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Art in Review

By HOLLAND COTTER

Martin Wong P.P.O.W. 532 Broadway (at Spring Street) SoHo Through Feb. 6

In the mid-1980's, Martin Wong was painting oddly rapturous evocations of inner-city life. His subject was the streets of the Lower East Side, where he lived, and although his tenements, rendered brick by brick, were as forbidding as prisons, the night skies above them were rich with constellations painted and labeled in gold.

Mr. Wong has become an increasingly polished technician since that time, and his passionate sense of place remains strong. The paintings in his current show are of the Chinatown districts in San Francisco and New York. Mr. Wong paints specific buildings in meticulous detail, but his approach to the neighborhoods themselves is not primarily geographic. This is Chinatown as a state of mind, one in which images of schoolchildren, the famous Chinese female impersonator Mei Lang-fang, a bottle of oyster sauce, and Bruce Lee as a blue-skinned bodhisattva sitting on a celestial lotus join in a kind of cinematic montage.

Mr. Wong is in full command of his essentially conservative pictorial approach. Many of the larger paintings, like "Lion Dancers," with its near-psychedelic wealth of ornament drawn from Chinese sources, are vividly theatrical, and the work as a whole has a sensuous nocturnal film-noir glow that reinforces the artist's stylistic roots in the American realist art of the 30's and 40's. What makes Mr. Wong's work seem very much of the moment, however, is not just its range of contemporary reference, but also its depiction of the seldom-represented world of Asian-American culture by an artist who is both an insider and an outsider. Mr. Wong grew up in San Francisco's Chinatown and found his career as a member of the Pop-influenced, multi-culturally savvy New York avant-garde of a decade ago. He brings both perspectives to this lovingly wrought and spirited body of work.