectacular, and it really is that huge of a loss," says Brendan Dugan, an art dealer who represented Wong in New York, and represents other high-profile artists such as Brice Marden and Julian Schnabel. "Nobody knew in Canada who Matthew was, particularly in Edmonton. And now I think people are

starting to realize that you had this really remarkable person who was living and working there. He was exceptional.”

Matthew Wong was in his late 20s when he bought a cheap sketchbook and began pouring ink onto the pages and pushing them together, “hoping something interesting would happen.”

He had graduated with a degree in cultural anthropology from the University of Michigan, and began exploring art while studying photography at the school of Creative Media at the City University of Hong Kong, in part at the urging of his first and only girlfriend. While he did well in his photographic studies, it was during those experiments with ink and paper that something clicked into place. From there, he could not stop. “Painting is a mysterious, often frustrating, but ultimately compulsive activity for me,” Wong wrote, in an artist’s statement in 2013. “Working on a daily basis is basically a way for me to keep track of my life, like a diary.” The art quickly became, as he later described it, all encompassing. He would paint most days from early in the morning to late at night. If he wasn’t painting, he was online or at the library, learning about the history of art and immersing himself in the work of other artists around the world. Wong said in a 2014 interview that the experiments in ink had been “maybe a last resort to find something to hold on to,” and soon became the only thing that sustained him.

Born in Toronto to Chinese parents and raised both in Canada and Hong Kong, Wong had an encyclopedic memory for information and images, and a desire to know as much as possible about the things that interested him, including a wide variety of music, film and literature. A self-described “omnivore for sights, sounds and ideas,” he read philosophy and wrote poetry, listened to rap and jazz and the Rolling Stones, loved Quentin Tarantino and arthouse and foreign films.

But his life had not been easy. He was diagnosed as a child with autism and then Tourette’s syndrome, which caused him to twitch and tic, and he had been at times bullied severely.

He was 14 or 15 when he told his mother he wanted to kill himself, and he was diagnosed then with clinical depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder and paranoia. Wong’s parents, Monita and Raymond, were successful business people who worked in textile manufacturing, and they invested everything they could into the health of their only child, moving between Canada and Hong Kong to ensure him the best possible care, education and support.

As an adult, Wong would often tell people about his mental-health challenges as soon as he met them, to explain any behavior they might find unusual. But while Wong sometimes struggled to feel comfortable in face-to-face interactions, he connected profoundly with people online, forming extraordinary relationships and bonds with a network of artists and art critics around the world, seeking to share and discuss art on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram.

He began working with oils after reaching out to prominent New York curator and gallery owner John Cheim on Facebook, asking the best kind of paints to use. Cheim later purchased one of Wong’s large ink drawings, and the two went on to become friends.

"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," Cheim wrote about Wong, on the website Artnet. "And from that first foray into oil paint, he quickly mastered the medium and began to make intensely beautiful paintings." New York painter Paul Behnke says Wong contacted him on Facebook in 2012 or 2013, when Wong was living and working between Hong Kong and an artists' colony in Zhongshan.

"Before he turned to painting, I think he was struggling to find a place where he fit in. I think he felt a little bit alienated," Behnke says. "When he found painting and art - I think he's even described it this way in one of his interviews - it was like a life raft or something. He just grabbed a hold of it and took off."

Wong's process for painting was purely instinctive, with images not planned or sketched out in advance. He would begin with colour, applying it to the surface of the canvas and making marks until he had a vision of what the painting would become. He painted intensely and physically, passing his tools back and forth between both hands, filling the surface with swirling darkness and vivid slashes of colour, expressionist landscapes and scenes that have been compared to, among others, the works of Van Gogh, Matisse and Seurat. In some images, subtle figures. When his mother asked about the decisions he made, why he made a mark here or there, he told her he didn't know.

Wong had his first paintings exhibited at the artists' community in Zhongshan in 2014, and, the next year, at a government-run arts centre in Hong Kong. He showed for the first time in the United States in 2016 as part of a group exhibit, called Outside, in the tony Hamptons resort community of Amagansett, N.Y., over the Labour Day weekend, in part because of his connection with Cheim. Around that time, Wong also became acquainted with Dugan, who would become a close friend and represent his work through Dugan's gallery. Although Wong had only been painting for about three years, Dugan says his work immediately stood apart. He says there was a sense that the work that felt both personal and universal, and that, even so early in his career, Wong displayed a "mastery of skill and vision." One of the paintings was purchased by an influential New York couple known for their significant art collection. They saw immediately that this painting was something special," Dugan says. Shortly after the exhibit, Dugan took some of Wong's paintings to the Dallas Art Fair, and Wong and his mother flew to meet him. Dugan remembers Wong looking at one of the paintings they intended to show, and declaring, "It's not done." He and his mother immediately went to buy paint, and he began reworking the piece inside the art fair booth.

"It was an incredible thing to watch. He would just start making marks, he would just start painting, and that's what he did that day," Dugan says, remembering Wong's confidence as he started painting over the finished work. "No one else would have done that. The Dallas Museum of Art, one of the country's most prestigious galleries, ended up buying the painting for its permanent collection. In a news release about the purchase, the gallery described The West as, "a beautifully rendered offbeat picture." "These kind of things kind of became a norm with Matthew. People just responding in these wild ways," Dugan says.

“There was a magical quality about him and how people react to him and his work. Everything about him.”

The next three years would be an incredibly intense period of creation, attention and travel for Wong. His first solo show opened at Karma in March, 2018, to broad acclaim, earning mention in The New York Times, and being described by New York Magazine art critic Jerry Saltz as “one of the most impressive solo New York debuts I’ve seen in a while.” The New Yorker called Wong’s watercolour paintings “little rhapsodies of the everyday,” and asked: “When were you last wowed by a bowl of cherries?”

Wong’s fans and supporters grew rapidly, and included collectors and supporters involved with some of the United States, most prestigious galleries and arts organizations, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim and the Whitney. Their attention quickly established Wong as a serious and major artistic talent on the precipice of broader fame. “It was real, Dugan says. “It was happening for him.”

But while Wong’s success in the art world was a huge accomplishment his mother sometimes worried about how fast it was all going. It was as though he had ascended a mountain, and she wondered whether he needed time to catch his breath.

Wong’s art practice had always been extremely prolific. Living what he described as “a fairly reclusive life” with his mother in a condo he’d purchased overlooking Edmonton’s North Saskatchewan River, he devoted nearly all his time to art, breaking only to go out for dessert and coffee, to go on long aimless walks or read or watch movies at night.

He sent Dugan images of the watercolors he made every morning and evening, and the oil paintings he was working on during the day.

In the summer and fall of 2019, Wong was working with particular intensity. With a show already upcoming New York in November, he embarked on a totally new body of work, sometimes getting up in the middle of the night to go to his studio and paint.

Visiting New York toward the end of September with his mother to attend a charity art event, Wong told Dugan he wasn’t feeling well, and that he was anxious and paranoid.

While those close to Wong were very mindful of his mental health, there also didn’t initially seem to be cause for serious concern. Wong had many ups and downs, but he had achieved such success - both commercially and in terms of artistic recognition - and there were so many people who admired and supported him.

“That’s the thing that has been the hardest to grapple with, is how unrelated all of that success was to how he actually felt ...” Dugan says. “I think that level of pain that he was in, even though we would talk about it, I guess none of us understood.” Wong died by suicide on Oct. 2 near his home in downtown Edmonton. Monita Wong says when she last held her son, she told him, “You’re at peace now. You’re no longer suffering.”

“He was in such pain,” she says. “At one point he told me, ‘You know, Mom, you have no idea. I am living with the devil every single day. My mind is fighting with these demons.’”

A memorial was held in Edmonton with a small group of people from the art world in attendance, as well as some close friends of Wong’s from throughout his life, and the family’s neighbors in Edmonton. He was laid to rest with some clothing and 38 books of art and poetry. The full text of one of his poems is etched into the stone of his mausoleum.

“Whatever personal loss I feel, it’s like, ‘Oh my God, he was just starting,’ “ the artist Behnke says. “To think, what would he have been doing in 10 years? Really, the sky’s the limit.”

Monita Wong and her son were inseparable and without him now she cannot sleep or eat, and sometimes can barely breathe. She is keeping herself busy organizing and archiving his work, and says she and her husband will be establishing a foundation in his honor. She remembers telling Matthew, “Eventually you will be recognized as a great painter that represents Canada,” and how he would always joke in response, “Oh yeah, I should get a key to the city.”

“I want to make Matthew known,” she says now. “I feel that’s very important.” Monita traveled to New York for the opening of her son’s show last month. While people filled the gallery, Monita spent most of the night sitting alone in a corner she’d reserved in the restaurant next door, privately greeting friends and acquaintances who came to pay their regards, avoiding the crowds and the weight of both their accolades and their condolences.

She says the walk to the gallery that night was the hardest. She could still see her son on every single corner, the image of him as fixed and vivid as paint on canvas.