

BOOKFORUM FEBRUARY/ MARCH 2020

ARTFUL VOLUMES

by *Bookforum* Contributors



Matthew Wong, untitled (detail), 2018, gouache on paper, 9 x 12 inches

In *Blue*, a collection of the late artist Matthew Wong's recent paintings, he presents a sensitive meditation on the color's melancholy cast, reminiscent of William Gass's classic volume *On Being Blue* in its affecting intensity. The deep brooding blues that saturate Wong's canvases depict night and wintry scenes in which trees, snow, sky, and houses are delineated in the color's varying shades. His inventive way of seeing brings an eerie dynamism to placid landscapes: In *Starry Night*, no doubt an homage to van Gogh's iconic work, we view a sleepy seaside village. Like the Dutch artist, Wong blurs the distinction between animate and inanimate. The sea, sky, and mountains are blue, yet the sky is rendered in woven arches dotted with yellow; the water, too, is brightly speckled, and the purple-white outline of the mountains activates their dominant presence. The natural elements pulse with life even as the houses appear almost sepulchral in their quiet self-containment. Indeed, humans are evidenced in these paintings chiefly by their traces- smoke rising from chimneys, portraits on a wall, a pair of glasses on a table. *Tracks in the Blue Forest* offers an uncertain narrative: Amid a forbidding stand of stark, blue-black trees proceeds a line of irregular dashes, footsteps moving from the glowing white snow into a ghostly blue region where the steps disappear and gloom pervades. So palpably chilly and solitary is this vista that the painting itself appears as though it would be cold to the touch. Wong committed suicide last October at the age of thirty-five, and it's difficult not to read such images in light of this fact. *Blue* is filled with artistic choices that resound with the knowledge of Wong's death-his name doesn't appear anywhere in the text, and it's not on the cover or spine. "Color," Gass writes, "is consciousness itself, color is feeling." The mental domain on vivid display in these works is rich in feeling, profound in its concentration. Wong understood and painted what Emily Dickinson called the "zero at the bone."

- ALBERT MOBILIO