

Art In America

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Joe Hill

Martin Wong at P.P.O.W

The first exhibition of Martin Wong's work since his New Museum retrospective in 1998 and his death from AIDS-related illnesses in 1999 provoked a sense of nostalgia. It was not just the absence of the artist or the antique vitrine in the entryway that encased nine of his paint-encrusted brushes (included in accordance with the artist's wishes), it was the subject matter of Wong's nine paintings on display, his East Village and Lower East Side neighborhoods during the 1980s. Wong's paintings document a seedy but religious area that--for better and worse--has been lost to gentrification.

Ranging in size from approximately 2 by 3 feet to more than 8 by 13, the nine paintings were installed in two rooms. One room featured works peopled with the diverse residents of Alphabet City, while the other was devoted to his near life-size storefront pictures, in which the only signs of human presence are the plethora of padlocked and chained accordion fences that protect the buildings from unwanted entry. That several of these tableaux depict small community churches and one shows a verdant public garden (of which there are surprisingly many in the area) adds authentic irony to these poignant renditions of the urban environment.

Today one still sees in Wong's neighborhood the graffiti, the colorful wall murals, the bodegas and the street used as a communal (and sometimes clandestine) gathering space. But the rubble-ridden abandoned lot of *It's Not What You Think, What Is It Then?* (1984), in which a couple named Sharp and Dottie huddle within a haze of gold nimbuses under an ominous, blazing maroon sky, is now the impressively well-manicured Lower East Side II Consolidation, a project of the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) at 5th Street and Avenue C. In Wong's monumental picture, the meticulously rendered individual bricks, cinder-blocked windows, scumbled surfaces and oppressive tonalities suggest the gritty difficulty of building a better life in this milieu, which one hopes the NYCHA project has improved.

In *Iglesia Pentacostal Cedros de Dios* (1986), the most beautiful storefront work in the show, Wong depicts the church once overseen by Rev. Roberto Vasquez at 25 Avenue B, a site now occupied by a Basque-inspired hipster restaurant--one of the many trendy boites in the neighborhood--whose patrons are unlikely to be drawn from the nearby housing projects. *Iglesia Pentacostal* shows a white facade behind a metallic gray accordion fence. Like other churches the artist depicted, it is clearly identified by the stenciled sign above the entrance (here in vibrant red and black), but the chains and padlocks that crisscross and punctuate other compositions are absent from *Iglesia Pentacostal*. Instead, the surface is activated by Wong's bravura brushwork, the tonal range of interlocking whites and grays that make up facade and fence, and the occasional

touches of incidental color that are both ground-level storefront stains and purely painterly flourishes.

Whether painting overpopulated tenements with a primitivizing, art brut directness, as in *Study for La Vida* (1984), or a plain garage-door facade with the abstract remains of washed-off graffiti, as in *Houston Street* (1996), Wong had a pronounced affinity for both his medium and his neighborhood, conveyed through a poetic sense of time and place. As the upscale lounges and condo developments progress along Loisaida Avenue, one is thankful for Wong's powerful historical testament.

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