

# THE ART NEWSPAPER

## AUGUST 21, 2020

### REMEMBERING THE BEAUTIFUL MELANCHOLY OF MATTHEW WONG

by Kenny Schachter



Matthew Wong's *The Realm of Appearances* on show at a preview of Sotheby's contemporary art evening auction on 29 June in New York

I'd like to share a few thoughts concerning Matthew Wong and the recent auctioning of four of his works since his recent premature death in October of 2019, the highest for a record \$1.82m; but, more importantly, I'd like to discuss the artist.

Having studied photography, Wong started painting only a relatively short time ago, to virtuosic affect. He sucked visual information from social media platforms at a super-human pace; and, just as quickly, out it came in the form of paintings and poetry. The amalgamation of all he absorbed at rocket speed, quoting masters like Van Gogh, Matisse, Vuillard, Klimt and Bonnard, manifested itself in a manner all his own—a distinctly dark and beautiful way of seeing. Even when his works were rendered in saturated upbeat colours, they still conveyed an air of melancholy. He painted a lifetime compressed into the approximately ten years since he picked up a brush.

Together we'd meet up and share meals across the globe from Paris to Los Angeles and even in Long Island, where he and his mother, Monita, whom he always travelled with, twice visited shows of mine. Matthew was super-inquisitive, acutely sensitive and wildly passionate about not only art—he dressed as coolly as my clothes-crazy kids, who often joined us. They even went out late on one occasion, after I claimed elder's early retirement for the night. Matthew closely watched everything from the remove of Instagram (and before that Facebook) from either Hong Kong or Edmonton, Canada, where he was based in the last years, and from that vantage point he was a consistently supportive follower of the art of Adrian and Kai, my two oldest kids, and they grew to adore his works and, moreover, him.

In March of last year I lost my 21-year-old son Kai to suicide, which I have written about

before, and don't plan to stop—the rates in young people alone are up more than 50% in the US in the past ten years. Kai was enrolled in The Slade School of Art in London, where he was admitted to graduate school without even completing a semester of undergrad based on the merits of his portfolio. The pain, to say the least, is indescribable for the survivors, not to mention what my son, and Matthew, silently endured. It's impossible to characterise how un-understandable it is to family and friends, especially when people as successful as Matthew and ostensibly as Kai seemed on the verge of becoming, fall prey to mental illness. I think of Kai every waking moment of my life and am surrounded by his accomplished works.

I purchased a painting by Wong in 2017 before I knew who he was, from a dealer (other than his long-time gallery Karma), ineluctably drawn to the colours and composition of his take on classic art. Not long after his death I sold the work for a modest sum back to the dealer I originally bought it from—I just couldn't stand the thought of another reminder of such senseless, unbearable tragedy. It never occurred to me to check on the offering price. The very next day, I had multiple queries for Wong's works at more than three times the amount I had accepted. I didn't renege as to do so wouldn't be right, either.

That still doesn't account for the morose speculation that drove his prices to astronomic levels at last month's auctions, though great the paintings surely are. Adding to the fray, Loic Gouzer's recently launched Fair Warning auction app will sell off another, a work painted in 2017, on 27 August with an estimate of \$100,000- \$150,000. I was obviously targeted for not being aware of the demand the works were beginning to garner on the secondary market. Markets trade on a zero-sum edge—a disparity of information unbeknownst to one party in a transaction is at their immediate and direct expense. Markets have no motivations other than opportunism and greed. It's human nature. I don't care about the sum so much as the fact I was slightly taken advantage of by the disingenuousness of both dealer and buyer. But this is my fault alone.

Like Kai, I miss Matthew and both of their brilliant insights, childlike humour, joy for art, love and friendship. On Matthew's tombstone is a poem he wrote:

*June*

*I am that which is idle on a summer day.  
I am the mouth that does not move.  
I am the dish that parts the beef like a sea.  
I am the wind's last legs at dusk.  
I am six feet short of the moon,  
Watching you as you sleep, and you,  
Who came to my breath, perhaps expecting me  
To turn up around the corner in the rain,  
Like a memory of Paris, so I close my eyes  
And kiss you as if I was there.*