

TWILIGHT CHILD



JULY 1969

Antonia Kuo and
Martin Wong

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FRYE/
Art Museum

Twilight Child brings together the work of Antonia Kuo and Martin Wong, two queer, diasporic Chinese artists born more than forty years apart. This cross-generational study in personal and artistic resonance illuminates the nuanced ways artists converse across time and place. Developed in close collaboration with Kuo, *Twilight Child* features Wong's rarely exhibited biomorphic clay sculptures from the 1960s and '70s alongside selected paintings and archival materials from throughout his career. Kuo contributes recent photochemical paintings—including a new work created in response to Wong's poetry—and sculptural objects made at her family's Seattle-area industrial metal casting company.

In their works, both artists combine the influences of their Chinese heritage with their contemporary American realities and elements of fantasy. They each incorporate photography in unconventional ways, to stylistically divergent but conceptually related ends. Wong collaged photographs to compose his trompe l'oeil New York nightscapes of the 1980s, adding constellations and ASL fingerspelling to create dense compositions filled with coded languages. Kuo likewise achieves a densely patterned, shallow depth of field by superimposing photographs, masking, and painting gesturally with reactive chemicals on light-sensitive paper. Through their respective techniques, the artists underscore processes of translation and confound "straight" legibility.

The layering and hybridity present in these works suggest the pluralism of multicultural experience as well as a desire to integrate dualities such as chaos and control. For Kuo, this approach reflects a simultaneous interest in and ambivalence toward expressing cultural identity, "a confusion that can be productive to mine, an element of self that is both familiar and distant."

Antonia Kuo (born 1987, New York City) lives and works in New York. Her practice centers around recording, image making, and the potential of the photographic medium. Kuo creates her own intensive processes by which images and materials can be alchemically transformed. She often merges formal elements based on industrial materials and machine parts with intuitively derived natural forms and gestures. In her unique photochemical paintings she utilizes light-sensitive paper and photochemistry to capture light, time, and mark making, collapsing her drawing and painting practice with photographic materiality. Compound images are built up over multiple layers and remain tethered to some markers of representation but ultimately coalesce into an interpretative field of entropic energies and phenomena. Like her photochemical works, Kuo's sculptures serve as recordings of forms that are lost, obscured, and only partially remembered.

Martin Wong (born 1946, Portland, Oregon; died 1999, San Francisco) first exhibited work in his hometown of San Francisco in 1961. He lived in Humboldt County, California, on and off between 1964 and 1978, and he completed his undergraduate studies in ceramics at Humboldt State University in 1968. Wong's psychedelic paintings, sculptures, and calligraphy from this period include eclectic imagery drawn from Eastern mythologies, natural history, pop culture, and local scenes. In 1978, Wong moved to New York City. There he became associated with the cultural developments of the Lower East Side, cultivating an eccentric urban cowboy style while living in the Puerto Rican enclave of Loisaida. The artist's unique representational imagery—often rendered in minutely detailed yet graphic trompe l'oeil—encompasses the urban environment, the history and scenes of Chinatown, and homoerotic fantasies of firemen and prison inmates. Wong included astrological and American Sign Language fingerspelling iconography in much of his work, likening these to the inscriptions in ancient Chinese painting. He spent much of the final five years of his life in San Francisco and continued to paint up to the day of his death from complications related to AIDS.

Martin Wong's biography is adapted from information provided by the Martin Wong Foundation and P·P·O·W, New York. The Frye is grateful to the Foundation and P·P·O·W for generously providing access to Wong's artwork and archive and for sharing their expertise in support of Twilight Child.

Where the tangled darkness grows

Amanda Donnan in conversation with Antonia Kuo

Amanda Donnan: It has been such a pleasure working with you on *Twilight Child*, Antonia, both as an artist contributing (and developing new) work and as a curatorial thought partner on Martin Wong's practice. Before we turn to the connection with Martin, let's talk a bit about your work. There was a feeling of kismet during our first studio visit when you told me about your connection to the Seattle area, where you've been making sculptural work at your uncles' industrial casting company every year since graduate school. Most of the sculptures in the exhibition take the form of hollow ceramic molds that could be used for investment casting. In that process, the mold would be filled with molten bronze or aluminum, cooled, and then broken off to reveal the cast metal piece inside. So, in a sense, what we see would usually be the discarded shell.

Antonia Kuo: The ceramic molds used in investment casting are usually destroyed, but I've chosen to preserve this intermediate stage. I'm fortunate to have access to a family foundry; my father's family is from a mining town in Montana and has always been steeped in metal, so his brothers started metal casting foundries in the Seattle area. Because of this relationship, I've been granted the freedom to experiment with every aspect of the casting process. I enjoy learning material processes intimately to then subvert them in some way, playing with fundamental aspects of the material and process to achieve unexpected results. My ceramic sculptures are informed primarily by the foundry environment and industrial molds used to cast machine parts; the forms I create echo this machine language but develop intuitively and coalesce into embodied entities or totems that seem to express their own distinct personas.

AD: We've also included a few of your ink drawings and recent photochemical paintings made in your Brooklyn studio. The drawings are incredibly dense, detailed, unreal, landscapes that are mostly black, composed of shadow rather than positive shapes. Your photochemical paintings, too, involve processes that can be thought of as "reverse": photographic printing from negatives, masking out, and combining unpredictable light-reactive chemicals in full light instead of in a darkroom. Are all these connected in your mind, as different ways of approaching similar ideas?

AK: Definitely, on many levels. The drawings are the roots of my practice and continue as a throughline in the rest of my work. I bring drawing and my hand directly into the photochemical work—every piece is a dense container exploring micro/macro matter, energy, and transformation. At its core, my work investigates how images and forms are recorded and translated through technology and the hand.

I also think of the mold sculptures in relation to indexicality and photography: they are records of forms that are lost (they begin in wax, which is then melted out of the ceramic), a "negative" that relates to negative space as well as to the photographic negative. Not only am I interested in blurring the distinctions between media, but I also believe each can expand and elaborate the world I am building in its own way.

AD: Let's drill down a bit on the notions you raised of recording and translation, which are bound up with ideas of faithful reproduction. You use high-fidelity mediums like casting and photography in ways that deny their inherent capacity for realism, creating complex, layered images and abstract forms that blur distinctions as you said and also resist easy legibility. *Oculus* (2022) [see poster image on reverse], for example, contains conflicting visual cues: the flat, painterly "framing" abuts the receding pictorial space of the central photograph, which includes an image within an image that confuses the boundaries between the two.

Though stylistically quite different, Martin's work also defies categorization. It shifted pretty dramatically over the course of his career, from the calligraphic poetry, costumes, and stage sets for experimental "acid drag" performance troupes [the Cockettes and Angels of Light Free Theatre] and HR Giger-esque biomorphic ceramic forms of his 1960s-'70s Northern California period to the trompe l'oeil paintings and multi-canvas installations he made in New York in the '80s and '90s. His paintings are often a sort of microcosm of that multiplicity, involving a complex layering of disparate cultural references, languages, and double entendre.¹

You told me that, for you, this proclivity toward stacking and hybridity is related to expressing your cultural identity as an Asian American. Can you say more about that, in terms of your own life and work and what you see in Martin's?

AK: Martin's parents were Chinese immigrants, and his hometown was San Francisco; growing up around multiple languages and cultures must have impacted his pictographic language and issues around translation. It seems like he was consistently navigating otherness and outsiderhood while also integrating himself within local communities and cultures, his visual language a constant reflection of places he occupied. He also had complex feelings toward expressing his cultural identity, which I strongly relate to. I grew up not belonging to one or another identity as a multiracial person with a Buddhist Taiwanese mother and ex-Roman-Catholic-priest-turned-psychoanalyst American father, feeling an outsider identifying as queer in childhood, studying Chinese pictorial characters most of my life yet ultimately remaining illiterate. I also find translation to be one of the core principles of my work. I start with certain images and work and rework them, translating them through various processes to ultimately end up with an image that has been through many iterations. I enjoy collapsing and collaging, working with images as material.

Martin was constantly probing, trying to find avenues for expression through various mediums. I share this interdisciplinary thread with Martin and enjoy muddying the distinctions between media, like making work that exists between painting and photography and can't be classified as either one. Many of my chemical paintings are either directly painted with resists and chemistry or begin with drawings or photographs I've taken that are then applied to photosensitive paper by selectively blocking out areas. Successive layers are added with dyes and toners to further

complicate the image. Resultant images are never straightforward and require a slower, subjective interpretation from the viewer. I think my resistance to producing clear or easily decipherable images relates to how I navigate my identity and is also a response to how quickly we digest images in our current era.

AD: Though Martin is best known for his paintings of New York from the 1980s, this exhibition gives equal weight to the “peripheries” of his practice: the early ceramics, his late paintings, sketches, and some of the photocollages he used as reference material. It strikes me that, in terms of medium at least, the works most closely aligned with your photochemical paintings are Martin’s photocollages, though you never knew those existed until we started working on this project. Really the only way Martin’s work “showed up” directly in your work before now is in some sculptural forms loosely based on his hand-built ceramics, which were in turn inspired by natural history illustrations of extinct rugose corals among other sources. What was it about Martin’s life and work that resonated with you early on? How has it impacted your practice in ways that might not be immediately perceptible?

AK: I’ve been drawn to Martin’s work for a while, but it was his incredibly haptic early ceramics that most stubbornly stuck in my mind—one piece in particular, *Untitled (MW Was Here January 23 1970)*. What drew me to that work in particular was a small, vortex-like aperture in the center of a radiating Gothic spiked halo, emitting a powerful aura and a sense of deep interiority. At the foundry, I tried recalling that piece from memory to create a form in dialogue with Martin. When I had the pleasure of seeing Martin’s show at KW Institute in Berlin last year, I finally saw that ceramic piece after years of it living in my mind! Now working on the show with you, Amanda, I’ve been so touched and inspired to delve even deeper into his process, looking through his archives and ephemera, sketchbooks and source material.

I was thrilled to find that many of those ceramic works were made with clay sourced from local deposits and left outside to weather the elements. Some of the ceramics we saw in person for our research still had bits of dirt or leaves stuck in them. The patina of time in these works is fascinating and something I’m concerned with encapsulating in my own work. Martin also extensively photographed his ceramic sculptures in particular arrangements and settings like Gothic church niches and on stone plinths in public spaces, emphasizing the ritualistic and seemingly spiritual aspect of the ceramics, many of them adorned with long feathers sticking out the top like antennae. Only a few art objects have ever made me cry—one was an ancient Chinese bronze, most likely dating back to 1600 BCE. As you can imagine, it really had the patina of time! The early Chinese bronzes are so beautiful, meticulously crafted and were used by shamans during ritualistic performances as containers for food or wine. My mother told me that the shamans would break the molds off the bronze sculptures as an act of divine magic, revealing the stunning bronze inside as further proof of the Mandate of Heaven.² I think of Martin’s ceramic sculptures as containing a potent aura within this same ritualistic vein. Throughout his work there is a sense of poetic fantasy, but also a grounded quality that centers around what it means to be human—in relation to his communities and daily realities, scaled all the way up to forces of nature and the cosmological.

AD: Now that we’ve organized the exhibition, has your perception of Martin’s work, even of your own, changed?

AK: It has been such a rewarding experience working on this show, getting to know Martin on a more intimate level and creating new work in response. The most striking revelations in terms of threads we share have been his calligraphic poems from the late ’60s and the dynamic photocollages. The tone and imagery of the poems especially resonate with my recent photochemical paintings and my early landscape drawings. In the poems I’m thinking of, a protagonist describes his state of mind passing through shadowy, dreamy night scenes, where “tangled darkness grows” with glints of glimmering waters and starry skies. Discovering Martin’s photocollages hit me from left field, as I had no idea he ever made work that way. A large part of my practice is taking photographs from my daily life and environment that I then inject into the photochemical paintings, so it was really exciting to discover that photography played an essential role in his paintings. After working on this show, I’m very aware that Martin was building a constantly expanding world through so many different lenses and that I’m striving to do the same thing in my own way. In one archival photograph taken in his apartment studio, he is working on a painting leaning on many other paintings all stacked up on top of each other: images all butted up, a world of images!

¹ See Mark Dean Johnson, “Pieces of the Puzzle: Martin Wong’s Multiplicity” and the other essays available in the online Martin Wong catalogue raisonné, accessible at <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/martin-wong/feature/pieces-of-the-puzzle-martin-wong-s-multiplicity-mark-dean-johnson>.

² The artist disclosed this information was based on memory and is not historically factual.



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Twilight Child: Antonia Kuo and Martin Wong is organized by Amanda Donnan, former Chief Curator and Director of Exhibitions, with Georgia Erger, Associate Curator.

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Cover: Martin Wong with his work, July 1969. Photo: Gary Ware. Copyright Martin Wong Foundation. Courtesy of the Martin Wong Foundation and P·P·O·W, New York. Poster: Antonia Kuo. *Oculus*, 2022. Unique chemical painting on light-sensitive gelatin silver paper mounted on aluminum in welded aluminum frame. 70 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 56 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 2 in. Courtesy of the artist and Chapter NY, New York