

neumuseumbooks



sweet oblivion

the urban landscape of **martin wong**



1. *Sweet Oblivion*, 1983, Acrylic on canvas, 84 x 108".
Collection of Rose and Morton Landowne, New York, NY. Photo: Fred Scruton

Brick by Brick

NEW YORK ACCORDING TO MARTIN WONG

Dan Cameron

Martin Wong's paintings embody a directness and fearlessness of purpose so conspicuously missing from American art today that his work often appears to be the product of a radically different place and time. Wong is one of the few truly original stylists to have emerged from the highly contentious New York art scene of the 1980s, and his paintings are now only beginning to become known to a wider audience. Although these two facts make it difficult to think of Wong's exerting a direct influence upon the artists of his generation, his relaxed and personal style as well as his openness toward the subjects of his paintings, mark him as one of the forerunners of today's resurgence of figure-based painting in the United States. Perhaps the key to the continuing fascination of Wong's work, however, lies in his tenacious exploration of the labyrinths of identity, his own and that of others. Long before it was fashionable to discuss art in terms of cultural identity, Wong had arrived at a thoroughly hybrid approach to depicting urban life, one which was further enriched by the fusion of a fervid imagination with his unique methods of constructing a painting. The results confirm Wong's growing status as an American original, the author of a vision that no one could have predicted, and which, once experienced, can never be ignored.

To understand why there is a compelling urge today to take a closer look at Martin Wong's artistic production, one can start by reviewing the reasons why the art world nearly let his work fall by the wayside. Because it would be difficult to do so without getting caught up with the art world's own belief-system about itself, and the particular ways that artists are embraced before being rejected (and then, much later, embraced again), it might be instructive to make some of those typically misleading comparisons between the ethos that prevailed during the 80s and the allegedly distinct times we are living in now. I would even suggest that something about Martin Wong's art causes these ideas to rise to the surface, and it is more than likely that this quality has to do with the raw power of myth that appears throughout his imagery. Echoing the work of certain other self-taught artists, Wong's art has always embodied a relentlessness of purpose, as if having once lent plastic shape to the products of his imagination, there was never any time left to be wasted on irony or self-doubt. This combination of reckless courage and naiveté is precisely what New York's East Village represented in its heyday.

Unlike both Soho, whose bohemian conventions it deplored, and Chelsea, whose entrepreneurial drive it pre-saged, the East Village was from approximately 1983 to 1987 an extraordinarily persuasive symbol of the art world's discontent. Beginning with the brash pioneering gestures of Fun Gallery (run by Patti Astor and Bill Stelling) and Nature Morte (co-owned by Alan Belcher and Peter Nagy), the East Village was far ahead of Soho in its recognition of, in turn, the graffiti/neo-Expressionist and neo-Conceptual movements. If the one served as funky spiritual clubhouse to hip-hop crossovers like Keith Haring, Futura, Kenny Scharf, Arch Connelly, and Lady Pink, the other was where black-suited aesthetes hovered in the corner mulling over the work of Sherrie Levine, Haim Steinbach, Barbara Bloom, Jennifer Bolande, and Steven Parrino. A virtual mecca of home-grown nightclubs like Limbo and 8 B.C., the neighborhood art scene painstakingly cribbed from the Warhol 60s in its emphasis on trendiness, hedonism, and what it tried unsuccessfully to pass off as cynicism. Despite its relatively brief flowering, the East Village played a significant role in the careers of a number of New York's most prominent artists: for example, Jeff Koons, Nan Goldin, Kiki Smith, Philip Taaffe, David Wojnarowicz, Fred Wilson, Judy Glantzman, Ashley Bickerton, and Sarah Charlesworth. One can draw up an equally impressive list of its most innovative galleries: Pat Hearn, American Fine Art, 303, Jay Gorney, P.P.O.W., Postmasters, Jack Shainman, and Gracie Mansion. In short, by 90s standards the East Village was almost embarrassingly idealistic, albeit steadfast in its refusal to admit it, and the only present-day art-world phenomenon that can be identified as its legacy would be the small but closely knit network of groundbreaking galleries in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn.

Although, ironically enough, most of Martin Wong's artistic successes took place in Soho, he represented an idealized composite portrait of the East Village artist.¹ Wry, lanky, and unfailingly garbed in his best space-cowboy attire, Wong in the mid-80s embodied the Lower East Side artist as self-made man: a throwback to the hippie archetype of the 60s (his hometown is, after all, San Francisco) and a precursor to the identity-driven culture of the current decade. Behind this laid-back exterior, however, his absolute belief in his art shone through. There were usually multiple layers of irony in the way he discussed what he was doing and why, but underneath his clarity of purpose was obviously unshakable. Perhaps over time, the public facade that was Martin Wong in the 80s has come to seem like an especially brave form of defense mechanism in the face of the New York art world's particular brand of competitiveness. At the core of this line of conjecture lies a more serious observation about the relationship between Wong's artist persona and his work. Although it is hardly typical for a self-taught painter—in this case, one whose closest artistic forerunners would have to be Grandma Moses, Ben Shahn, and Alice Neel—to move to New York and pursue a professional career, Martin Wong was not the first to do so. But for an artist to have hurled himself as completely as Wong did into the urban whirlpool that was the East Village in the height of the 80s remains an almost unprecedented act among American self-taught artists.

Although propriety suggests that caution be observed when discussing Martin Wong's paintings in language normally reserved for folk or naive artists, this is a characterization that the artist himself has made no effort to disavow. On the contrary, the more we allow our eyes to linger over the details of bricks, constellations, manual alphabets, and poetry in Wong's paintings, the easier it becomes to slip into a mode of critical thought that invites an explanation based on the model of obsessive-compulsive activity as evidenced in the work of such well-known outsider artists as Joseph Yoakum, Martin Ramirez, and Adolph Wolffli. Of course, Wong is anything but self-taught: he may not have known how to paint when he decided at the age of thirty to be an artist, but he had studied ceramics formally. More to the point, he has attained a remarkable level of connoisseurship in a



2. Stanton Near Forsyth

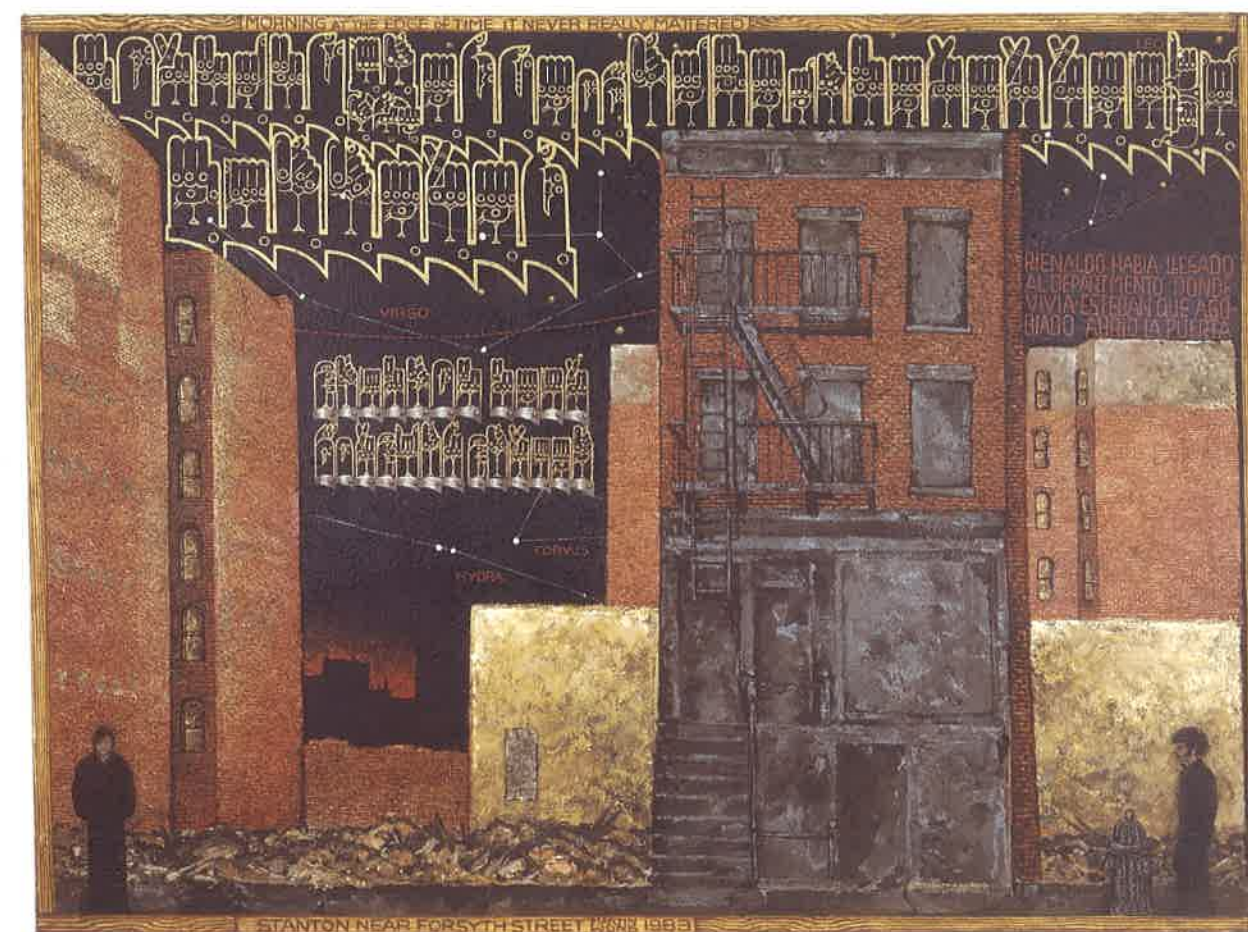
broad array of subjects known, the graffiti New Yorker.² Like many survival, so his side. Worldlines invented techniques such paradoxes artist's peculiar

One of the characters as literal as his produce an image the surface, Wong

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2. *Stanton Near Forsyth Street*, 1983, Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 64". Collection of James Dormont, Rumson, NJ. Photo: Adam Reich

broad array of subjects: Asian painting, calligraphy, and decorative arts; American antiques; and, as is well-known, the graffiti painters whose work he passionately collected throughout his years as a full-time New Yorker.² Like many artists before him, Wong has occasionally fallen back on his collecting skills as a means of survival, so his appreciation of beautiful objects (including the ones he makes) has tended to have a practical side. Worldliness and sophistication may not be the qualities we most expect to encounter in an artist who invented techniques of painting simply because he didn't want to submit to a formal course of instruction, but such paradoxes are invariably discovered when we consider the role identity plays in the process by which one artist's peculiar worldview gradually becomes irresistible to the rest of the world's occupants.

One of the characteristic features of Wong's paintings from the period covered by this exhibition, 1983 to 1992, is that as literal as his painting gets—and this is an artist known for meticulously rendering thousands of individual bricks to produce an image of a blank wall—his specific relationship to the scene that he is depicting manages to elude us. On the surface, Wong the visual diarist is clearly overwhelmed by the visual aspects of his surroundings, and he struggles to



3. *Chain Saw Valentine (Portrait of Joaquin Angaza)*, 1984, Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 48". Courtesy of the Syracuse University Art Collection, NY. Photo: Adam Reich

reconstruct that experience for his viewer. But at a deeper level, Wong's paintings become a portrait of the artist in the unending process of analyzing and interpreting his environment, searching for points of access and identification that are resonant with his own experience. While the case can be made that Wong never quite finds this resolution of identity in his neighborhood, the power of his art resides in the symbolic and mimetic relationships that he creates along the way as a means of keeping his investment in the search alive. What is produced is a moving testament to the will to believe, even under the bleak circumstances that clouded urban America during the 80s.

Because his mission to find a personal correspondence with the heart of urban decay was so intense, we must take self-mythification into account if we are to understand the essence of Wong's art. As a starting point, let's consider *My Secret World, 1978-81* (1984; pl.16). Created at the end of his long period of self-instruction in painting, the subject of the work is entirely self-referential. In its disparate motifs we see how the artist grappled first with the process of representing each fragment of his immediate environment, then with the task of fitting it together into a harmonious whole. That Wong's handling of his composition suggests that he has not quite mastered either half of the equation is in part what lends the work its charm, as if to have already learned enough technique to completely pull off the illusion would have spoiled the viewer's empathy with the scene. This observation, however, brings up another possible interpretation: that Wong the author is a by-now-skilled technician trying to capture what it felt like a couple of years earlier to have been capable of producing only clumsy approximations of the world. Whatever the explanation, it is hard to brush off the picture's effectiveness as a psychological portrait of urban loneliness: a man alone in his dingy room, inventing a vision of the world that he will continue to remake until it finally conforms to his image of a worthwhile destiny.

Whether or not its popular significance as the year Orwell chose for the enshrinement of Big Brother had anything to do with it, 1984 seems to have been a watershed year for American art that expresses a sense of defiance.³ For Wong, it resulted in the first in a string of remarkable series of paintings, for which his subject was either the streets themselves or the lives taking place behind the crumbling brick walls. In *Stanton Near Forsyth Street* (1983; pl.2), Wong has organized the background tenement buildings so that they suggest masses of empty space, while the single dilapidated structure in the foreground hovers on the verge of disappearing. The bleakness of the scene is balanced by two quite different visual tangents: the narrative moment preceding a pickup on the street (a figure who resembles the artist faces us, while another saunters by), and a burst of celestial activity in the form of hands spelling out in manual alphabet the words of a poem and a tracing of the constellations in the nighttime sky. The image does not so much suggest that man is dwarfed by his surroundings as it affirms that the poetics of the scene produce a context that transcends the physical altogether.

Sentiment and gruesomeness come together explicitly in Wong's *Chain Saw Valentine (Portrait of Joaquin Angaza)* (1984; left), which depicts an image taken straight out of horror comics: a massive gray heart, riven with spikes, dangles suspended by a chain and hook over an abandoned lot. Rendered as an allegorical portrait, the painting appears to refer to a failed romance, with the heart of the former beloved depicted as brutal, inorganic, and ultimately destined for the junk heap in which it was spawned. In comparison to Wong's canvases that were more directly influenced by his relationship with writer Miguel Piñero, *Chain Saw Valentine* is more indulgent in its deployment of a kind of violent recrimination from which no redemption is possible. But it would be hard to argue that this painting is about anything other than romance, as revealed in its lovingly



4. *Stripped Trans Am at Avenue C and 5th Street*, 1984, Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 92". Collection of Shelley Dark, New York, NY. Photo: Adam Reich

detailed representation of the watchband that grimly encircles the ruined heart. In a sense, it can be read as the flip side to a work like *The Annunciation According to Mickey Piñero (Cupcake and Paco)* (1984; pl.33), which immortalizes the moment when one man opens his heart to another in a declaration of love that is rendered all the more powerfully against cold white prison walls. Although this work deals explicitly with an aspect of prison life that Wong could have experienced only secondhand through Piñero, the placement of the viewer in a position that corresponds to that of the half-concealed listener in the background transforms the entire scene into the religious allegory referred to in the title. Just as the prostrate Paco submits to rejection by Cupcake as the price he must pay to be in the latter's company, Wong the listener becomes the excluded witness who, on hearing the story, assumes the responsibility of passing it on to future generations.

Although a great deal of significance has already been placed in Wong's position as an outsider within the social milieu he celebrates through his Lower East Side paintings of the mid-80s, the same can be said about the majority of his subjects. *Stripped Trans Am at Avenue C and 5th Street* (1984; above), with an apocalyptic red sky looming over a cluster of teetering buildings, appears ominous enough without the rusted auto shell spilling off the edge of the canvas. But if we consider the subject of the painting in relatively literal terms, Wong's immortalizing of an aspect of urban violence comes across as a kind of warning—both to himself and to the viewer—about the extremes that define his environment. The car, like the artist, is a bit player in a much larger social carnival, yet all of the narrative trappings surrounding it have been left out in order to focus on the detail that allows us to come away with a sense of bleakness in its most concentrated form.



6. *African Temple at 9th Street*, 1985, Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 96". Private collection. Photo: Adam Reich

An oddly related message seems to come through in the painting *Orion* (1984; pl.5), which shows a stack of hardcover books, the topmost having fallen open to an image of the constellation Orion. The same image fills the nighttime sky that serves as background, while a text encircling the tondo-shaped canvas explains that this particular arrangement of stars has so fascinated past astronomers that conquerors have often renamed it after themselves. Although these historical figures might be more real to us than the mythological figure of Orion, the new names have never stuck—a fact that strikes Wong as significant. This border text might seem to be a carefully wrought non sequitur were it not for the peculiar way it reverberates with the titles of the books in the center: *Washington Confidential*, *Wrestling*, *When the Rangers Were Young*, and *The Losers End*, for example. Whimsical with a Confucian bent, Wong's message here seems to be that the lives of immortals and those who are forgotten are more closely entwined than one might suspect. The respectable but fading tomes are thus brought into approximately the same outsider orbit as the stripped Trans Am.

People are not spared in Wong's vision of the outsider as a kind of prophet. One of his most compelling works from the mid-80s, *African Temple at 9th Street* (1985; above), above is the visual record of the artist's fascination with the two occupants of this makeshift storefront temple, and especially with the found calligraphy of their handmade signage, painted spontaneously on the outer wall, which conveys the directness of expression that Wong the urban anthropologist has always sought in invented systems—the manual alphabet, Chinese ideograms, graffiti, constellations, and even brick arrangements. In Wong's *Hot Wheels* (1985; right), a boy sits with his feet propped up on his bicycle handlebars, his eyes coldly following some distant activity from under his baseball cap, as a slight sneer plays across his mouth. Surrounding the boy is an endless maze of walls, link



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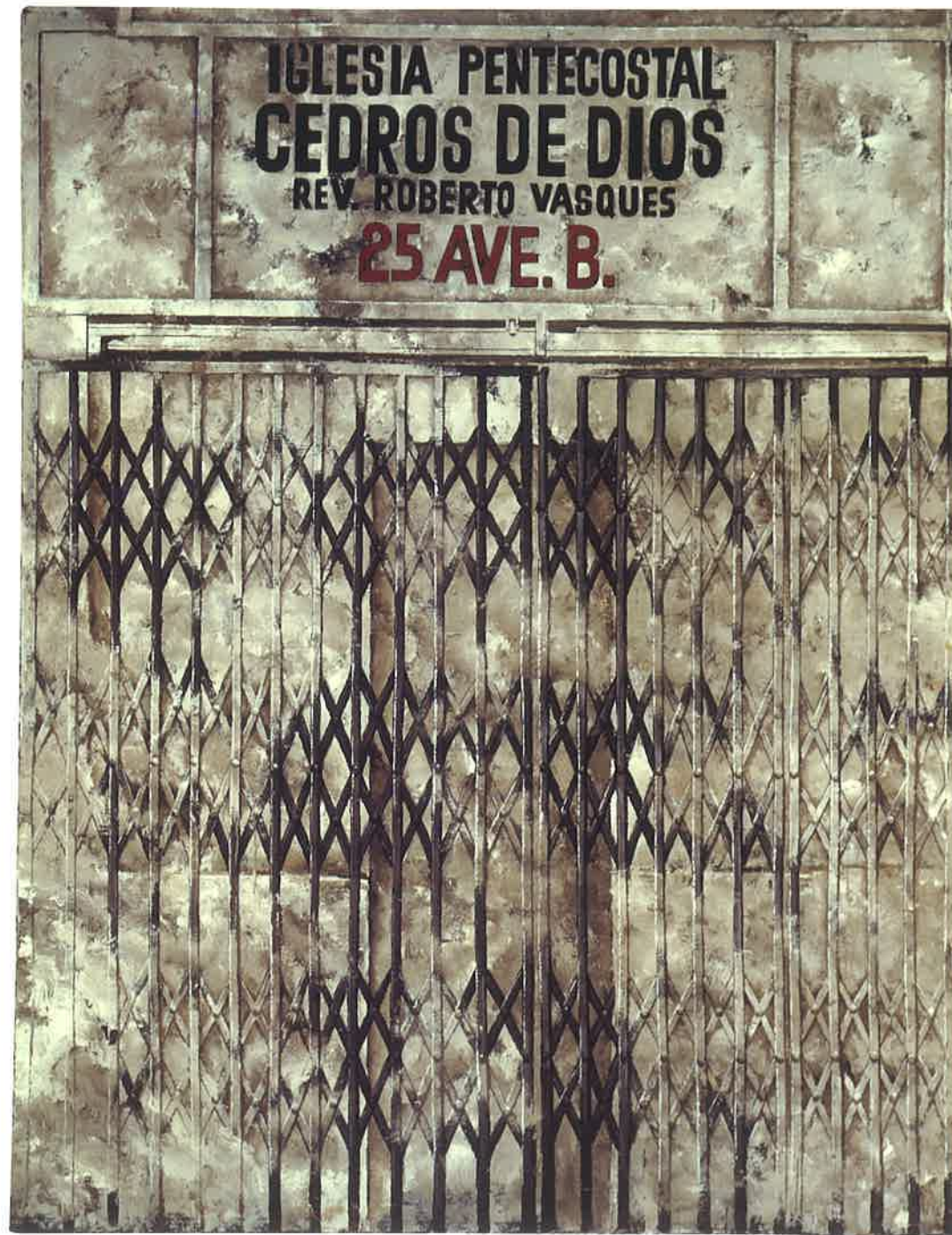
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7. *Hot Wheels*, 1985, Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 72". Collection of James Beveridge, New York, NY. Photo: Adam Reich

fencing, and barbed wire—hostile environment for a child's imagination. His face is that of a child, but his years of innocence are already long gone, and he has settled into his streetwise role with a veteran's air of world-weariness.

Perhaps the most powerful visual statements in this series are the closed storefronts that permit the artist to fulfill a twofold mission: to capture the visual essence of urban abandonment and, simultaneously to linger over the details that hint at the possibility of renewed life. In the two major works of this series, *Closed* (1984-85; pl.17) and *Iglesia Pentecostal* (1986; pl.8), Wong at first seems to be minimizing his gift for dramatically shaping the visual field of his paintings around a single pictorial incident. What he gives us instead is a frontal view of the storefronts, on canvases that approximate the size and shape of their subjects. There is nothing to see around or behind the subject, and no visual perspective to offer us a sense of contrast. For all we know, the narrow white storefront depicted in *Iglesia Pentecostal* is closed only until services the next Sunday; or it's possible that Reverend Roberto Vasques, the pastor, departed months earlier, leaving his flock behind to fend for themselves. The fact that we don't know the circumstances that led up to the moment depicted makes the painting more psychologically compelling.



8. *Iglesia Pentecostal*, 1986, Acrylic on canvas, 108 x 84". Collection of James Shapiro, Bois d'Arc, MO. Photo: Adam Reich



9. *Exile — This Night Without Seeing Her Passes Like an Eternity*, 1987-88, Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 24". Private collection. Photo: Larry Lamay

Closed, on the other hand, appears to suggest that the previous occupants have either vanished or were driven away. In addition, the grinding poverty that underscores the entire scene appears to be shared by the building's owner: despite the fewer than eight padlocks holding the flimsy chain in place, we have the impression that it would be easy to break in and reclaim the space inside. The statement about urban isolation and fear that Wong is making in these two works does not revolve around the obstacles that he has painted, but rather the sense of apathy that surrounds them. Passive and inert, the paintings nevertheless speak volumes about how a neighborhood can swing from vibrancy to decay without anyone taking notice.

Toward the end of the 80s, Wong's artistic mood shifted considerably as he began to focus his artistic attention on his own mechanisms for psychic survival rather than on the dramatic conditions offered by his environment. *La Vida* (1988; pl.26), possibly the outstanding work of this period, is discussed in detail by Yasmin Ramirez in this catalogue, in the context of Wong's integration within the Hispanic community of the Lower East Side. Two related paintings, *Exile—This Night Without Seeing Her Passes Like an Eternity* (1987-88; left) and *I.C.U.* (1988; pl.10), while apparently steeped in the more desperate atmosphere of the earlier paintings, nevertheless offer a subtle means of psychic escape. The first work, a narrow vertical canvas, is almost entirely filled with depictions of building fragments. The two exceptions are, at the top, a love poem in Spanish against a fragment of nighttime sky—"Esta noche que ha pasado sin verla ha sido como una eternidad" (This night without you has been like an eternity)—and, at the bottom, a young Hispanic man nodding off in a half-delirium. Although we feel at first compelled to view the latter in terms of an unfolding tragedy, Wong is more circumspect, leading us to entertain the possibility that even if the young man dies of an overdose in the street, his thoughts at least are directed toward the loftier heights of romantic love. In *I.C.U.*, whose title is both a pun and a reference to hospitals, the artist has created a beaconlike image of an all-seeing eye gazing out over sleepy tenements like a protective god. Not only is the image



10. *I.C.U.*, 1988, Acrylic on canvas, 40" diameter. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Larry Lamay

surprisingly benign, but Wong seems to have gradually transformed his own presence within his neighborhood from an alienated outsider to one who looks out for the well-being of everyone else.

The homoerotic aspects of Wong's mid-80s paintings move to the forefront of two works based on the secret erotic life of firemen, *Gemini* and *Big Heat* (both 1988; pls. 58 and 11). Whereas the first painting alludes to the protective spirit of *I.C.U.* in the image of the twin firemen standing side by side at the lower edge of the painting, *Big Heat's* central motif is much more startling: having successfully subdued the conflagration inside the charred buildings behind them, the same two firemen are so overcome with passion for each other that they don't even slow down long enough to remove their helmets and carbon dioxide tanks. This painting provides a tantalizing coda to the saga of Wong's life in the ghetto: enthralled though he still is with his surroundings, he is also beginning to assert his imagination in a more forceful manner. *Big Heat* is not someone else's narrative, recounted by Wong in the third person. On the contrary, the embracing firemen are obviously products of the artist's own fantasies, to which he has given visual form by using the people surrounding him as models. The dynamics of Wong's situation have changed, insofar as he is no longer dependent upon what is taking place around him to provide the material for his paintings. This is the first tentative step before the artistic leap that soon enables Wong to bring his unique perspective to bear upon the memories of his own childhood and the constructed life of the Chinese-American.

Although Martin Wong's paintings have not yet received the attention from museums and critics that his artistic vision merits, there are small but significant indications that the obstacles to a broader understanding of his work are no longer as prevalent as they once were. One obvious factor has been the sharp increase in an awkward, self-conscious style of figurative painting, in the wake of a period during which installation and video art had been the medium of choice. Another change in the discourse of taste has been the critical attention given to urban popular culture, as well as a heightened awareness of the role played by representation in determining how a community sees itself.

In any analysis of Wong's work, however, probably the more important shift in contemporary aesthetics is the increasing public interest in art that attempts to bridge cultural differences between disparate groups. Within Wong's artistic search for an interpretation of the world in which he has a vital role to play, the transformation from myth into visual reality becomes an almost heroic effort to revitalize the connection between art and everyday life. He has succeeded in bringing back to life a time and place neither long ago nor far away, which we suddenly recognize in his vision as having been more fragile and life-affirming than we ever suspected. But even this point does not quite sum up his artistic accomplishment, since in a very real sense Martin Wong has already done what too many of us can only aspire to do: rebuild the world in the image of our fondest hopes and dreams.

FOOTNOTES

1. Wong's most influential exhibitions were in 1984 and 1986, at Semaphore Gallery on West Broadway, in 1988 at Exit Art, and in 1993 at P.P.O.W.
2. In 1993 Wong donated approximately three hundred graffiti works, comprising the bulk of this collection, to the Museum of the City of New York.
3. Politically grounded artists like Jenny Holzer, John Ahearn/Rigoberto Torres, Tim Rollins & KOS, Hans Haacke, Barbara Kruger, Martha Rosler, and David Wojnarowicz achieved considerable prominence in the art world during 1984, while artist collectives such as ABC No Rio, Fashion Moda, Group Material, and the Guerilla Girls also became a fixture of the downtown New York art scene. Some of the exhibitions seen at the New Museum during 1984 were *The End of the World*, *Art and Ideology*, *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*, and a retrospective of the works of Leon Golub.