

All the World's a Stage: The Art of Martin Wong

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In his autobiographical, *trompe l'oeil* painting, *My Secret World, 1978–81, 1984*, Martin Wong depicts a brick wall punctuated by two windows that provide a partial view of a hotel room. In the window to the left, Wong “chiseled” the room number and the hotel’s address on the lintel and his name and the date the painting was completed on the sill. The lintel on the right reads: “It was in this room that the world’s first paintings for the hearing impaired came into being,” while the sill shows the painting’s title. Despite the thoroughness of Wong’s statements, the painting is not completely transparent. From our perch outside the windows, we cannot see everything in the room. Arguably, the inspiration for Wong’s painting was Vincent van Gogh’s painting of his bedroom in Arles. In contrast to van Gogh’s intimate setting, which locates the viewer inside the room, however, Wong places us on the outside—we are voyeurs peering through open windows.

Through the window on the left, we see part of the artist’s painting, *Psychiatrists Testify: Demon Dogs Drive Man to Murder, 1980*, in which a series of gesticulating hands, suspended inside a window similarly set into a brick wall, spell out the painting’s title in American Sign Language (ASL). The background on which the gesticulating hands are depicted can be read as the night sky, transforming the hands into cosmic signs. The title which is lettered above and below the depicted hands is truncated by the right border of the hotel room’s left window. What we are able to read is “Psychiatrists Testify” and “Demons Dogs Drive Man.”

The man in the title is the serial killer David Berkowitz (aka Son of Sam), who shot six people in New York in the summer of 1977. According to the psychiatrists who examined him, Berkowitz claimed that a dog, which had channeled the spirit of a six-thousand-year-old man, ordered him to shoot his victims. Included in the original painting, but not in Wong’s painting-within-a-painting, is an additional inscription that reads, “Painting for the hearing impaired.”

Wong is interested in madness and “voices” and their relationship to artists. By showing only part of the painting’s title, Wong transforms a tabloid headline into something more benign, something that might be applicable to van Gogh or even Wong. Through the window on the left, we also glimpse two more paintings above the artist’s neatly made bed. The one on top depicts an eight ball against a brick wall, while the bottom one shows a pair of dice, the exposed sides of each showing the sum of seven dots. Wong’s images of bad luck and good luck are part of his worldview, along with his interest in different kinds of language, from the aural hallucinations of the insane to the hand signals of ASL.

Through the window on the right we see a row of books on top of a dresser, along with a box containing an eight ball and dice, suggesting that everything Wong paints is based on something real. The book titles include: *Flying Saucers*, *The Universe*, *Pro Hockey*, *Pirate Stories*, *How to Make Money*, *Crossword Puzzles*, *Unbeatable Bruce Lee*, *Picture Book of Freaks*, and *Anti-Gravity*. By bookending the row with the titles *Flying Saucers* and *Anti-Gravity*, Wong reveals his determination to overcome whatever obstacles stand in his way, while also registering an array of aspirations, pursuits, and temptations, including the desire to “make money,” as well as an interest in sports and sports figures (or masculinity), male adventures (pirate stories), Asian identity, and being a “freak”.

As the title suggests, and the painting’s format confirms, we are voyeurs who can glimpse only a portion of Wong’s life. By turning viewers into voyeurs, the artist emphasizes that looking is not innocent, and that there is no such thing as an innocent eye. Rather, there is a gap (or partial barrier) between the viewer and the viewed. Wong is positing a dilemma between telling and withholding, which lies at the heart of all art. Throughout his career, Wong found ways to both challenge and acknowledge this as well as other dilemmas and prohibitions. His highly informed fearsomeness and imaginative solutions are what I want to call attention to in this essay.

First, however, I want to establish the formal affinities he shares with two widely celebrated artists from an earlier generation, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. My primary reason for doing this is to offer a fresh view of the intricate visual details that Wong is able to compress within his paintings, which range from detailed depictions of the crumbling environs of his beloved East Village to restaged views of a bygone era of San Francisco’s Chinatown.

SELF- TAUGHT ARTISTS / STUDENTS FOR LIFE

Although Wong is known for his, as Cameron puts it, “meticulous rendering of thousands of individual bricks to produce an image of a blank wall,” I want to advance that his seemingly obsessive attention to detail can in fact be seen in a context that connects him to Johns and Rauschenberg.¹ Rather than engaging in some “obsessive-compulsive method, often associated with outsider folk artists like Joseph Yoakum or Martin Ramirez,” that suggests a closed, repeated approach, Wong remained open to both his everyday world and to his imagination.² More than anything else, Wong’s openness is what distinguishes him from folk artists. I am reminded of the poet Robert Duncan’s definition of “responsibility”: “responsibility is to keep the ability to respond.”³

1 Cameron, Dan, “Brick by Brick: New York According to Martin Wong”. In *Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong*, ed. Amy Scholder. New York: New Museum and Rizzoli, 1998, 2.

2 Ibid.

3 Duncan, Robert. “The Law I love is Major Mover”. In *The Opening of the Field*, New York: New Direction, 1960, 10.



Vincent van Gogh, *Vincent's Bedroom in Arles*, 1888
Oil on canvas
The Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam



Jasper Johns, *Fragment of a Letter*, 2010
Intaglio on paper
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis



In contrast to those who study painting in art school, and learn from their teachers what constitutes mastery, Wong, Johns, and Ryman are self-taught painters. Unlike self-taught painters like Yoakum or Ramirez who developed an inflexible style from which they seldom ventured, however, Johns, Ryman, and Wong see themselves as perpetual students devoted to intensifying the possibilities of their medium. The sense of always being a student—that is, someone who keeps exploring how to make a painting because it can never be fully learned—helps explain their lifelong commitment to integrating their materials with a painstaking attention to both detail and the whole. All three artists find different ways to demonstrate that they are taking full responsibility for what they do in their art. In each case, the result is the development of a unique object, signed and dated by the artist, which invites slow and careful looking upon the part of the viewer. For what these painters ask of the viewer is a careful accounting of each aspect of their works that looks beyond the immediacy of their paintings. This parsing out mirrors the exactitude that these artists bring to their work, and their refusal to take anything for granted.

Their use of language leads to the other connection that Wong, Johns, and Ryman share. Despite the obvious differences in intention, all of them make paintings and hybrid objects in which language—be it as basic as the artist's name, the work's title, the place where it was made, and the date on which it was completed—functions as a necessary component of the composition. In their work, seeing and reading, the visual and the physical, are intertwined. This again differentiates their work from that of many other self-taught artists. Moreover, in his intaglio diptych, *Fragment of a Letter*, 2010, Johns incorporated the manual alphabet of ASL into the work, something that Wong began doing in the early 1980s. As Wong spelled out in his painting, *My Secret World*, 1978–1981: “It was in this room the world’s first paintings for the hearing impaired came into being.” Coincidentally, the letter Johns cites is from Vincent van Gogh to his friend, Emile Bernard.



Jasper Johns, *Gray Alphabet*, 1968
Intaglio on paper
British Museum, London

Johns' paintings and sculptures clearly inspired Wong throughout his career. By employing a *trompe l'oeil* approach to his subjects, Wong consciously connected himself to Johns, as well as embraced the challenge that such an association entailed. Here we get a glimpse of Wong's artistic ambition. In order not to be seen as derivative of Johns, Wong knew that he must make something that is recognizably his. That he was able to do so within a few years after committing himself—at the age of 30—to being a painter is a testament to his genius.

A thorough student of his precursors and a highly sophisticated artist, Wong synthesized a wide variety of sources, ranging from high art, popular culture, and Asian entertainers to personal history, family photographs, and close observation. According to Barry Blinderman, Wong's first gallery dealer, his sources include "Persian and Christian illuminated manuscripts, Chinese painting from the Sung dynasty to the present, and American folk art."⁴ This only hints at the expansiveness of Wong's visual intelligence and imagination. As manifested by his collection of more than 300 works of graffiti art, which he donated to the Museum of the City of New York in 1994—and the many other collections he assembled, including a large group of American-produced racist caricatures of Asians—Wong possessed a keen eye and a voracious appetite.⁵

Wong's scrupulousness was driven by a necessity to be true to the layered complexity of his subject matter and myriad feelings, while consciously working within the strictures brought to bear by a formally acute intelligence. As the poet and critic Barry Schwabsky astutely points out, Wong's work is "tinged with memorializing passion that never stops to ask whether an object is real or imaginary. His peculiar and highly literate synthesis of allegorical reverie and social

4 Blinderman, Barry, "The Writing on the Wall (Every Picture Tells a Storey, Don't It?): Tenement and Storefront Paintings, 1984–1986", in Scholder, eds, *Sweet Oblivion*, 22.

5 A significant part of Wong's personal collection was presented by Danh Vo in the installation *IMUUR2*, Guggenheim Museum, New York, March 15–May 27, 2012.

6 Schwabsky, Barry. "A City of Bricks and Ciphers". *Art in America*. September 1998. 100–105.

7 Cameron. "Brick by Brick". 2. Four things strike me about Wong's sartorial preferences. Firstly, he was extremely self-possessed and confident. Second, he liked to challenge stereotypes, particularly when it came to popular culture's view of Chinese Americans. In the winning of the West, the Chinese worked on the railroad and ran restaurants and laundries. They were not cowboys and were not seen as heroic. Third, he wasn't afraid of calling attention to himself, qualities that mainstream society does not associate with a Chinese American male, a member of the model minority. Fourth, Wong was drawn to the theatrical, to costumes and drama, in both art and life. Finally, whether it had to do with his public appearance or with his art, Wong was uncompromising, idiosyncratic, sly, and witty.

8 Blinderman. "The Writing on the Wall". 21.

realism, formal concision and memorial ardor is perhaps even more poignant today than when he first attracted attention in the early 80s as part of the emerging East Village art scene."⁶

Brimming with contradictory impulses, Wong was a social realist and a visionary dreamer, a painstaking craftsman and a lover of kitsch, who could be simultaneously critical and celebratory. By bringing these very different, seemingly antagonistic possibilities into play, he became an iconoclast whose legacy includes, expanding the narrow, received view of the ethnic painter as the storyteller (or spokesperson) for the tribe. For one thing, Wong's tribe—the people he feels at home with and whom he chronicles—crosses racial boundaries and challenges gender stereotypes. It is a community that is simultaneously real and imagined.

Moreover, his depictions of Bruce Lee, Mei Lang-Fang (a Chinese opera star famous for his female impersonations), and other Asian entertainers, Wong further complicates the viewer's understanding of ethnic and sexual identity, as well as sexual appetites, particularly as it is defined by mainstream culture. It is a complication that runs through all of Wong's work, whether the subject is Chinatown, the East Village, or his declaration of homoerotic olfactory desire in the painting, *I Really Like the Way Firemen Smell*, 1988.

FROM WEST COAST TO EAST VILLAGE

Born in Portland, Oregon, Wong grew up further down the coast, in San Francisco's Chinatown, which remains both a tourist destination and a tightly knit social enclave. After graduating from George Washington High School, he studied ceramics at Humboldt State. His study of ceramics would exert an immense influence on his practice as a painter, particularly on his palette (with its earth reds, burnt Siennas, ochers, and umbers) and in his deep feeling for materials. His use of gold acrylic to convey the mortar between the bricks, as the outline of his figures, and to draw the stylized hand signals from the manual alphabet, recalls the transformation of glazes in the kiln as well as the transubstantiations of alchemy. The juxtaposition of an earthy palette with gold suggests that Wong believed that one can—through the medium of paint—transform lowly matter into spiritual substance.

In 1978, after living in Eureka and San Francisco for a decade Wong moved to New York, eventually settling in the East Village, a largely Hispanic neighborhood of tenements and burned-out and abandoned buildings. As an openly gay Chinese American man, Wong was considered an outsider in this neighborhood. However, instead of trying to hide his outsider status, Wong called attention to it by wearing a cowboy hat and shirt and sporting a Fu Manchu mustache. While he taught himself Spanish and earned the nickname "Chino Malo" (Bad Chinese), he was always "unfailingly garbed in his best space-cowboy attire."⁷

In the paintings that first gained Wong attention in the short-lived East Village art scene, he incorporated the manual alphabet of ASL into compositions of constellations and tenements. As Blinderman points out, these signs suggest that the painter recognizes that he must make his hands "speak,"⁸ Wong's use of the manual alphabet can be understood on a number of levels. As someone growing up in San Francisco's Chinatown, Wong was aware that



Martin Wong, *Courtroom Shocker/Jimmy the Weasel Sings Like a Canary*, 1984
Acrylic on canvas



Martin Wong, *Courtroom Shocker/Jimmy the Weasel Sings Like a Canary*, 1983
Acrylic on canvas

language could be both a form of communication and a barrier, particularly to those who are unfamiliar with it. Moving to a neighborhood in the East Village where many residents spoke Spanish must have reinforced this early memory.

Since ASL is strictly visual, Wong might have also associated it with the language of signals used by a segment of New York's gay community who wished to announce their sexual availability. It is also worth noting that *Signs of Sexual Behavior: An Introduction to Some Sex-Related Vocabulary in American Sign Language* by James Woodward was published in paperback in 1979. By using the manual alphabet to spell out words in his work, Wong recognizes that painting is a language of signs that combines the visual and physical, while acknowledging that art, no matter how accessible, is not universal. In fact, just the opposite—art must always be deciphered and interpreted. By depicting stylized versions of hand signs, Wong signals that there is a gap between the viewer (reader) and the art (signs) that the artist (messenger) must try and transcend without betraying or simplifying his subject.

In *Clones of Bruce Lee*, 1981, he uses the manual alphabet to spell out the painting's title, which he places against a background. But without this knowledge, the viewer might associate the hand signs with Chinese ideograms. In one version of another Sign Language painting, *Courtroom Shocker/Jimmy the Weasel Sings Like a Canary*, 1984, Wong also transcribes the painting's title, derived from a tabloid newspaper, into hand signs, which he uses to fill the painting's square format, effectively turning it into a sign. In an earlier version of the painting, Wong uses *trompe l'oeil* realism to depict the same hand signs in a wood-framed painting mounted on a brick wall, a "stamped metal plate" beneath it with the headline and artist's name spelled out. Wong has interpreted the hands signs for the viewer, literally spelled out what they mean.



Martin Wong, *The Babysitter*, 1998
Acrylic on linen

Within a short time after his arrival in New York, Wong was chronicling his life in the East Village, as well as that of his neighbors, friends, and lovers, against a backdrop of brick tenements, tar-covered schoolyards, and graffiti-covered walls. Focusing on his distressed neighborhood, and its Latino and black residents, Wong stood apart from the other artists who were also gaining attention in the East Village art scene: Keith Haring, Sherrie Levine, Kiki Smith, Philip Taaffe, and David Wojnarowicz. He was an artist of the local. He documented the Hispanic neighborhood, as well as recorded different aspects of his identity as an openly gay, Chinese American with desires and memories, all of which were at odds with mainstream America. He did so without a trace of cynicism or irony, but with noticeable sympathy and tenderness.

Wong lovingly painted crumbling tenement walls, one brick at a time, chain link fences, padlocks, and shuttered steel gates. He memorialized stripped-down cars, storefront temples and churches, courtroom testimony, graffiti, poems by Miguel Piñero, and Hollywood Asians such as Bruce Lee and his television character, Kato. In his *trompe l'oeil* memorialization, *Pedro's Lament*, 1984, as Blinderman perceptively points out, "Wong's vertiginous substitution of real objects for representations of objects, and conversely of veneer for real substance, sets up an oscillation between the realms of painting and architecture as bearers of 'stories'."⁹

In the diptych, *Flagstone Boogie Woogie*, 1984, he carefully rendered rough-surfaced flagstones in homage to Piet Mondrian. He depicted Spanish, English, and Chinese store signs, the calligraphy of signage seen on walls, as well as recorded conversations and poems in paint.

He was a documentarian and a fantasist, an ardent observer and a wishful dreamer, an insider and an outsider, all of which he gets into his work. Although they might be mute witnesses, Wong's walls do 'talk'—and they invite the viewer to see and listen.

By depicting his Hispanic and black friends, lovers, and neighbors, Wong challenged the underlying assumption that ethnic painters should stick to themes approved by their own race, as well as by mainstream America. Moreover, by redefining what was possible, he opened the door for future generations. Identity was not something the individual was given, but something that was constructed, like a costume and mask. When it came to identity, Wong was not an essentialist. In hindsight, given the racial tension in 1980s America, the wonder of Wong's work is how intrepid he was in exploring his desires and memories. He willingly defied expectations regarding ethnic storytelling in paint. Even now, what strikes me about Wong's multifaceted body of work is how courageous and adventuresome he was throughout his tragically short career, which barely spanned two decades.

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Wong was fearless in his desire to get it right, to paint each brick as if his life depended on it. Despite his social realist impulses, the paintings resist any easy reading and, more importantly, are not didactic. Wong was a complex man who made intricate paintings in which a multitude of languages, from the written to the visual, both coincide and collide. By bringing together constellations (and their names), book titles, stylized hand gestures derived from ASL, words in English and Spanish, Chinese ideograms, tattoos and graffiti, Wong recognizes that America is a multilingual country in which no language is central.

Rather than being part of a utopian "melting pot", each of us belongs to a community and speaks that group's language. Ideally, the individual who is conversant in more than one *langue de tribe* will be able to successfully move across different groups and enclaves. After growing up in San Francisco's Chinatown, studying ceramics at Humboldt State, living in the town of Eureka, being an active member of the hippie community in Haight Ashbury, and electing to be openly gay, Wong had to have been aware of many distinct signifying systems, or what Ferdinand de Saussure called *langue* (language) and *parole* (speaking). It is his inclusiveness that sets Wong apart from his contemporaries.

In Wong's paintings, America (as represented by the East Village and Chinatown, both in New York and San Francisco) comes across as a decaying world in which many secret and coded languages are used. While some observers may connect the coded languages to Wong's gay identity, it also has to do with being Chinese American, and growing up in a tightly knit neighborhood where more than one language was in constant use. This dual consciousness of language was deeply ingrained in Wong. Despite the geographical and emotional distance between them, this is what Manhattan's tenement-filled East Village and San Francisco's crowded, tourist-filled Chinatown share: both are populated by people for whom English is not their native tongue. In such a situation, confusion, miscommunication, and misunderstanding are unavoidable and perhaps even inescapable. Wong's awareness of this unbridgeable chasm plays a key role in his work. In his frontal depictions of gritty, crumbling East Village tenements, which nearly fill the painting's entire surface, and are often framed by a smoldering red sky, Wong suggests that the world is an inferno spiraling towards chaos as well as the decrepit backdrop of his



Georges Seurat, *Circus Sideshow (Parade de cirque)*, 1887–1888

Oil on canvas

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

subjects' lives. He underscores this view by placing his figures in the foreground, dwarfed by the moldering tenements and abandoned buildings behind them. By envisioning his urban environment as a stage set, the artist conveys the possibility that its inhabitants are always playing roles, and that everyone is wearing one sort of mask or another in order to survive.

At the same time, Wong suggests that the viewer is an anonymous member of the audience, both a witness and a voyeur. His nighttime paintings, such as *Stanton near Forsyth Street*, share something with George Seurat's moody, nocturnal painting *Circus Sideshow*, 1887–1888, which is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, where Wong might have seen it. In *Circus Sideshow*, Seurat depicts a group of musicians standing on a stage playing to a crowd of men below, enticing them to buy tickets to see the show.

In the Seurat painting, the potential ticket buyers are depicted in the foreground of the painting, their backs to the viewer, suggesting that the viewer is an anonymous member of the crowd. In *Stanton near Forsyth Street*, the two figures in the foreground, each standing on opposite sides of the canvas, are the focus of our attention. The Asian figure, who is facing out at the viewer, is Wong, while the figure on the far right, seen in profile, will eventually walk past him or perhaps strike up a conversation and become a lover or a one-night stand. In the sky above, the artist has traced and named the constellations, as well as overlaid the background with lines from a poem rendered in both the manual alphabet and Spanish. Along the top strip of the *trompe l'oeil* wood frame, Wong has 'engraved' an ominous line in English: "Morning at the edge of time it never really mattered."

Instead of being an anonymous member of a crowd, we are invisible witnesses, unseen voyeurs scrutinizing a potential exchange between two men. By placing us in the position of a voyeur, Wong challenges us to examine our response to a covert situation unfolding in a

lovingly rendered, utterly bleak circumstance: Do we wish to look the other way and pretend we don't see what's going on? Do we disapprove? Is it none of our business? Are we members of this community or clueless outsiders?

One of the currents running throughout Wong's work is his awareness of the gulf between the viewer and the viewed, between the "I" and the other. Instead of breaking down the fourth or imaginary wall between the actors on the painting's stage and the audience, Wong emphasized its existence, as he did in the multipanel *Chinese Hand Laundry*, 1984, and in paintings such as *The Annunciation According to Mikey Piñero (Cupcake and Paco)*, 1984, *Lock-Up* 1985, *Cell Door Slot*, 1986, *C76, Junior*, 1988, and *Mintaka*, 1990.

In each of these paintings, Wong utilized *trompe l'oeil* realism to render or frame a scene in which the viewer, who is literally and metaphorically *outside* the drama, becomes a voyeur or mute witness. In *C76, Junior*, Wong depicts a Latino man tucked into his bed, asleep and peaceful. This compassionate image is countered by the position of the viewer, who is standing in the corridor outside a prison cell (which is numbered C76). Are we the guard, a potential threat, a guardian angel, or a desiring lover? In *Reckless*, 1991, which can be seen as a counterpoint to *C76, Junior*, the cell doors are open and the bare-chested man lying in his bed, with arms folded seductively across his lower belly just above his crotch, which is covered by a sheet, evokes both homoerotic desire and danger.

WONG AND PIÑERO

One of the strongest bodies of work within Wong's diverse oeuvre consists of his collaborations with Miguel Piñero. According to Yasmin Ramirez, the two met in 1982 at the opening of *The Crime Show* at ABC No Rio, a storefront art gallery run by members of an artist's collaborative known as Colab.¹⁰ In their first collaboration, *Attorney Street: Handball Court with Autobiographical Poem by Piñero*, 1982–1984, Wong includes English, ASL, and graffiti that had been spray-painted on the playground wall. The impetus for the painting came from Piñero, who asked Wong to "document a handball court that had been freshly tagged with graffiti by Little Ivan".¹¹

Along with Little Ivan's graffiti, Wong includes Piñero's poem, which begins: "I was born in a barrel of butcher knives / raised between two 45's / on a Saturday night when the jungle was bright and the hustler were stalking their prey." At the bottom of the painting, in the foreground and partially covering the bottom edge of a graffiti-covered wall, Wong employs the manual alphabet to spell out a line that Piñero spoke in the movie *Fort Apache: The Bronx*, 1981: "It's the real deal Neal I'm going to rock your world make your planets twirl, ain't no wack attack." Wong repeats this line in English in a "stamped" metal plaque he has carefully rendered in paint and "attached" to the "wood" frame.

Each language—from the *trompe l'oeil* letters "stamped" in metal to the stylized hands of ASL to the signature flourishes of the graffiti—required Wong to employ a different convincing imitation to reflect the different realities. Whether derived from literature, a tabloid headline,

10 Ramirez, Yasmin. "La Vida: The Life and Writings of Miguel Piñero in the Art of Martin Wong". In Scholder, eds. *Sweet Oblivion*. 35. In recounting the beginning of their friendship, Ramirez writes: "Piñero was an extraordinary performer who could emote both the pathetic and the menacing aspects of the personas he created, and Wong was moved by what he heard. After the opening Wong struck up a conversation with Piñero and, feeling an 'instant affinity' with the poet, invited Piñero to see more of his art. Piñero visited a few days later, and they became fast friends. In a matter of weeks, Wong's apartment became a 'hideout' for Piñero and a posse of four young men whom he adopted as apprentices: Pito a.k.a. Little Ivan, Little Brian, and the twins, Peter and Marty". 37.

11 Ibid. 39.

or something he heard, poetry and the lingua franca of everyday life were an essential part of Wong's paintings from the beginning. In *La Vida*, 1988, which shows the facade of a blocked-up, abandoned tenement, Wong depicted men, women and children in each of the windows of this inaccessible building, including Piñero, who is depicted three times, and another poet and playwright, Amiri Baraka. By combining image and word, as he did in so many paintings, particularly those incorporating lines from the work of Piñero, Wong connected himself to the classical Chinese tradition in which image and ideogram are inseparable.

The lessons Wong absorbed from Johns, Warhol, van Gogh, Chinese classical art, and *trompe l'oeil* painters such as John F. Peto, give us a glimpse into the breadth of his self-education, the disparate possibilities he was able to pull together. Even though Wong treats the world as a stage set, suggesting that everyone is wearing a mask or playing a role, he is neither cynical about his characters nor suspicious of their motives. If anything, he is sympathetic to their plight and can often convey a tenderness seldom seen in modern and postmodern art.