Tenement Dreams

Martin Wong’s New York love story in paint

December 1, 1999 By Dan Cameron

I was first introduced to Martin Wong by critic Carlo McCormick late one weeknight at the East Village club 8 BC. This was probably early 1984; I remember that it was already winter and that I was already a fan, because I responded to meeting him the way I might have if he’d been a rock star. In fact, what stays with me most from that first meeting is the image of Martin in full space-cowboy regalia, hypnotizing everyone in earshot with his unstoppable monologue, a swirl of cosmic revelation and catty gossip. Later, as we strolled, chatting, down Avenue B, I noticed that he wasn’t wearing a coat, but thought better of mentioning it; he seemed much too caught up in his train of thought to consider the cold.

Martin’s eccentric charm was a manifestation of his bedrock faith in the necessity and power of art. Although he turned to serious art-making only as an adult, his pursuit of beauty was lifelong. As a young man in San Francisco, Martin had excelled in a number of oddball professions—stage designer for drag performers, dealer in Asian curios—but eventually decided that if he was going to be an artist, he had to move to New York City. Arriving at the height of the ’80s graffiti movement, Wong quickly became a discerning collector while perfecting his own painting technique. By the time I caught up with him, he was already a fixture of both the graffiti and East Village subcultures.

Martin Wong had an artistic love affair with the city that seems to be found only in people who are not native New Yorkers. This passion can be seen in the meticulous care with which he painted each individual brick in his innumerable cityscapes and in the attention he lavished on the ornate signs of Chinatown. For Martin, a brick wall was never an obstacle, but rather an invitation to look more closely, as one gazes at the face of somebody one loves and can’t get enough of. He was never afraid of urban desolation: His paintings chart the psychic journey of someone who arrived a stranger and left with more friends than he could ever estimate.

For those who, like me, saw Martin as a source of inspiration, his post-diagnosis decision to return to San Francisco and place himself in his mother’s loving care was not easy to embrace. But his health held out for many more years than it would have here; he was with us long enough to see his work return to the public eye, in the form of a 1998 retrospective I organized at New York City’s New Museum. After his death in August, at 53, his mother, Florence, told me that seeing his work for the first time in a full museum survey was the artistic vindication he had always craved,

and that it had come just in the nick of time.

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