



April 2010
Nick Stillman

Martin Wong P·P·O·W GALLERY

Martin Wong's paintings of New York's downtown dystopia have occasionally materialized in exhibitions rounding up the East Village scene of the 1980s, but such a diverse group of his works as was seen in this exhibition had not been assembled since his retrospective at the New Museum in New York in 1998, one year before his death of AIDS. Curated by artist Adam Putnam, P·P·O·W Gallery's miniretrospective combined Wong's iconic early cityscapes and mysterious paintings of pudgy hands rendering sign language with lesser-known later photocollages of the decayed Lower East Side and paintings on astrological and botanical subjects. Wong doesn't dazzle with technique (he was a self-taught painter), and he may have been less imaginative in his symbolism than peers such as David Wojnarowicz, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, or Kiki Smith, but his gritty yet quixotic cosmos of toughs with leering eyes and symbolic systems steeped in local mysticism is an unabashedly romantic representation of one individual's "downtown." Thus Wong's work sometimes wanders into the terrain of corniness, but even when it does, it always smolders.

Especially those firemen! Wong wasn't shy about his thing for New York's Bravest, most obviously in the self-explanatory *I really like the way firemen smell . . .*, 1988, a fireman's silhouette haloed by Wong's text describing his fetish for their after-work musk. HE THINKS I'M ONLY INTO HIM FOR HIS UNIFORM, his painted words declare. IN REALITY I'M ONLY INTO HIM FOR THE SMELL. Wong's subjects are imbued with romance, whether he's painting urban desolation, constellations, or tender portraits of a hard-boiled set, in or out of the clink. *Cell Door Slot*, 1986, is especially penetrating: A pair of blazing eyes peek from confinement into the privileged territory of freedom occupied by the viewer. Wong constantly puts us on the spot, making us try to decode secret messages and interpret stare-downs (come-on or threat?). *El Caribe*, 1988, shows the back of a biker, Puerto Rican flag blazing, his reflection slyly glancing back in the rearview mirror—more lusty eyes, looking right at you.

Codes were important to Wong, from sign language to astrological symbols to the silent signals with which the historically subjugated (specifically homosexuals) have had to communicate. Two sign language paintings from 1981, on view here, show phrases rendered by Wong's trademark hands on surfaces that mimic chalkboards. The text itself—spelled out, too, in the works' wooden frames, and in their titles—seems disposable, seemingly transposed from whatever headlines or ads were blaring in the tabloids that day: COURT ROOM SHOCKER: JIMMY THE WEASIL SINGS LIKE A CANARY and PSYCHICS UNLOCK BEAUTY SECRETS OF THE STARS, in this case. These early paintings probe the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion, but never at the expense of the viewer. Where there is secrecy in symbols that initially appear impenetrable (the uninitiated might think the hands are flashing gang symbols before catching on to their descriptive forms), Wong never obfuscates the keys to his iconography. A complex network of white lines on a black ground is clearly labeled a constellation; a brick wall isn't a dead end but a clue to look around for signs of life amid the rubble.



Martin Wong,
El Caribe, 1988,
acrylic on canvas,
40 x 45 1/4".

The trickle of critical writing on the P·P·O·W exhibition seemed preoccupied by how dated Wong's apocalyptic Lower East Side feels now that the neighborhood is steroidally overloaded with luxury amenities for the nouveau riche. And it's true: Wong's nocturnal city of ruins may now be Detroit or New Orleans, but it's definitively not New York. What was most striking to me, though, was how Wong's essentially romantic nature doesn't foreclose his art from undertaking a sophisticated investigation of the operations of code on communication, always leaving it to the viewer to determine whether its function is liberating or alienating.

—Nick Stillman