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Matthew Wong | Vincent van Gogh: Painting as a Last Resort

The Chinese-Canadian artist Matthew Wong (1984-2019) spent the final eight years of his life painting an impressive body of work. With imagination and ambition, he elevated his art to great heights within this brief span of time. His imaginary landscapes are both vividly colourful and accessible, yet at the same time hauntingly alienating and melancholic.

Among the numerous sources of inspiration that Wong found in art history, Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) was one of the most significant. Moreover, he identified a kindred spirit in Van Gogh. Both artists searched long and hard for their purpose in life, which they found in painting. Wong described it as his 'last resort.' Both Wong and Van Gogh struggled with mental health challenges and both ultimately took their own lives.

This exhibition of Wong's oeuvre explores his connection with Van Gogh through six themes. A dialogue thus unfolds between two soul mates, intimately connected despite being separated by time and place.



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Unknown Pleasures, 2019



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
A Walk through Primordial Garden, 2018

Wong's fantasy landscapes provided him with an escape from a reality that was particularly harsh due to his psychological vulnerability. This idyllic garden existed only in his thoughts, but by painting it, he shared it with everyone. Paths often wind through Wong's worlds, much like in this painting. The solitary figure on the path served as a reference to himself.



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
The Kingdom, 2017

The visual interplay of tree trunks in a forest has been depicted by many artists, including Gustav Klimt (1862-1918), David Hockney (1937), and Vincent van Gogh. With this work, Wong confidently placed himself in that lineage. A birch forest, like the one in this painting, is commonly seen in and around Edmonton in Canada. This is where Wong lived for the last three years of his life. He had a studio there and regarded it as both a sanctuary and his personal kingdom.

Learning by Doing

While Wong was formally trained as a photographer, he was self-taught as a painter and draughtsman, like Van Gogh. Engaging with fellow artists through social media provided a platform for broadening his perspective and refining his ideas. Wong actively posted his works on Facebook, leveraging feedback as a valuable learning tool. He also educated himself in European-American and Chinese art history.

As a beginning artist in Hong Kong, Wong embraced traditional Chinese materials such as ink and rice paper. He used these materials for drawings that echoed the style of American abstract expressionists. When he secured a studio in 2013, he began experimenting with oil paint. He worked almost obsessively, sometimes producing up to five paintings a day, and developed at lightning speed. In 2015, Wong transitioned from abstract to figurative works, discovering that this was better suited to what he wanted to express. Two years later, having relocated to Edmonton, Canada, Wong found his signature style and made his breakthrough in the art world.



Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890)
Trees and Undergrowth, 1887



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Untitled, 2013

Soon after graduating with a degree in photography, Wong discovered that he preferred drawing and painting over taking photographs. The physical aspect of working with ink or paint suited him better than the technical intricacies of photography. Wong operated intuitively, giving his brush free rein across the paper. In this case, he created a dynamic, abstract composition from which a landscape seems to emerge.

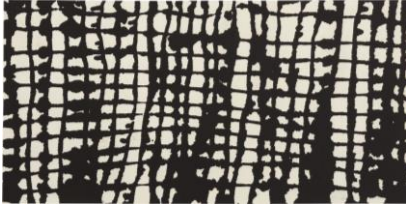


Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Valley, 2014

One of Wong's early major influences was the American artist Joan Mitchell (1925-1992). He was drawn to her colourful and expressive abstract works and bold brushstrokes, as is clearly evident in this painting. Its title pays homage to Mitchell's *La Grande Vallée*, a monumental series comprising 21 paintings. Wong's decision to execute this painting on two canvases is also a nod to Mitchell, whose works frequently consist of multiple canvases.



Not on view:
Joan Mitchell, *Two Sunflowers*, 1980.
Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Untitled, 2014



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Stargazing, 2015



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Contemplating Infinity, 2015

This work is one of Wong's first experiments with figuration. Although the composition actually comprises two abstract parts, Wong's inclusion of a figure pulls the painting away from the abstract and towards the figurative.

This intervention transforms the area to the left of the figure into what, upon closer inspection, resembles an infinite mountain landscape. Wong selected this painting for a solo exhibition in Hong Kong. In the exhibition catalogue, he drew parallels between his brushwork and that of Van Gogh.



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Memento, 2015



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
The Sun, 2016



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
The Other Side of the Moon, 2017

In the winter of 2016-17, everything seemed to fall into place for Wong. He successfully synthesised his art historical influences, ranging from Van Gogh to traditional Chinese painting, into a distinctive and personal style. This painting is one of the earliest examples of this - an inviting yet unsettling fantasy landscape brought to life through a rich array of colourful marks. Thanks in part to this work, Wong made his breakthrough in the American art world.



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Act of Faith, 2016

Bright Moment, 2016

Sleeping on the Grass, 2016

In the summer of 2016, Wong spent three months in Los Angeles. These works reflect upon the free California lifestyle. Working in acrylic paint on paper, he used cheerful colours applied in short strokes. This use of colour was a strategy for Wong to pull himself out of a persistent gloomy mood, as Van Gogh also did sometimes.



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
White Sea, White Sky, 2016

Expression Through Colour

In a 2017 Facebook message to a friend, Wong wrote: 'I think my main strengths are colour and brushwork.' In this regard, he shares a kinship with Van Gogh, in whose work colour and brushstrokes also play an essential role. Wong combined his colours instinctively. He selected a starting colour intuitively and allowed his subconscious to guide the choice of other colours. The result was often an explosion of bright, contrasting hues. At the same time, he made monochrome canvases, experimenting with various tones of a single colour.

Both Wong and Van Gogh used colour as a means of conveying a particular feeling or emotional charge. With his imaginary landscapes, Wong aimed to evoke a sense of longing and melancholy for a place that no longer exists, or never did. His choices of colour enabled him to create that dream world, in which viewers can lose themselves.



Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)
Wheatfield with a Reaper, 1889

Van Gogh considered the reaper and the wheat as symbols of the eternal cycle of nature and the transience of life: reaping comes after the harvest has been sown and grown. A weighty theme indeed, yet Van Gogh did not perceive it solely as bleak. In his words, the sun 'floods everything with a light of fine gold,' infusing the scene with a sense of light-heartedness. To convey this feeling, Van Gogh used warm shades of yellow to depict the swaying wheat.



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Coming of Age Landscape, 2018

Similar to Van Gogh's *Wheatfield with a Reaper*, the colours in this work radiate a scorching heat. At the same time, there is a certain sense of calm. Everything seems balanced: not just the colours, but also the interlocking patterns of dots and strokes, which contrast with the uniformly painted sky. Recognising a certain maturity in style, Wong aptly named this painting *Coming of Age Landscape*.



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Night Crossing, 2018



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Untitled, 2017



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Untitled, 2017

These two powerful canvases are all about colour. Wong's works usually tell a story, however that is not the case here. Instead, he wanted to explore how different colours harmonise and interact. This experimentation is also why Wong did not assign titles to these works. Painted shortly after his initial successes in the art world, these pieces, with their uninhibitedness and large format, reflect Wong's ambition and confidence.



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Somewhere, 2018



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Dialogue, 2018



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Good Morning, 2018



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Night 4, 2018



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Day 4, 2018

Wong frequently pushed the boundaries in his use of colour. In these two canvases, he explored how far he could go in working with a single colour. They belong to a series of paintings consisting of day and night versions of the same imaginary scene. While nearly identical in composition, *Day 4* and *Night 4* differ entirely in colour. Wong abstracted the representation to such a degree that the subject becomes indiscernible, transforming the works mainly into an experience of colour.

Bold Brushwork

Wong's painting process was quite physical. He worked with speed, agility, and certitude, often resulting in the paint flying across his studio. His thick and expressive brushstrokes testify to this physical approach. They are the traces he left as an artist; Wong's presence in the work is palpable. The same holds true for Van Gogh's paintings. Through their expressive way of painting, both artists reveal their inner selves.

After shifting to more figurative work, Wong experimented widely with all manner of marks, dots, and patterns. Over time, he learned to introduce a greater sense of tranquility into his work. He increasingly combined his signature marks with other techniques, such as broadly painted bands and lines.



Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)
Wheatfield, 1888

The wheat and vegetation in the foreground of this painting seem to be dancing. Everything is in motion. For Van Gogh, painting this and other fields was a perfect way to practise his brushwork. By alternating the length, thickness, and direction of his strokes, he created dynamism and at the same time infused his own personality into this depiction of the wheatfield.



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
The Journey Home, 2018

Wong's fascination with both European and Chinese art is evident in this triptych. He employed thickly applied and flaring strokes of paint to depict the sun's rays, just as Van Gogh sometimes did. Wong borrowed from the Chinese artist Shitao (1642-1707) the theme of a solitary traveller in a boat on his way home.



Not on view:
Shitao, *Returning home*, c. 1695.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Far Away Eyes, 2017



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
The Night Watcher, 2018

Wong covered most of this canvas with a myriad of small dots of yellow and white paint, applying them directly from the tube to the canvas. Countless small lights seem to shine in the forest. Blue and green strokes of paint hide under the yellow dots, giving the feeling that something dark and indistinct lurks in the depths of the forest. The title implies that the red figure is keeping watch. But for what?



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Figure in a Landscape, 2017



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Night Moods, 2018

Wong did not solely experiment with a variety of paint strokes; this painting clearly illustrates his exploration of diverse pattern combinations. The interior is divided into a patchwork of different decorations, connected by a cohesive colour family that unifies the composition.

The only passage in the painting consisting of plain, smooth paint strokes is the view through the window.



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Ripple in the Night, 2018

Black and White

'I may really be a black and white ink painter at the core of my project,' Wong explained in 2015. This was shortly after a solo exhibition in Hong Kong incorporating his paintings and ink drawings. Wong felt that his Chinese background almost obliged him to work with ink and rice paper: 'there are parts of me that can't quite escape those roots by default.'

The evolution of Wong's ink drawings consistently preceded his paintings. He often tried out new ideas in ink before translating them into paint. The diversity of marks, dots, and lines that define his work serves as a prime example of this process. While inspired by traditional Chinese painting, it is equally possible that Wong looked at Van Gogh's ink drawings. Van Gogh, too, built up his drawings with a rich variety of touches and strokes.



Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)
Landscape with Hut, 1888

Van Gogh and Wong shared a similar approach in their ink drawings, building up their compositions through a tapestry of different short strokes. Yet their technique and the purpose of this approach differed. Van Gogh worked with a reed pen and used the technique to introduce variety into his landscape. Wong, in contrast, applied his touches with brush and deployed them to make his fantasy worlds more personal.



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Footprints in the Wind, 2016



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Untitled, 2017



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Untitled, 2015

Throughout his life, Wong had difficulty connecting with others in person, yet he enjoyed a rich social life online. His mental vulnerability and the tics resulting from Tourette's syndrome made it hard for him to engage in social situations, which left him frustrated. He seems to have expressed his struggle in this penetrating masked portrait, conveying a sense of being locked up in his own world.



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
The Realm of Appearances, 2017



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Flowers in a Starlit Landscape, 2017

The subjects Wong drew often appeared in different contexts in his paintings. For instance, the sunflowers in this drawing are portrayed under a starry sky, while in the painting on the left they are in a Chinese vase.

With these works, Wong pays homage not only to Van Gogh's famous paintings, but also to the Austrian artist Egon Schiele (1890-1918). By referencing both European and Chinese art, Wong intertwines the cultural traditions on which his work leans.



Not on view:
Egon Schiele, Sunflower, 1909.
Private Collection.



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Landscape of the Longing, 2016

Two of the most important figures in Chinese traditional painting are Shitao and Bada Shanren (1626-1705), whose work Wong studied intently. The steep Chinese mountain landscape and elevated perspective in this drawing are both derived from the Chinese masters. The theme of longing, frequently expressed in Chinese painting, also resonates in Wong's work, as evidenced by the title of this drawing.



Not on view:
Shitao, Thirty-Six Peaks of Mount Gyand
recollected, c. 1705.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
A Poet's World, 2015

Imagination and Reality

While there are a striking number of parallels between Wong and Van Gogh, there are at least as many differences. One of the most fundamental distinctions lies in the subjects they depicted. While Van Gogh almost always painted what he saw, Wong worked from his imagination.

Wong conveyed his ideas, memories, and feelings through his imaginary landscapes and interiors. He moulded all that he experienced into his work, transforming it into his distinctive dream worlds. In doing so, he navigated the balance between reality and imagination. In contrast, Van Gogh consistently commenced with reality, finding symbols in the world around him that reflected his ideas and feelings. While both artists shared the common goal of personal expression, their approaches to achieving it manifested a crucial difference.



Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)
The Bedroom, 1888

Van Gogh portrayed his bedroom in the Yellow House in the autumn of 1888. With the painting, he wanted to express 'absolute tranquillity.' This is illustrative of Van Gogh's working method. He sought to create a painting based on a certain feeling and to do so selected a suitable subject in reality. In contrast, the interior by Wong that hangs next to it exudes a comparable sense of tranquillity but is painted entirely from the imagination.



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Time after Time, 2018



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Untitled, 2019

In 2019, Wong created three works in which he engaged very directly with Van Gogh. In this gouache Wong referred to *Van Gogh's Chair*. He even painted his pipe. The plant and the window, however, are Wong's own additions. Van Gogh made a symbolic self-portrait by painting his own chair. The idea of an object serving as a portrait of someone intrigued Wong, possibly serving as the impetus for this work.



Not on view:
Vincent van Gogh, *Van Gogh's Chair*, 1909.
The National Gallery, London.

Matthew Wong (1984-2019)



Untitled, 2019



Last Light, 2019



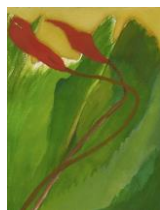
Untitled, 2018



Illumination, 2018



Red House, 2018



The Twins, 2018

Wong began each day the same way. Before having breakfast, he would make a drawing in ink, and sometime later in gouache (opaque watercolour), like these works. He adhered to this ritual throughout his career. Wong painted the first thing that came to mind without hesitation; all he had to do was turn his gaze inward. Consequently, these works stand as the most immediate outcomes of his associative and imaginative approach to painting.



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)

The Realm of Appearances, 2018

In his paintings, Wong created vast imaginary landscapes full of beauty and colour. They evoke a nostalgic notion of a perfect world that feels as if it once existed in a distant past. The title of this painting alludes to this idea. The pervasive melancholy stemming from the realisation that this world is unattainable is one of the main themes woven through Wong's body of work.



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)

End of the Day, 2019

'Visualizing the idea of that place or memory or thing that transcends its physical experience, but at the same time simply doesn't exist.' This is how Wong articulated a central theme of his art. The landscape in End of the Day is such a place that transcends reality to evoke a distinct emotion. With a solitary figure in the painting, Wong expressed the feeling of being alone in an overwhelming world.



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Old Town, 2017



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Starry Night, 2019

By creating his own version of Van Gogh's famous *Starry Night*, Wong referenced Van Gogh's most iconic and clichéd painting. *Starry Night* is one of the few paintings in which Van Gogh let his imagination run wild. In his version, Wong used his imagination to reduce Van Gogh's painting to simple shapes and introduced a dark lake. Wong painted the starry sky with a pattern derived from the Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama (1929).



Not on view:
Vincent van Gogh, *Starry Night*, 1889.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Morning Landscape, 2017

Inner Landscape

'I see myself in him [Van Gogh]. The impossibility of belonging in this world,' Wong wrote in 2018.

He drew inspiration not only from Van Gogh's artworks, but also identified with his life story. Both artists struggled with mental health, finding hope and strength in the act of creating art.

Wong used his art to reflect on his life and his emotions. The recurring theme of a solitary figure in an overwhelming landscape symbolises Wong's own feelings of loneliness and melancholy. At the same time, his imaginative landscapes served as a refuge - a safe and enchanting realm into which he could escape. In this he was not alone: Wong's works may be highly personal, yet their appeal is universal. The profoundly human emotions depicted in his canvases resonate widely, evoking recognition and offering consolation.



Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)
Garden of the Asylum, 1889

During his time in the psychiatric institution in Saint-Rémy, Van Gogh created this painting of the garden.

He deliberately chose the colour combination of red and green, because he felt it gave 'rise a little to the feeling of anxiety from which some of my companions in misfortune often suffer.' In the sawn-off branch of the tree in the foreground, he perceived someone with 'hurt pride.'

This is also how Van Gogh felt himself when, grappling with persistent mental crises, he admitted himself to the institution.

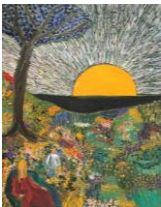


Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Dark Reverie, 2018

This is arguably one of the bleakest landscapes Wong made, evident not only in its colour scheme but also in its symbolism. The canvas is so dark that you can barely make out tree trunks and vegetation. A pitch-black path winds its way into the depths of the forest, with no end in sight. It seems to be a direct reference to Wong's ongoing struggle with severe depression.



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
The West, 2017



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Landscape with Mother and Child, 2017



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
So Much Depends..., 2017



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Nostalgia, 2016

Nostalgia is a recurring theme in Wong's paintings. Here, he even chose it as a title. The figure in the foreground, seemingly emerging from a kind of afterlife, appears to gaze wistfully at a scene from his past. This sentiment is particularly explicit in *Hideaway* next to *Nostalgia*. It is probably a depiction of a happy holiday memory Wong held of the island of Capri and the cave he visited there with his parents. The cave may also have had a symbolic meaning for Wong, as a place of retreat.



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Hideaway, 2016



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Solitude, 2018

In *Solitude*, Wong expressed his persistent feelings of loneliness. However, in his view, these were not all negative; this work lets us see that he sometimes also actually liked being alone. From a distance, he looks at Edmonton, the Canadian city where he lived. There was little artistic activity, and Wong was without friends there. At the same time, this isolation afforded him the peace to pursue painting.



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Round About Midnight, 2019

Wong's Death

Wong hoped that recognition and success would contribute to his mental health, potentially offering a solution to his persistent depression. However, even as his acclaim grew, he increasingly perceived this hope as illusory.

Despite everything, he kept on working. He took comfort in painting, as well as in the realisation that someone else, in this case Van Gogh, had a similar experience. In autumn 2019, Wong ended his life.

Behind every suicide is a complex story shaped by various factors. It is never the result of a single event or circumstance. Relatives are often left with many unanswered questions. Talking about suicide helps. In the Netherlands, support and assistance can be found by calling 113 or visiting the website of the 113 Suicide Prevention Foundation.



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
A Dream, 2019

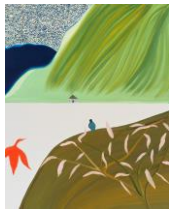


Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
The Space Between Trees, 2019

With this work, Wong paid tribute to Van Gogh. It is a direct reference to the latter's *The Painter on the Road to Tarascon*. Wong replaced the figure of Van Gogh walking with the park bench he often sat on in Edmonton. Wong envisioned this bench as his own self-portrait and by incorporating it into this painting, he literally positioned himself in Van Gogh's work. Beyond being a homage, this painting illustrates just how deeply rooted Wong's fascination with the Dutch painter was.



Not on view:
Vincent van Gogh, *The Painter on the Road to Tarascon*, 1888.
Lost in the Second World War.



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
See You on the Other Side, 2019

Wong created this symbol-laden painting shortly before taking his life. A solitary figure gazes from a distance at a house across an empty plain. With this painting, Wong seems to have expressed his withdrawal from the real world into his own imaginary universe. The red phoenix, rising anew from the ashes after death, symbolises hope and rebirth.

Path to the Sea

What happens when you look at a work of art attentively over an extended period of time? Does the experience become different; more intimate, deeper, or perhaps more personal?

The artwork you are about to see is titled *Path to the Sea*. A winding path leads you into the depths of the landscape. Is the environment pleasant, or does it feel overwhelming and oppressive? And what of the figure in the left foreground – are you invited to join in on the journey, or do you prefer to observe it as a spectator?

Take a moment to quietly explore the painting and make it uniquely yours. If you wish, consider these suggestions:

- Allow your eyes and thoughts to wander freely.
- Are you uncertain what to look at? Focus on a detail, a colour, the composition, or the paint strokes.
- Look at the work from a different angle, walk through the space and lie down instead of sitting, or vice versa. You might see something completely new.
- Reflect on your feelings. What does the work evoke in you, and what might be the underlying reasons for those feelings?



Matthew Wong (1984-2019)
Path to the Sea, 2019