

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

A Portrait of Martin Wong Between Text and Image

by [Brian Karl](#) on April 17, 2015



Frank Carrino Photography

Martin Wong, “Untitled” (c. 1968–71), salt-fired stoneware (courtesy Collection of Bob Schultze and Sonja Schultze-Huff, Eureka, California) (all images courtesy CCA Wattis Institute of Contemporary Arts)

SAN FRANCISCO — Curated by students of the Curatorial Studies program at the California College of the Arts, this compact, well-considered [gathering of work across many media](#) by [Martin Wong](#) is a marvel of what the small-scale and seemingly ephemeral can communicate. The artist, who died in 1999 of complications from AIDS, was moderately recognized in his own lifetime, but has been experiencing a recent escalation of attention, peaking perhaps in Julie Ault’s [curation of some of his work](#) into the 2014 Whitney Biennial.

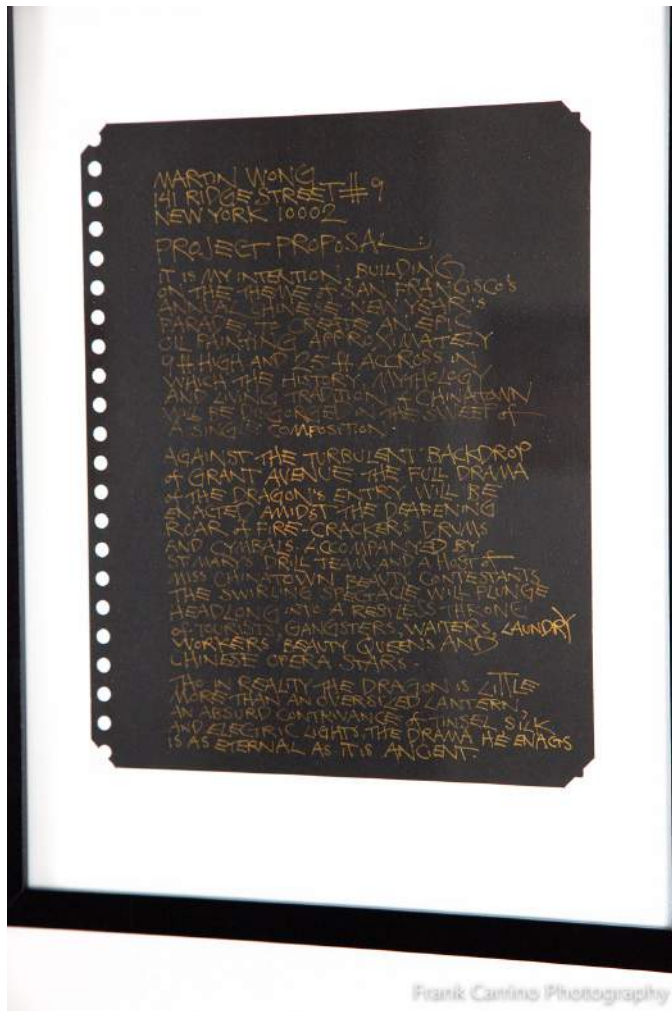
Visionary while also exceptionally down-to-earth, Wong’s work is always good-humored. His easy and gleeful immersion in and channeling of elements of popular culture allow for an unending series of takes on hybridity; gay, Chinese-American, appreciator of and interactor with Latino cultural production, polymorphous manipulator of conventional art genres and material —

from found elements to ceramic vessels and stoneware slabs, prolix prose to illustration and painting — Wong performed all of these through techniques that were both highly studied and self-taught.



Installation view, 'Martin Wong: Painting Is Forbidden' at CCA Wattis Institute, showing Wong's "As Seen on T.V. – It's Fun to Shop and Save" (1981), acrylic on canvas (courtesy the Estate of Martin Wong and P.P.O.W Gallery, New York)

Among the more idiosyncratic iconographies that play out over multiple works is his stylized appropriation of American Sign Language's fingerspelling letter symbols. This is most interestingly deployed in "As Seen on T.V. – It's Fun to Shop and Save" (1983), a small, brightly colored tour-de-force painting that greets visitors as they enter the exhibition. Mixing and matching commercial culture vernaculars, from cheap television advertising to local signboard painting, the work contains hand-sign letters spelling out the title — symbols that are both child-like in their chubby, cartoon shapes and grown-up in their adornment with crisp white shirt cuffs and identical buttons. A gold-framed TV screen looms like a sentence-ending exclamation point.



Frank Camino Photography

Martin Wong, "Project Proposal" (c. 1980s), gold ink on black paper (courtesy New York University Fales Library & Special Collections Martin Wong Papers 1982-1999, New York) (click to enlarge)

There is more than a hint of "outsider" art in Wong's obsessive returning to specific themes and renderings, his sometimes distressed or odd material choices (e.g. a paper bag, a Coca-Cola bottle), and his deliberate amateurism while also taking on ambitious themes. One such instance is Wong's "Project Proposal" (c. 1980s), comprised of an incisive sociocultural investigatory description of Chinese New Year. Written in gold ink on a darkened sheet of notebook paper, the text of the piece celebrates a tacky festival's gritty reality while throwing in camp and nostalgic elements of rhapsodic fantasizing, including beauty queens, tourists, gangsters, and Chinese Opera stars.

Wong's interest in gay iconography is signaled in much of his work. His very early rendering of a portrait of Rimbaud is an especially fine drawing that transcends juvenilia, while he uses more direct imagery in a later, hyperphallic image illustrating a poster for the Museum of Graffiti (much of Wong's work was turned to practical needs such as making menus, calendars, and posters for events). A recurrent presence is an image of two affectionate firemen, shown kissing in an early photographic postcard and shoulder-to-shoulder in the large-scale diptych painting "Sweet 'Enuff" (1988). One subset of that gay interest that surfaces more questionably is his fascination with contemporary prison culture, as in the painting "Come Over Here Rockface" (1994).

Wong's connections to the Lower East Side and Nuyorican poetry scene are embodied in the textual basis for many of his works, and figure in the frequently foregrounded imagery of urban cityscapes. Wong discovered and explored these physical, social, and cultural realms most prominently through his relationship with writer [Miguel Piñero](#), whose importance is notably demonstrated in the attention to detail in the ink portrait "Drawing (Mikey Writing 'Short Eyes' [Miguel Piñero])" (nd). Wong was drawn to these cultures, perhaps, as a further gloss on or complication of his own welter of identities.



Installation view, 'Martin Wong: Painting Is Forbidden' at CCA Wattis Institute of Contemporary Arts

The show is laid out surprisingly coherently for such a mass of objects and images, and works well in the smaller back-room space of the Wattis, whose intimacy and almost-an-afterthought location supports the impression of happening upon and engaging privately with a treasure trove of one intensely creative individual's highly personalized output. Enticingly presented, without a sense of clutter, it manages to convey the profusion and density of Wong's greater enterprise while pointing to some of the overlap of his crossmedia explorations and sketches.



Martin Wong, “Untitled: (c. 1968–71), stoneware (courtesy the Florence Wong Fie’s 2012 Survivor’s Trust, San Francisco, California) (click to enlarge)

A few choices in the exhibition’s design are a bit too coy: for instance, the placement some 12 feet off the floor of a copy of “Untitled poster (Waco Group Show)” (1974), to the point of illegibility, or the single mask a little less high up on a corner wall shelf, leering at the rest of the room. Most poor-sighted is the placement of one of the many untitled stoneware tablets so close to the wall as to obscure entirely the embossed text on one side. More successful and appropriate touches include the layer of gold-bronze paint on the surfaces of the podia holding many of the smaller sculptures and a number of careful juxtapositions of drawings and photocollages.

The installation showcases well the overlap across media of Wong’s exceptionally meticulous and bravura letterings, both on paper and ceramic pieces, which variously recall Islamic and Sanskrit calligraphy, graffiti tagging, and comic book illustration, among other DIY, youthful, creative impulses. They are far-ranging in content and savvy in their literary moves — from breezy free association raps to hard existential noir (e.g. “We had a gas station out on the Mojave ... Years passed behind the screen door”).

The compressed, stylized letterings — which seem to unspool a stream of consciousness yet are nonetheless carefully calibrated to narrative and thematic purposes — so clearly denote the ongoing creative explosion of Wong’s thought processes. The texts stand out in the show, demonstrating the fecundity of Wong’s thinking as he contemplated concerns as profound as the creation of the universe and as specific as the troubled encounters of van Gogh and Gauguin, always with striking wit and substance.



Frank Carrino Photography

Martin Wong, "Untitled (8)" (nd), ink on paper (courtesy PPOW Gallery, New York)

At the same time, the texts hint at something more cryptic and occult: messages that seem

meant first and foremost to communicate among a tight-knit group of some kind — a street gang or religious sect, say. Such texts unfold marvelously in many variations on paper sheets or scrolls, laid out loose or dangling from walls, and also in a series of simple yet effective clay tablets — like prayer stones or altar pieces, perhaps partially inspired by Wong’s studies in Nepal. As is typical in Wong’s practice, such pieces traffic in the mundane as much as the mystical — for example, in “Untitled” (1968), where the line “LAYERS OF OLD SOCKS AND DIRTY NEEDLES” nestles in between “LAYERS OF PATTERNS HIDDEN BENEATH” and “LAYERS OF CONSCIOUSNESS PEELING AWAY.”

[Martin Wong: Painting Is Forbidden](#) continues at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts (360 Kansas Street, San Francisco) through April 18.