

The New York Times

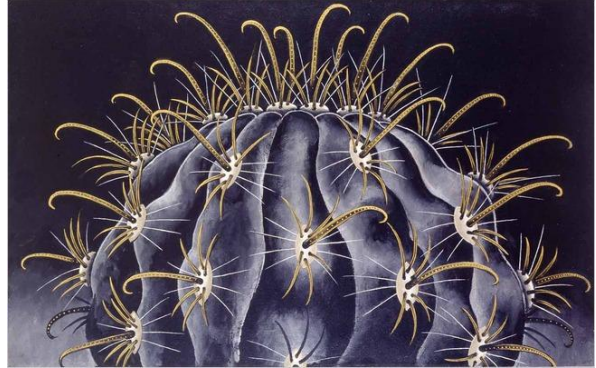
Expect the World®

Art In Review

January 22, 2010

MARTIN WONG
'Everything Must Go'
P.P.O.W.
511 West 25th Street
Chelsea

Through Jan. 30



KAREN ROSENBERG

The Lower East Side today doesn't much resemble the neighborhood where Martin Wong lived and worked during the 1980s and '90s. Mr. Wong, who died of an AIDS-related illness in 1999, made dark but beatific paintings of tenements, jail cells, hustlers and drugged-out poets.

But nostalgia for the demimonde isn't the dominant theme in this small and thoughtful survey, organized by the artist Adam Putnam and coinciding with "Downtown Pix" at the Grey Art Gallery at New York University. The selection of paintings, photo collages and sketches emphasizes Mr. Wong's interest in surfaces (he trained as a ceramicist) and symbols (sign language and astrology figure prominently here).

Some canvases glamorize air-shaft views with trompe l'oeil windows and gilded frames within frames. Others lavish the same attention on muscled men in tight white tank tops. Texts refer to tabloid headlines, horoscopes and the seductive smell of off-duty firemen ("like hickory smoked rubber and B.O.").

Keith Haring and David Wojnarowicz come to mind, but so do Jasper Johns, Gordon Matta-Clark, Paul P., Terence Koh and Kehinde Wiley. Perhaps the most surprising link is to Georgia O'Keeffe, in Mr. Wong's paintings of spiky cactuses.

Subculture will always be part of Mr. Wong's appeal; in the show's brochure, the critic Carlo McCormick calls him a "kung fu hippie hip-hop punk." This show gives us many other points of access. KAREN ROSENBERG