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GOTHAM ART & THEATER

by Elisabeth Kley

For Martin Wong, the Chinese American artist who died of AIDS in 1999 at the age of 53, heaven and hell came together in the burned-out tenements and enormous piles of rubble that once filled the Lower East Side. Sitting on the floor in his tiny East Village apartment, wielding a paintbrush in each hand simultaneously, Wong limned unparalleled ethnic fantasias on canvases of considerable size. But even his most severe images of Alphabet City slums -- featured in "Everything Must Go," a retrospective at P.P.O.W. curated by New York artist Adam Putnam -- have a mythic dimension, filling the skies over gritty red-brick cityscapes with timeless constellations.

*Everything Must Go* (1983), which hangs in the gallery's largest space, forecasts the inevitable passing of earthly monuments in terms of collapsing urban neighborhoods. An enormous pile of debris -- no doubt the ruins of a building at Rivington and Attorney Street, as inscribed on the faux frame Wong painted around the composition -- sits against a glowing red horizon, while silver constellations of Pegasus and Pisces wheel in the dark sky above. Across the top of the painting, Wong's stylized signing hands spell out the work's title like some kind of archaic hieroglyph. On the left, a mysterious ribbon of pale rainbow colors resembles the heavens at dawn.

Another work, *I.C.U.* (1988), is at first glance a barren scene of tenement airshafts and fire escapes. But this otherworldly complex of sealed brick towers reaches up to the star-dotted heavens like a mystical fortress, complete with all-seeing eye. The silent Zodiac also watches over the slums in a suite of six hexagonal paintings of constellations from 1995, each hemmed in by a frame of bricks and mortar.

In addition to finding beauty in desolate neighborhoods, Wong was attuned to the eroticism of criminal and working-class men, and his paintings could evoke a passion for saintly brutality reminiscent of the writings of Jean Genet or, closer to home, Miguel Piñero. In *Cell Door Slot* (ca. 1986), imprisoned eyes stare balefully out of a narrow opening between some weather-beaten bars. The almost iconic *Angelito* (1992) features a dark-skinned man slumping in front of a metal-shuttered storefront, with his head and the folds in his garments outlined in gold.

And the link between toughness and religion is even more overt in *Sacred Shroud of Pepe Turcel* (1990), a hexagonal portrait of a muscular man seen from the back, standing in front of a jail cell. A white undershirt covers most of his crucifix tattoo, but a hand nailed to the cross can be seen on each of his shoulders.

Some of Wong's most memorable images press against the picture plane, toying with the formalism that had dominated the preceding decade. *Iglesia Pentecostal Mansion de Luz* (1985), for example, is a painting of a church sign in front of a building shuttered with locked gates, an

image of fiery red darkness titled after light. In the mid-'80s, Wong put together an entire show of such paintings, composing a desolate ghetto streetscape that found little favor with collectors at the time. Now, almost 25 years later, the work is an icon of intense, everyday spirituality.

*FDNY* (1998), another of Wong's painterly double entendres, is a mandala-like gridded tan circle with a brick red center surrounded by oozing grey smoke on a pitch black background. An aerial image of a firefighter's rescue trampoline, it represents a tenuous promise of safety in the midst of mortal danger. Considering Wong's raucous sense of humor, not to mention his adventurous personal life, it no doubt also refers to a certain object of gay desire. Prices range from \$8,000 to \$40,000; the show remains on view till Jan. 30, 2010.