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ART REVIEW; The Streets of a Crumbling El Dorado, Paved With Poetry and Desire

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The flowering of art in the East Village in the mid-1980's was brief and uneven, but rich. Graffiti came in off the street, bringing black and Latino artists into galleries. Expressionist painting and conceptualism shared the field. An explicitly gay art emerged in the work of figures like Arch Connelly, Keith Haring, Nicholas Moufarrege and David Wojnarnowicz. Political content was everywhere, as was the theme of childhood innocence -- and experience -- that has played so important a role in 1990's art.

Among the distinctive contributors to that eclectic environment was the Chinese-American artist Martin Wong. He was aligned with no movement and espoused no particular style. But the paintings he produced on the Lower East Side, where he lived, were emblematic of a volatile place and time, with their blend of visionary symbolism, surrealist humor, romantic desire and popular culture.

Two dozen of those paintings are included in ''Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong'' at the New Museum in SoHo. A compact retrospective organized by Dan Cameron, senior curator of the museum, and Barry Blinderman, director of the University Galleries of Illinois State University, it covers nearly two decades of his career, beginning with his arrival in New York from San Francisco in 1978.

He was 32 at the time, and although he had been a painter, entirely self-taught, for only two years, his background in art was multifaceted. He had studied ceramics in college. And, thoroughly immersed in the chemical, sexual and spiritual liberations of the 1960's, he had been a member of the Angels of Light, the legendary, mystically oriented gay street performance troupe in San Francisco.

In New York, he settled on a painting style that was instantly recognizable as his own. He took as his primary images the decaying tenements of the Lower East Side, which he depicted as looming monumental structures like temples or mausoleums, each brick of their facades painstakingly delineated. Then he softened and transformed this claustrophobic urban landscape with a wealth of poetic details.

The boarded-up windows in his buildings were covered with light-catching gold pigment. Streets and lots have an air of postnuclear desolation, but the skies, painted

black or orange-red, as if flushed with the glow of distant fires, are vibrant with activity. Glittering constellations and hand-written poems in Spanish and English rise over the city in some paintings. In the show's title work, ''Sweet Oblivion'' (1983), gilt-edged hands, spelling out messages in sign language, float like heavenly hosts on high.
In many of these works, people are absent, or present only by implication. Such is the case in one of Mr. Wong's best-known pieces, ''Attorney Street: Handball Court With Autobiographical Poem by Pinero'' (1982-84), in which architecture, poetry and traces of human activity are brought together in compositional layering of airless, puzzlelike intricacy.
The handball-court wall at the center of the picture is a painting-within-the-painting, covered with the eye-popping graffiti rendered in miniature. It is backed by a row of symmetrical buildings, flanked on either side by receding chain-link fences, and enclosed within a double frame of trompe l'oeil brick and wood. Within the painting, a narrow band of sky is inscribed with a poem by the Puerto Rican-born writer Miguel Pinero (1943-1988), who was Mr. Wong's lover and muse at the time.
Pinero appears, sometimes in person, more often in spirit, through these paintings, perhaps most memorably in ''The Annunciation According to Mikey Pinero (Cupcake and Paco)'' from 1984. Here Mr. Wong adapts the scene of a homosexual encounter from Pinero's Pulitzer Prize-winning prison play, ''Short Eyes,'' and renders it as a Renaissance-style Annunciation filtered through Jean Genet, all in fleecy, cloudlike white and gray except for the warm brown of the protagonist's bare skin.
The near-religious charge of this tenderly erotic image is felt elsewhere as well. It is there in a boxing-match cast as a Pieta in ''Down for the Count'' (1985), and in a tableau of two helmeted firefighters kissing like dark-winged angels under a rainbow-hued wall in ''Big Heat'' (1988). And it assumes a kind of disembodied, sacramental weight in ''Iglesia Pentecostal'' (1986), a life-size painting of the door of a storefront church that's set, like the entrance to a sepulcher, behind a metal security grate.

When Pinero died in 1988, a phase of Mr. Wong's work began to wind down, though the last of the Lower East Side paintings in this exhibition seem to be far more concerned with renewal than with despair.

In ''La Vida,'' the tenement windows are filled with people, carefully individualized portraits of firefighters, neighborhood children, couples, the graffiti artists Daze, Lee and LA2 (Mr. Wong had amassed a notable collection of their work by this time), and dozens of other friends and neighbors, living and dead. But all the street-level doors to the building are cemented shut: this block party fiesta is a dream, a thing wished for, maybe even believed in, but not real.

In 1992, Mr. Wong changed course in a series of works that take his Chinese-American heritage as its subject. His interest in traditional Chinese painting had

always been strong. (Anyone visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art bookstore when he worked as a part-time clerk there in the 1980's could draw on his literacy in the field.) And it has been subtly evident in his work all along.

One sees it reflected in his repeated use of texts in his paintings, inclusions that he regarded as equivalents of colophons on landscape scrolls. And it is discernible in instances of near-calligraphic brushwork, as in the gracefully rendered left foot of the kneeling figure in the ''Annunciation,'' a fleet passage of linear play that also suggests the improvisational fluidity of comic book graphics and graffiti.

Yet the Chinatown paintings, far from drawing on classical sources, are modern pop images, witty, illustrational, half realistic, half fantastic. They are drawn in part from the artist's childhood memories of life in San Francisco, but also from the often-racist back-lot exoticisms of Hollywood films and from the gift-shop novelties that Mr. Wong has avidly collected for years.

This being so, it is no surprise that his depiction of Mei Lang-Fang, the Chinese opera star famed as a female impersonator, takes the form of decorative calendar art. Or that Bruce Lee appears in the Daoist afterworld beset by grimacing villains and psychedelic dragons a la Kenny Scharf. Or that the reclining femme fatale in ''Ms. Chinatown'' is both a portrait of a real person (the artist's aunt Nora, who worked in a Chinatown nightclub) and an evocation of the opium-den mysteries associated with the 1940's actress Anna May Wong.

In short, Chinatown in Mr. Wong's version is, as he has acknowledged, ''a tourist idea, an outsider's view,'' with the mix of affection, fascination and distortion that such distance implies. And one might say the same of his Lower East Side, that romanticized inner-city El Dorado where poverty is glossed over and desire hangs like a ceaseless throb of music in the air.

But the New York paintings from the 1980's, which are his strongest and most original works, have a unique visual grit and metaphorical suggestiveness. Their alchemical mix of Ashcan School realism, Pop insouciance and folk-art mysticism creates an alternative universe in which the everyday world is precious, and the otherworldly close at hand. The result is an art that remains both stirringly evocative of a distinctive cultural moment, and beyond fashion.

''Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscapes of Martin Wong'' remains at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, 583 Broadway, near Prince Street, SoHo, through Sept. 13.