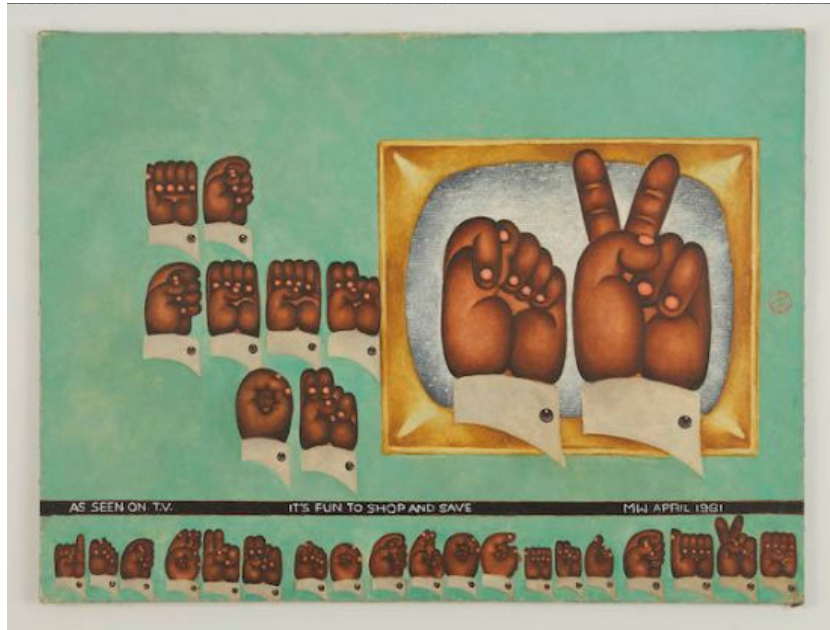


# SFGATE

Kenneth Baker | on March 20, 2015



**Martin Wong at CCA:** For something in a completely different creative register, see “Martin Wong: Painting Is Forbidden” at the [Wattis Institute of California College of the Arts](#) in San Francisco. Its title derives from a notebook entry by the artist that rather too casually likens a painter’s compulsion to a serial killer’s.

To see “Martin Wong,” you have to make your way through a bloodless constellation of over-thought, under-realized objects by Belgian collaborators Jos de Gruyter and [Harald Thys](#), but the Wong show will quickly eclipse it in memory.

Wong (1946-1999) grew up in San Francisco and died here, a victim of AIDS-related afflictions, but spent time in the 1970s and ’80s in gay and other subcultural circles in New York.

There he made paintings primarily, and wrote poems on scroll-like sheets of paper, perfecting a kind of obsessive calligraphy not quite illegible but tending to defeat even a committed reader.

Wong’s undated poem “Chapter 11 Scarry Night” begins as a fantasy narrative of the violent falling-out between [Vincent van Gogh](#) and [Paul Gauguin](#), a sort of origin myth of Vincent’s famous painting “Starry Night,” but readers will soon find themselves losing the thread among the downward-sloping tines of Wong’s upper-case E’s and the arrowheads of his D’s. Still, the title’s nice play on

“starry,” “scary” and “scarry” — that is, leaving scars — lingers in the mind. Wong’s idiosyncratic spelling and phrasing often leave a viewer wondering at what level he knew what he was doing, and in what sense it matters.

Wong had a prodigious drawing hand, capable both of forming convincing likenesses and of spinning off wildly into seemingly psychedelic invention.

Some of his ceramics suggest outsider art curiosities, others, unidentified fossils or incised grave markers.

Wong’s work has enjoyed growing posthumous recognition recently. In 2012, Vietnamese American artist [Danh Vo](#) took advantage of winning the [Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum](#)’s Hugo Boss Prize to bring before New Yorkers a vast trove of artifacts that Wong had collected, many of which fed his art in one way or another.

The CCA show offers the Bay Area the deepest look at Wong’s work that it has ever had. Congratulations to the college’s 2015 graduate class in curatorial practice, whose project this is.