

Major Exhibition Sheds New Light on the Art of Martin Wong

Martin Wong: Chinatown USA
April 17 – July 18, 2026

Media Preview: April 16, 10 am – 12 pm CST



Martin Wong, *Chinese New Year's Parade*, 1992-94

(CHICAGO, IL, March 5, 2026) — On Friday, April 17, 2026, Wrightwood 659 opens *Martin Wong: Chinatown USA*, an exhibition focusing on an underexplored through-line in the practice of visionary Chinese American artist Martin Wong (1946-1999): his fascination with Asia through Chinatowns as personal, mythical cityscapes. Wong explored these spaces—filled with Asian art and architecture as adopted in the United States amid the explosion of street culture in San Francisco and New York in the late 20th century—as amalgams of memory, identity, and queer and pop-culture narratives.

The first U.S. museum exhibition devoted to Wong since 2017, *Martin Wong: Chinatown USA* is curated by Yasufumi Nakamori, PhD, with Ashley Janke, Assistant Curator, Wrightwood 659. The exhibition is presented by Halsted A&A Foundation.

The exhibition and its accompanying, fully illustrated catalogue take their title from the artist's 1993 exhibition at the downtown Manhattan gallery P·P·O·W, which still represents the artist's estate today. Only six years later,

Wong died of an AIDS-related illness at the age of 53. Since then, his reputation has continued to grow as a queer painter and poet who traversed identities and sampled a dizzying array of cultural references. Critical attention, however, has largely focused on his paintings of the Lower East Side, and the artists, poets, and immigrants in this neighborhood. Far less recognized are the Chinatown- and Asia-inspired paintings, drawings, and sculptures he created throughout his career. *Martin Wong: Chinatown USA* positions these works as central to his hybrid practice.

Wrightwood 659's presentation documents Wong's lifelong fascination with the streets, storefronts, nightlife, myths, Asian art, and celebrations of Chinatowns—even amid his better-known collaborations and creative exchanges with Nuyorican poets and graffiti artists on the Lower East Side.

Chinatown USA features more than 100 paintings, drawings, ceramic works, and photo collages, complemented by videos and artifacts, including pre-modern Asian objects collected by Wong. Several works reflect his interest in calligraphy, graffiti, and American Sign Language (ASL). A selection of works from his graffiti collection, on loan from the Museum of the City of New York, is also on view.

Mariah Keller, Executive Director of Wrightwood 659, says “At Wrightwood 659, we are committed to presenting art that confronts urgent social questions and foregrounds LGBTQ+ and Asian voices. Martin Wong’s work does both with extraordinary imagination and humanity. His paintings speak across communities and across time, making this exhibition deeply resonant for our moment.”

“Martin occupied a complex position in regard to his identity, balancing intense personal attachment to his Chinese heritage with a grasp of the issues of Orientalism and the related marginalization of queer, Asian, Latino, and Black people,” says Dr. Nakamori. “It’s true he did not grow up speaking Chinese, nor did he ever visit China. He claimed his view of Chinatown was like that of an outsider. Our scholarship suggests complexities and nuances of his own identity and relationship with Asia through Chinatown.”

The Exhibition

Chinatowns and Icons



Martin Wong, *Ms. Chinatown*, 1992



Martin Wong, *Jade Palace Cocktails Restaurant*, 1958

At the heart of the exhibition are paintings from Wong's *Chinatown USA* series. Highlights include *Chinese New Year's Parade* (1992-94), a near-psychedelic extravaganza depicting Wong as a small boy facing a tsunami of demons, a towering dragon, and Peking Opera performers. In *Canal Street* (1992), the pagoda-styled building at Canal and Centre Streets metamorphoses into a fantasia of calligraphed signs, red

columns, green-tiled eaves, and an impossibly saturated blue sky.

Wong also created densely layered paintings of iconic Asian pop-culture heroes such as Bruce Lee. Shortly after moving to New York's Lower East Side—and inspired by Lee's influence on youth culture—he painted *Clones of Bruce Lee* (1982). A decade later, he revisited the subject, depicting the actor amid a crowd of doubles, referencing the wave of imitators that followed Lee's death.

Life in Art

A long unseen painting, off view for nearly 40 years and on loan from The Broad Art Foundation in Los Angeles, will be featured in the exhibition. The 12-foot-wide *Tai Ping Tien Kuo* (*Tai Ping Kuo*) (1982) portrays the artist's mother and stepfather—nude—in the center of a triptych echoing the format of a European religious altarpiece. The work exemplifies Wong's practice of inserting himself, family members, and his friends into his art.



Martin Wong, *Tai Ping Tien Kuo* (*Tai Ping Kuo*), 1982

In *Chinese Laundry: A Portrait of the Artist's Parents* (1984), Wong places his Californian parents inside a classic New York Chinese laundry. They smile from behind a storefront meticulously detailed with brown paper shirt packages, neatly tied laundry bags, a wall calendar, a clock, and a clothes press. Another deeply personal work is *Portrait of Mickey Piñero Tattooing* (c. 1988), depicting the poet and playwright Miguel Piñero, Wong's companion from 1983 to 1984.



Martin Wong, *Lex Shan Gay Loo: 64*, 1992

Poems, ASL, Calligraphy and Graffiti

Works inspired by ASL and Chinese characters—including *Lex Shan Gay Loo: 64* (1992)—are installed in Wrightwood 659's third-floor galleries. Wong developed a visual alphabet of fingerspelling and a distinctive calligraphic script reflecting the bulbous, fleshy forms and Buddhist hand gestures he admired in Tibetan painting. He did not aim for literal accuracy, once describing his ASL paintings with characteristic irony as "deaf pictures reveal sick secret world of Chinese."

The exhibition also features works from Wong's collection of Asian calligraphy and American graffiti, including pieces by Stanley Pratt, Sharp Goodstone, Angel Ortiz, Lady Pink, and Keith Haring. Wong donated his graffiti collection to the Museum of the City of New York in 1994.

Mosaic New York

Paintings on the fourth floor present non-Chinatown scenes of New York: skateboarders, firemen in love, graffiti-splashed walls, and brick tenements.

A highlight is *Untitled (Silver Storefront)* (1985) suspended from the center of the gallery. The verso of this work, made publicly visible for the first time, depicts Zhong Kui, the legendary Taoist demon hunter, holding an artist's

palette inside a commercial art gallery in Chinatown. The work marks a pivotal transition in the exhibition between Wong's New York and Chinatown series.

Across the gallery, *Polaris* (1987) shows children of various ethnicities playing marbles over a celestial map. Wong often embedded written messages in the constellations of his painted skies. As he once remarked, "Basically, I'm a Chinese landscape painter. . . They write a poem in the sky, and I do that, too."

Publication

The 192-page hardcover catalogue, *Martin Wong:*

Chinatown USA, edited and introduced by Yasufumi Nakamori, features six essays by Zully Adler, Margo Machida, Lydia Yee, Vivian Li, Lisa Hsiao Chen, and Mark Dean Johnson. The publication will be released on May 26, 2026, distributed by D.A.P. and published by Halsted A&A Foundation and Gregory R. Miller & Co.

Retail: \$55.

The Artist

Born in Portland, Oregon, Wong grew up in San Francisco near Chinatown. His Chinese-born father died when Martin was four years old. He was raised by his Chinese American mother and Chinese Mexican American stepfather. Martin considered himself Chino-Latino.

After graduating from Humboldt State University, he designed sets and props for radical queer performance troupes in the Bay Area and started the Human Instamatic Portrait business in Eureka before moving to New York. He initially lived in an SRO hotel before moving to Loisaida, then a Puerto Rican enclave on the Lower East Side. From a six-floor walk-up, he observed the vitality of the neighborhood. In 1994, when diagnosed with AIDS, he returned to San Francisco, where he continued to paint until the day before his death in 1999.

Major museum presentations include *Martin Wong: Human Instamatic* (2015-17), organized by the Bronx Museum of Arts, and *Malicious Mischief* (2022-24) at the KW Center for Contemporary Art in Berlin. His work is held in the collections of leading institutions worldwide, including The Art Institute of Chicago, IL; The Broad, Los Angeles, CA; The Cleveland Museum of Art, OH; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY; Minneapolis Institute of Art, MN; Museum of Modern Art, NY; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA; Whitney Museum of American Art, NY; and Tate, London.

Also on View this Spring at Wrightwood 659

Dispossessions in the Americas: The Extraction of Bodies, Land, and Heritage from La Conquista to the Present brings together more than 40 works by 36 contemporary artists from across Latin America whose creative output broadly seeks to critique and unsettle the long-standing politics of dispossession—the deprivation of land, culture, language, or all three. Featuring photographs, videos, installations, performances, sculptures, and paintings, all produced between 1960 and 2026, the exhibition examines the enduring legacies of colonialism, showing how dispossession continues to shape Indigenous, Afro-descendant, queer, and trans communities. *Dispossessions in the Americas* is curated by Jonathan D. Katz, Professor of Practice, History of Art and Gender,



Martin Wong, Recto of *Untitled (Silver Storefront)*, 1985



Martin Wong, Verso of *Untitled (Silver Storefront)*, n.d.

Sexuality, and Women's Studies, University of Pennsylvania (and curator of the recent blockbuster *The First Homosexuals*), and independent curator Eduardo Carrera. The exhibition is presented by Alphawood Exhibitions.

About Wrightwood 659

Wrightwood 659 hosts exhibitions on socially engaged art and architecture, on issues facing LGBTQ+ communities, and on Asian art and architecture. Located in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood in a building transformed by Pritzker Prize winner Tadao Ando, Wrightwood 659 encourages visitors to engage with pressing issues of our time in an intimate and beautiful space. For additional information, please visit wrightwood659.org.

Hours of Operation and Tickets

Wrightwood 659 is open Fridays, 12 noon-7 pm; Saturdays, 10 am-5 pm. Tickets for both exhibitions, opening April 17, go on sale March 19, 2026. Admission is \$20 and is available online only at <https://tickets.wrightwood659.org/events>. Please note, admission is by advance ticket only. Walk-ups are not permitted.

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Images

Martin Wong, *Chinese New Year's Parade*, 1992-94, acrylic on linen. Collection of SFMOMA [Purchase, by exchange, through a fractional gift of Shirley Ross Davis]; © Martin Wong Foundation. Courtesy of the Martin Wong Foundation, P·P·O·W, New York

Martin Wong, *Jade Palace Cocktails Restaurant*, 1958, black and white photograph. © Martin Wong Foundation. Courtesy of the Martin Wong Foundation and P·P·O·W, New York

Martin Wong, *Ms. Chinatown*, 1992, acrylic on canvas. Collection of Cynthia T.M.H. Nguyen; © Martin Wong Foundation. Courtesy of the Martin Wong Foundation, P·P·O·W, New York

Martin Wong, *Tai Ping Tien Kuo (Tai Ping Kuo)*, 1982, acrylic on canvas. The Broad Art Foundation. © Martin Wong Foundation. Courtesy of the Martin Wong Foundation, P·P·O·W, New York

Martin Wong, *Lex Shan Gay Loo: 64*, 1992, acrylic on canvas. Collection of Jim Torth. © Martin Wong Foundation. Courtesy of the Martin Wong Foundation, P·P·O·W, New York

Martin Wong, *Recto of Untitled (Silver Storefront)*, 1985, acrylic and oil on canvas. Collection of KAWS. © Martin Wong Foundation. Courtesy of the Martin Wong Foundation and P·P·O·W, New York

Martin Wong, *Verso of Untitled (Silver Storefront)*, n.d., acrylic and oil on canvas. Collection of KAWS. © Martin Wong Foundation. Courtesy of the Martin Wong Foundation and P·P·O·W, New York