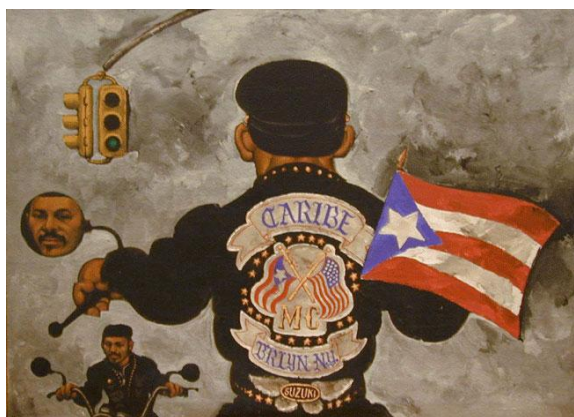


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Paul Laster



Martin Wong is a legendary figure of the '80s East Village–Lower East Side art scene. In 1978, Wong moved to New York from San Francisco, where he had been a ceramicist and a member of a gay performance troupe. Six years later, he was one of the hottest downtown artists. A self-taught painter, Wong captured the dynamics of neighborhoods being transformed by gentrification in a manner that mixed the Ashcan school of realism with visionary and romantic subject matter. Wong, who was born in Portland, Oregon, in 1946, died from an AIDS-related illness in 1999. This monumental exhibition, which was lovingly curated by artist Adam Putnam, is the first New York solo show of Wong's seminal work since 2001.

Putnam selected 28 paintings that mainly utilize monochromatic palettes, as well as photo collages of dilapidated NYC buildings and poignant works on paper from NYU's Fales Library. *Cell Door Slot* (1986) is a dazzlingly eerie grisaille canvas of a man's eyes, intently peering out of an opening in a jail cell door. An equally magnificent canvas, *Son of Sam Sleeps* (1983), portrays 14 hands signing the work's title on a blackboard, which is surrounded by a meticulously painted brick wall and a faux-wood frame.

Gems among the later works include six hexagon-shaped paintings of constellations from 1995 in imitation-brick frames, which Putnam dynamically displays in a triangular grouping, and a 1997–98 erotic rendering of a blossoming cactus. Worthy of reconsideration, Wong's powerful paintings offer countless lessons for revitalizing art.—*Paul Laster*