

ART, MORALITY AND MATTHEW WONG

by Uri Bollag



Matthew Wong, Mood Room, 2018. Courtesy Phillips

Art and morality go hand in hand. A good artwork of any shape or form knows how to either capture society, point a finger at its shortcomings or imagine a better future for the disadvantaged. A good artist knows how to convey the unspoken, speak the language of the silent, or to expose what is deliberately hidden. But in contrast to the creation of art, the marketplace where it is traded doesn't necessarily abide by rules of ethics, especially when looking at the explosion of the nominal art market value of the last decades and the rise of art as a money storing and growing asset and tax haven.

The question surrounding the commoditization of art is not a simple one, however, because the influx of money accounts for many beneficiaries, among them artists and the art industry itself, albeit the main profiteers remain the more fortunate segments of society. It is difficult to imagine how the big marquee auctions that are currently held by Sotheby's and Christie's, to a lesser extent Phillips too, running at heights of more than one billion dollars, benefit individuals that dedicate their lives to their passion of creating art, as paintings, sculptures and other artworks trade hands between multi-millionaires and the well-off auction houses receive generous commissions along the way. In the primary market too, an elitist circle of wealthy and influential individuals largely calls the shots and shakes hands at dozens of art fairs every year, moving funds in nepotistic fashion, while every now and then one lucky artist finds favor in their eyes and is invited onto the gravy train.

That image, that has pervaded in the art market throughout the last decades, is and has been facing much resistance in the last years on several fronts. For one, the market has hyperboled itself to such dwindling heights, that it was gripped by acrophobic shock somewhere in the second half of the last decade, and collectively decided to climb down at least some way, in order not fall off an invisible precipice (of course that was

not just thanks to reason but also a because of a cooling economy).

The renewed advancement of feminist, racial and LGBTQ+ causes has also shone a spotlight on how preferential the market has been towards the traditionally favored creators of art and as a result has begun to reconsider the criteria it employs to determine where and how to invest their resources. But whether these considerations are of ethical nature or an investment savvy anticipation of a society change remains questionable.

The real question here is whether that matters. The art market has immense power and its influence reaches way beyond the walls of museums, galleries and auction houses, and whether it is a moral awakening or mass herd behavior with a hint of fear that induces that change, the result might be the same.

At MutualArt we have long observed the rise in prices paid for works by women artists at auction, and are expecting the same to happen with pieces by artists of color, but we are under no illusion that these price hikes are made by virtue of moral considerations. It is more likely that especially investors, who view art as way of increasing their fortune, have recognized an opportunity to get their hands on Mitchells, Frankenthalers and Krasners now, while still “cheap”, wait for the gap with their male counterparts to close, hopefully in favor of the female artists, and resell at huge profits. This dynamic works the same across the board, where women, blacks and LGBTQ+ can freely be interchanged.

Art institutions of all types have declared allegiance to the fight for justice. It is too early to tell whether that was mere lip service or if real change will set in for more than a few “lucky” individuals that can be used as props. One way of telling is whether the changes are made where it actually hurts. If the market simply waits out the Covid-crisis, longing to pick up where it left off with some minor tweaks to appease the mob, it has done nothing but virtue signaling.

One example of such questionable morality for profit was obvious at the Sotheby's Contemporary Art Evening Auction this week. The first lot to appear during that segment was of “modest” expectation: Matthew Wong's *The Realm of Appearances* was estimated to fetch between \$60,000 - \$80,000. This was only the second lot by Wong to enter MutualArt's comprehensive database. The first, *Untitled*, was auctioned at Sotheby's 10-day Contemporary Art Day: An Online Auction, which closed May 14, 2020. It was estimated at \$10,000 - \$15,000, but sold for over four times as much, at \$62,500.

Wong was one of the most promising artists of his generation. He was born in Toronto, Canada, in 1984. He, like his parents, had moved between Canada and Hong Kong. After studying first Cultural Anthropology and later Photography, he was unsatisfied with what he had learned and began his self-taught art practice in 2013. He was immediately hailed for his talent and compared to the likes of Van Gogh, Matisse and Seurat. His paintings, mostly manipulated landscapes, are hypnotic, colorful, expressive, deep and mostly – unique. But Wong was diagnosed early on as autistic and with Tourette's syndrome. Later on, he began suffering from chronic depressions and other mental health problems. In October 2019, Matthew Wong put an end to his suffering by committing suicide.

It is clear that Wong has all the ingredients to turn into one of our times' greats of art. The skill, the signature-style, the rarity, the story. Less than a year has passed, and hungry collectors have recognized the potential for profit, on the back of the very real

suffering Wong endured in his lifetime. The Realm of Appearances, quickly caught in a bidding war, sold for \$1.82 million.

The trend continued at Phillips' Contemporary Art auctions, his Mood Room selling for \$848,000, after being estimated at \$60,000 - \$80,000. Maybe Wong's family will be happy their son might obtain such legacy. It's unlikely to serve as true consolation.

Do the ends justify the means? Answering that question with "yes" is deeply immoral. Answering with "no" would be one-dimensional and ignore the fact that in cases like the art market sometimes the side-effects of morally questionable behavior can lead to a sweeping moral readjustment, albeit not intentionally. But then again, maybe that adjustment was not for moral gain in the first place and won't lead to real moral consequences.

Most of the time reality is not black and white and falls somewhere within the gray area. The astronomical sums spent on art in both the primary and secondary market at best induce a feeling of frustration and helplessness in artists who are not part of the roster, in the worst case it leads to anger and surrender. It is one thing when profit and greed govern the rules of business, but a true artist would never pursue his calling for monetary reasons. Still, in the world we live in, many artists are thrown a desperately needed lifeline by this market. But the artists who don't receive such support surpasses the ones that do by tremendous numbers.

Only real, widespread democratization, based on transparency and fairness, might help this market become moral in its trade as it should be in its creation, when social mobility is not subject to the approval of few, but the merit of artistic excellence. Until then, all progress and recompense will be escorted by the bitter taste of greed.