

# ARTSY

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### THE MOST INFLUENTIAL ARTISTS OF 2020

by Benjamin Sutton



At the start of 2020, it was impossible to predict that this year would transform the art world as we knew it. By March, the COVID-19 pandemic began to throw entire years of museum, gallery, and biennial exhibitions into the balance, and it may have forever rocked the international art fair circuit. In June, the Black Lives Matter movement swept through the art world and ushered in a long overdue reckoning with the inequity and systemic racism of the art industry.

The artists below were at the forefront of these waves of change. They created fresh work to live up to this moment and launched fundraisers and initiatives to aid victims of COVID-19, promote BIPOC organizations, and lift up fellow artists. Some managed to set head-spinning auction records and opened spectacular museum shows; others set career milestones and earned due recognition for their longstanding, influential practices. They represent a small fraction of the artists who inspired us this year, though they stand out as leaders who will surely guide us through the next one and whatever it may bring.

## Matthew Wong

Just as Matthew Wong's career was taking off, we lost him. The Canadian painter had long struggled with mental health issues and died by suicide in October 2019 at age 35. At the time, he was preparing a solo exhibition, "Blue," his second with New York gallery Karma, which opened the following month and continued into the first week of 2020. It was tempting to read intimations of his suffering into the paintings of moonlit landscapes and serene interiors, yet more than that, the exhibition showcased Wong's mastery of color and composition, versatile brushwork (all the more impressive considering his MFA was in photography), and knack for balancing intense beauty and understated melancholy.

A problematic side effect of Wong's tragic genius is that his paintings have attracted the attention of speculators and flippers. His work first appeared at auction in May 2020, when an untitled watercolor from 2018 sold for \$62,500—more than four times its high estimate—at Sotheby's. The following month, at another Sotheby's sale, his 2018 canvas *The Realm of Appearances* sold for a mind-boggling \$1.8 million—about 22 times its high estimate. That record has since been eclipsed twice, most recently in early December, when his 2018 painting *River at Dusk* surpassed its high estimate of HK\$10 million (US\$1.2 million) to sell for HK\$37.7 million (US\$4.8 million) at a Phillips and Poly Auction sale. But while Wong's market may be volatile, his legacy is secure now, with works in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Guggenheim, the Museum of Modern Art, and others.