

Village Voice

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CARLO MCCORMICK ON MARTIN WONG

WHEN MARTIN WONG DIED at his parents' San Francisco residence this past August, five years after moving back home to a cocktail of AIDS medications, Chinese herbs, and mother's love, word of his passing spread through the diverse community of all who knew him with all the grief, startled silence, and spontaneous reminiscences awarded the best of our fallen heroes. Certainly there was an immediate collective sense of how much had been lost. Perhaps more elusive was an understanding of what it was that had touched so many in such radically different ways. The curious reality is that there wasn't a single Martin so much as countless Martins: a perversely encyclopedic collector of cultural artifacts, from lunch boxes to plaster mummies; the single greatest patron of the graffiti-art movement at the nadir of its public and institutional popularity; a pathologically prevaricating provocateur raconteur and troublemaking gossip; a wise old man of many lives and at the same time one of the most irrepressibly juvenile kids in a scene where most were half his age; and, above all, a profoundly idiosyncratic artist whose obsessively social representations of Manhattan's Latino Lower East Side remain as visionary testament to and haunting document of a time and place renovated and sanitized into oblivion. Martin Wong was such an outrageous character that no one person's memories could ever completely capture his irrational spirit.

During a period in the arts defined by stylistic and philosophical eclecticism, Martin Wong was the spit that seemed to hold everything together, and his paintings housed far-flung communities of disparate, often hermetic social orders. Martin bridged and expanded worlds that might never have interacted if it weren't for his singularly meddlesome presence. Anton Van Dalen, a prominent activist-artist of the Lower East Side, where Martin made his home after moving to New York in 1978, remembers the sudden appearance of his work in 1982 and how Wong's rapturously meditative paintings of tenement brick walls, disused storefronts, and vibrant street life fit so aptly within the political concerns of the collectives Group Material and Colab. Comparing it to the "so-called East Village Art" that Martin would be more closely associated with, Van Dalen emphasizes that the work was "free of the conventional bleak and harsh depictions of despair, and instead wove a complex, but fragile, tapestry of human life. Always personal, poetic, and driven by intimate experiences, Martin's tenements were filled with people he knew by name, and he took care to tell their stories." Papo Colo, an artist and cofounder of Exit Art, describes how, "unlike some other artists who were seduced by the notion of the criminal as exotic, he was attracted as a witness to that life." Martin's expressive capacities, despite working in a restricted palette--primarily reds, browns, and blacks--greatly impressed the sculptor and painter John Ahearn: "People talk about the Latino, the gay, the Chinese, or the self-taught aspects of his work, but they don't realize how sophisticated and knowledgeable he was about art. He cared very deeply about American art, in particular Homer, Eakins, and other nineteenth-century painters--he also

had this fantasy that they were all gay." PPOW gallery codirector Wendy Olsoff explains that "Martin saw himself as a contemporary manifestation of a WPA artist whose work was forgotten."

Wong's free-flowing sense of interaction was particularly instrumental in his support for the graffiti movement "at a time when the art world was no longer interested--when even the word was synonymous with the plague," recalls Daze, one of many artists associated with graffiti who lost prominent gallery and institutional backing in the years following the East Village heyday. "He became a voracious collector when everyone was selling, and told me he was patterning himself after Albert Barnes." As a source of support, Wong's mischievous mind may have been of even greater benefit than his archival fervor. Lady Pink, who is currently at work on a portrait of Martin (indulging his favorite fireman-uniform fetish) as part of a massive graffiti mural at La Guardia Community College in Queens, notes that "he was one of my biggest supporters and inspirations as an artist." Lee Quinones, who was showing with the Barbara Gladstone Gallery when Martin was giving him "discounted" supplies from an art store where he was then working, thought of Martin first as yet another graffiti fan, next as some rich collector kid, then as some horny pervert, and ultimately as one of the most loyal friends an artist could have. Quinones (who crashed on Martin's studio floor in tougher times) was surprised to find him constantly painting over his own work. "He had this epic sense of experimentation where he couldn't stay in one place any more as an artist than he could as a human. He had a spontaneous sense of adventure that I couldn't even find amongst my graffiti colleagues. It was a soap opera with him, inciting riots wherever he went, but it was a barrel of fun."

Irascibly eccentric and unpredictable, Martin's character continues to defy description; in painter Jane Dickson's words, he was a "tall, gangly, Chinese cowboy, conspiratorial smile, roaring laugh, scraggly hair, sweaty face, big heart." In Martin Wong, filmmaker Charlie Ahearn captured the bizarre spectacle of Wong in the studio using brushes that he hadn't cleaned for a decade, masses of accumulated crusty lumps that he would wield simultaneously in both hands, taking alternating swipes at the canvas. "He told me that the brushes had this iron-oxide buildup that would actually conduct electricity," Ahearn reminisces, "and that the reason he painted with both hands was that he would get an electrical charge running between them." And while Peter Broda, who cofounded the Graffiti Museum with Wong in 1986 (now part of the Museum of the City of New York), quotes Martin at his most honest of fictions, "Never let the truth stand in the way of a good story," some of the myriad myths he left behind are fact. Barry Blinderman, director of the Illinois State University Galleries and coorganizer (with Dan Cameron) of Martin's 1998 retrospective, tells how the painter dropped acid as he prepared for the opening of his first solo New York show, at the Semaphore Gallery, and gave all his work away. Blinderman, who ran Semaphore, had to post reward notices around the neighborhood and buy back work from junkies. Martin never made it to the opening, as he was interred at Bellevue as a result of his psychedelic episode. "When I went to visit him at the hospital," Blinderman remembers, "this intern took me aside and told me, 'This guy is really crazy, he's going around telling everyone

that he has his art in the Metropolitan Museum.' I didn't bother to tell him that for once Martin was actually telling the truth."

Carlo McCormick writes for numerous publications, including Paper magazine, where he is senior editor.

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