

# SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST

## JULY 22, 2020

### HOW ART SENSATION MATTHEW WONG LEARNED HIS CRAFT IN HONG KONG

by Aaina Bhargava



Works by the late Canadian artist Matthew Wong on display at the Massimo De Carlo gallery in Hong Kong in 2019.

Self-taught, he only started painting after completing a degree course in photography in Hong Kong seven years ago, yet his work quickly earned comparison with the art of modern masters such as Vincent van Gogh, Henri Matisse and Edvard Munch.

“The eye for detail he had was amazing,” recalls Hong Kong gallerist Claudia Albertini. “He was one of my best students,” says one of his teachers, the artist Leung Chi-wo.

On October 2, 2019, Chinese Canadian artist Matthew Wong took his own life on what seemed to be the cusp of an exceptionally promising career. He was 35 years old.

His untimely death gave rise to much curiosity about his persona and his art, and since then his vibrant, expressive paintings have become a commercial sensation, with several selling for record prices at auction this month.

Homecoming (2017), estimated to sell for between HK\$460,000 and HK\$640,000 (US\$59,000 and US\$83,000), went for HK\$3 million in the Hong Kong leg of Christie’s Global ONE sale on July 10.

Warmth (2017), one of three works sold at Phillips’ 20th Century and Contemporary Art sale in Hong Kong on 8 July – all of which blazed past their estimates – sold for HK\$2.65 million, over five times its estimated price range of HK\$400,000 to HK\$600,000).

Perhaps the most coveted piece, The Realm of Appearances (estimated at US\$60,000 to US\$80,000), sold for a staggering US\$1.82 million, 26 times the average of its high

and low price estimates, at Sotheby's New York Contemporary Art Evening auction on June 30.

Wong's career trajectory was unusual. He experienced both commercial success and critical acclaim almost immediately after taking part in his first exhibition in New York. Curator Matthew Higgs included one of his works in "Outside" – a group show at Karma Gallery, New York in 2016 – a career breakthrough for Wong.

There was extraordinary interest from collectors, and effusive praise from art critics. In a review of Bue, a solo exhibition held at Karma Gallery earlier this year, Roberta Smith, one of the most prominent and respected art critics, deemed him "one of the most talented painters of his generation".

Another eminent critic, Jerry Saltz, deemed Wong's previous solo show in 2018 at the same gallery "one of the most impressive solo show debuts" he'd seen in a while.

Born in Toronto, Wong spent most of his childhood moving between Canada and Hong Kong. According to The New York Times, which spoke to Wong's mother, Monita, last year, Wong was "on the autism spectrum, had Tourette's syndrome and had grappled with depression since childhood".

After graduating from the University of Michigan Ann Arbor in the United States with a bachelor's degree in anthropology, he moved back to Hong Kong and it was here that his interest in art was born, initially through the lens of photography. He enrolled in the Master of Fine Arts photography programme at the City University of Hong Kong's School of Creative Media.

Here, he was advised by Hong Kong artist Leung Chi-wo, an associate professor at the school, who remembers him being an exceptionally diligent and engaged student.

"He was very hard-working, serious, and really performed well in class. He asked a lot of questions and really wanted to learn as much about art history and art as he could," Leung recalls.

"He was always curious and very engaged in discussions, and you could tell he had this urge to express himself very specifically."

Claudia Albertini, director of the Massimo De Carlo gallery Hong Kong, where Wong had a solo exhibition in early 2019, also noticed this attention to specificity.

She says: "It really struck me the attention to detail that he had. You could see that he was very observant, really able to catch things with an uncommon sensitivity.

"While his show was on here, I remember he would just come into the gallery and stare at his work. It seemed if he was recalling every brushstroke, the order of every mark he made in the painting."

Expressiveness and tremendous detail are reflected in paintings that are saturated with vivid colours applied using urgent strokes. Often evocative of post-Impressionist, expressionist, and fauvist masters such as Van Gogh, Matisse, and Munch, among others, his respect for art history was evident in his paintings.

"The way he saw the world was definitely mirrored in his paintings, and is probably what

makes them so beautiful,” says Albertini. “Of course you could say that for many artists, but for him that was more evident. We see the reality through the artist’s eyes when we look at their work.”

While he studied photography, he seemed to tire of the medium. During his last semester at City University, he took up drawing, then ink painting, and eventually transitioned into oil on canvas. He completed the MFA programme in 2013, and had his first solo show in Hong Kong in 2015 at the Hong Kong Visual Arts Centre.

Despite his presence in Hong Kong, his work seemed to be especially well received in the West. Perhaps this was due to his presence on Facebook, a platform that he used to forge connections and hold dialogues with artists, collectors, curators, gallerists and critics from around the world, including prominent figures such as gallerist John Cheim of Cheim & Read gallery.

“I don’t think he developed a particularly strong network within the local scene in Hong Kong,” Leung says. “He was very active on Facebook, and I was surprised because I didn’t realise how important social media could be as a platform for young artists to introduce their work on.”

Wong deleted his Facebook account after he left Hong Kong (he last visited in March 2019), and moved to Edmonton, Canada, the landscapes of which many speculate inspired his paintings. Although he deleted his account, the connections he made through Facebook proved valuable, as did the visibility his work gained.

Of the international attention Wong received, Leung says: “I later heard in international art news that he caught the attention of John Cheim, was having a solo exhibition at a gallery in New York, and was even praised by Jerry Saltz. I remember thinking, wow that’s really something.”