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Martin Wong Is Dead at 53; A Painter of Poetic Realism

By ROBERTA SMITH

Martin Wong, a painter whose meticulous visionary realism is among the lasting legacies of New York's East Village art scene of the 1980's and a precursor of the identity-driven work of the 90's, died last Thursday at his parents' home in San Francisco. He was 53 and had lived in San Francisco since 1994.

He died of AIDS-related causes, said Barry Blinderman, a close friend and director of Illinois State University Galleries in Normal, Ill.

In the heyday of the East Village, where the local styles tended toward graffiti art, neo-Expressionism and late Conceptualism, Mr. Wong carved out a territory all his own. His art was as culturally complex as his appearance, which was usually distinguished by a Fu Manchu mustache and a cowboy hat. And it certainly lived up to his background, which included a degree in ceramics, a stint with a gay performance street troupe in San Francisco and expertise in such diverse areas as Asian painting, calligraphy and decorative arts; American antiques; the gift shop souvenirs of San Francisco's Chinatown, and graffiti art, which he acquired in such abundance that in 1993 he donated 300 works to the Museum of the City of New York.

Mr. Wong's stage-set-like depictions of the Lower East Side's crumbling tenements and gated storefronts offer the viewer enthralling fusions of the decorative and the real, the documentary and the fantastic, the religious and the erotic. His images are erected on remarkably clear geometries that evoke the simple architecture of the Italian primitives or the flatness of early Jasper Johns. But his surfaces teem with exquisite details that hover between trompe l'oeil accuracy and folk art obsessiveness.

There are expanses of finely wrought rubble and brick-by-brick walls inflected with gold and sometimes festooned with bits or blocks of language: dialogue, poetry or graffiti. Night skies are shot with red, as if lighted by distant fires, but can also be dotted with gold constellations or, also in gold, words spelled out in the manual alphabet of sign language. The fat stylized hands Mr. Wong deployed for these messages are crunched together like letters; they pay homage to graffiti artists' tags but also suggest some rogue form of Persian script. And throughout there was a sense of romantic longing and desire that the artist sometimes made explicit, as when he painted kissing firemen dressed in full gear.

Mr. Wong was born in Portland, Ore., in 1946 and grew up in San Francisco, where his parents worked for Standard Oil and the Bechtel Corporation. He received a degree in ceramics from Humboldt State University in Arcata, Calif., and joined the Angels of Light, a mystically oriented gay street performance troupe in San Francisco. At 30 he decided to become a painter and, not wanting to return to school, began an arduous process of self-education.

He arrived in New York in 1978, settling into an apartment on the Lower East Side and supporting himself with a job in the bookstore of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He first exhibited his work in 1981 at ABC No Rio on Rivington Street on the Lower East Side in an exhibition organized by Colab, an artists' group known for its impromptu "first come, first hung" shows, which were open to anyone while space lasted. At the opening he met Miguel Pinero, the poet and prize-winning playwright of "Short Eyes" and a well-known figure on the Lower East Side.

For the next few years Mr. Pinero was Mr. Wong's close friend and mentor, introducing him to the underbelly of the local art, poetry and drug scenes and providing entree to the local Hispanic community that figures so prominently in his paintings of the 80's. Mr. Wong made many portraits of Mr. Pinero, based several paintings on his prison experiences (the inspiration for "Short Eyes") and incorporated poems by Mr. Pinero into several paintings, which he considered collaborations. Mr. Pinero died in 1988.

Mr. Wong showed at Mr. Blinderman's Semaphore Gallery spaces in SoHo and the East Village in 1984, 1985 and 1986 and then at the P.P.O.W. Gallery in SoHo, where he had his last exhibition in 1998. That show coincided with a retrospective organized by the New Museum of Contemporary Art in SoHo and the Illinois State University Galleries. His work is in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Bronx Museum of Art, the Syracuse University Art Collection and the City of San Francisco.

In the early 1990's, Mr. Wong focused increasingly on Chinese, or more specifically Chinese-American subject matter, fashioning a fluid but characteristically hybrid style that drew on classical sources, childhood memories, Hollywood movie stereotypes and his collection of Chinatown gift shop souvenirs.

After he learned he had AIDS in 1994, he moved back to San Francisco but continued to paint and made frequent return trips to New York and the Lower East Side. He is survived by his parents, Benjamin and Florence Wong Fie.