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CANADIAN ARTIST MATTHEW WONG DIED TOO SOON LAST OCTOBER. HIS WORKS ARE NOW FETCHING STRATOSPHERIC SUMS AT AUCTION.

by Adrian Humphreys



'The Realm of Appearances' by Matthew Wong. HANDOUT/PHILIPS

Matthew Wong's paintings vibrate with gleeful colour but with a close look, loneliness and despondence start distracting. Amid a riot of bold, stylized trees, for instance, a solitary figure, barely noticed, stands at a wishing well, his hands poised as if he has no coins.

That particular painting, *The Realm Of Appearances*, was on the auction block at Sotheby's in New York last week and was expected to draw maybe US\$70,000; instead 59 bidders from 16 countries clambered over each other for it. The hammer fell, sold, at US\$1,820,000.

It was an astounding amount for a piece by a young, inexperienced, self-taught, Edmonton painter.

On Thursday afternoon, a whimsical Wong watercolour sold at Phillips, a New York auction house, blazing past its US\$20,000 estimate to US\$187,500; in the evening, the Mood Room, an oil on canvas bright as a St. John's street, sold for US\$848,000, more ten times its estimate. Another oil, *Warmth*, is on the block in Hong Kong next week.

This sudden, big-money embrace of Wong is a gleeful, vibrant backdrop but, like his paintings, there is distressing melancholy.

An October headline in the *New York Times* sums up the tragedy: "Matthew Wong, Painter on Cusp of Fame, Dies at 35."

Wong was born in Toronto in 1984. When he was seven, he moved with his parents to

Hong Kong. At the age of 15, the family returned to Canada, partly because of Wong's medical issues.

His mother, Monita (Cheng) Wong, told the New York Times that Wong was on the autism spectrum, had Tourette's syndrome and struggled with depression since his childhood.

After graduating high school, Wong attended the University of Michigan for anthropology, started taking photos, and went back to Hong Kong to study photography. It was during this stint in Hong Kong he started drawing.

"I began teaching myself to draw and paint from scratch since 2012, so it is still very early for me and I am just trying to see 'what the paint does,'" he said in an online interview in 2013. He was sharing his output online.

"Facebook has been great as it has brought me out of isolation and put my images on public circulation for anyone to access," he said in that interview.

His pace was frenetic.

"Work begins from the moment I wake up in the morning and usually carries on, on and off, until I retire very late at night," he said.

He had works shown in Beijing in 2013 and 2014 when he was splitting his time between China and Hong Kong, and a Hong Kong show in 2015, before returning to Canada and settling back in with his parents, this time in Edmonton.

Wong's big break came in 2016 when some of his work was included by curator Matthew Higgs in an exhibition for Karma gallery in the Hamptons, the tony stretch of New York's Long Island. Wong had a solo show at Karma a few years later.

New York fell in love with Wong. Or at least the well-to-do doyens of its art world did. Reviews were effusive.

"Some of the most irresistible paintings I've ever encountered," wrote Roberta Smith in the Times. "My life had been improved and I know other people who have had the same reaction. Such relatively unalloyed pleasure is almost as essential as food."

"When were you last wowed by a bowl of cherries?" asked The New Yorker of one of Wong's watercolours. New York magazine's critic said it was "one of the most impressive solo New York debuts I've seen in a while."

Some of the comparisons for Wong's potential were stratospheric: Vincent van Gogh, Edvard Munch, Gustav Klimt, Peter Doig.

Unlike the usual trajectory of budding artists — first selling art for very little — Wong's works immediately went for thousands of dollars. A second solo New York show was scheduled to open just a month after his death, called Blue. It went ahead, but works were not for sale.

Although only painting seriously for six years, museum galleries, major foundations and serious collectors were noticing and buying his paintings, whether with an eye for their

emotional impact or expected collectability, before his premature death.

All through the wild rise, Wong quietly suffered.

“He would just tell me, ‘You know, Mom, my mind, I’m fighting with the Devil every single day, every waking moment of my life,’” his mother, Monita (Cheng) Wong, told the Times after his death.

Wong died Oct. 2, 2019. The cause was suicide.

“The captivating compositions Matthew Wong conceived in his all-too-short career have captured the attention of collectors across the globe,” said Amanda Lo Iacono, at Phillips auction house, before the start of the evening sale.

“His paintings and works on paper utilize rich art historical references to depict vivid, emotive scenes, rendered with a carefree hand and an ebullient palette. We have achieved stellar results and we believe that this interest will continue.”

Before his death, the art world seemed bemused by Wong being a self-taught late-bloomer, who instead of art schools had degrees in anthropology and photography. After his death the amazement turned to his working through his troubled state. Suddenly, it’s from the astounding value of his work.

And, perhaps, for all three reasons together.