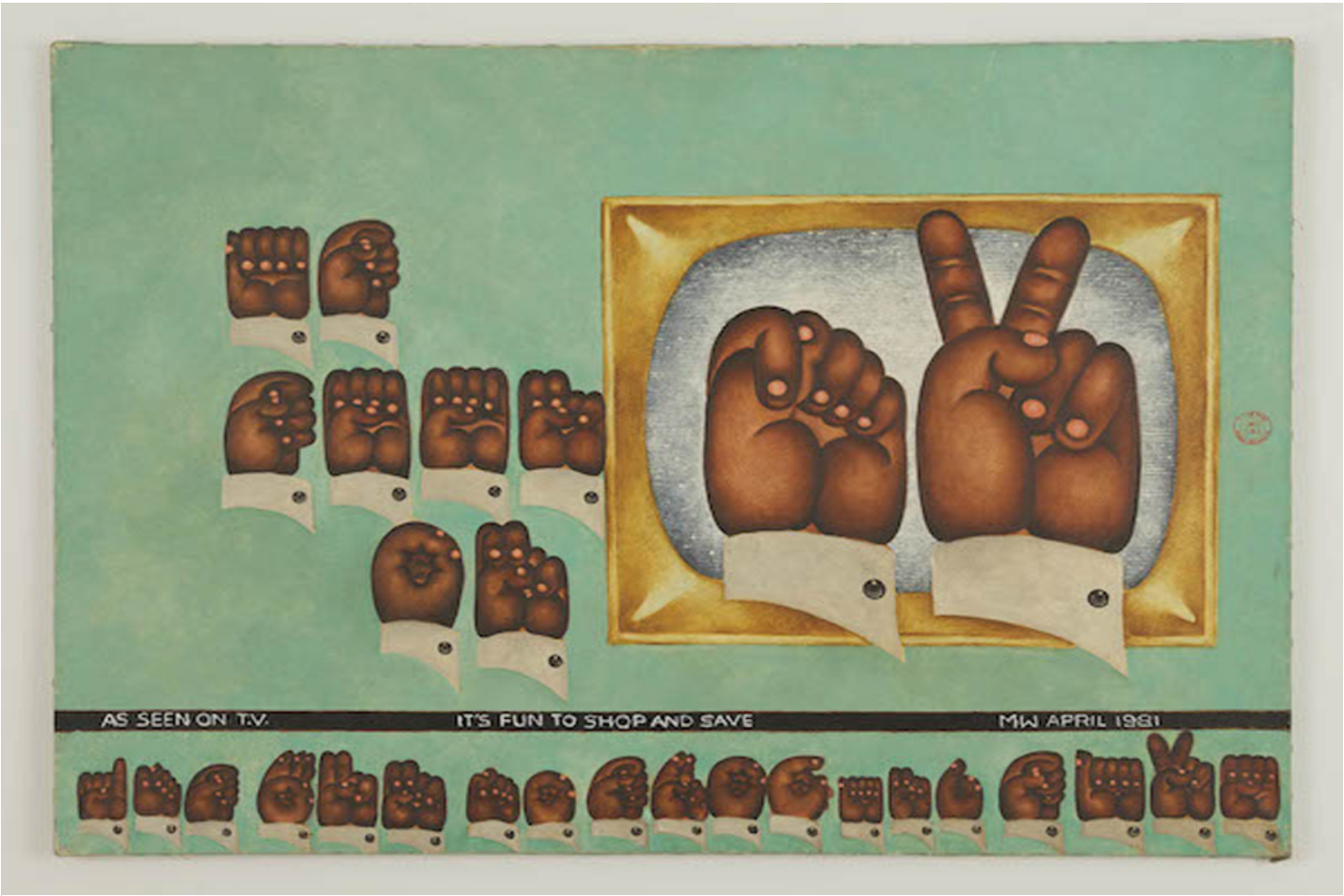
IN "MARTIN WONG: PAINTING IS FORBIDDEN," THE WATTIS INSTITUTE LARGELY SIDESTEPS PAINTING

BY BEN DAVIS (HTTP://MOMUS.CA/AUTHOR/BEN-DAVIS/) • • APRIL 17, 2015



As Seen on T.V.—It's Martin Wong, "Fun to Shop and Save," 1981. Courtesy of the Estate of Martin Wong and P.P.O.W Gallery, New York.

"Basically everything I paint is in my immediate neighborhood, where I ended up," Martin Wong said in a lecture in 1991. "So, people assume that I'm a local New York painter, but really I'm from San Francisco."

That could also more or less be the thesis of *Martin Wong: Painting is Forbidden*,(http://www.wattis.org/view?id=188) currently up (through April 18) at the Wattis Institute(http://www.wattis.org/) in San Francisco. Organized by members of the Curatorial Practice program at the California College of the Arts, the modest but wide-ranging show brings together some 150 pieces, both works by the artist and previously unseen ephemera. It shows an overlooked side of a major figure, but also, through his story, offers a glimpse of the now-passed creative world of 1960s and 70s counterculture that formed him.

These days, Wong has a kind mythic cachet, connected to his life "where he ended up," that is, the Lower East Side in its gritty-glamorous '70s and '80s phase (a few years after that talk at the San Francisco Art Institute(http://www.sanfranciscoartinstitute.org/), Wong returned home to the Bay Area, where he would die of an AIDS-related illness in 1999). He

was displayed at the Museum of the City of New York's *City as Canvas* show this past year(http://www.mcny.org/content/city-canvas), and is burned into the memory of the era through his defiantly colorful, cowboy-hatted persona.

Artistically, Wong's paintings cast a long shadow over everything else (a selection was featured as part of the show-within-a-show at the Whitney Biennial last year(http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/2014Biennial/JulieAult)). His self-taught but savvy style channels the look of urban folk art, with his own quirky set of leitmotifs: desolate landscapes of brick walls and chain link fences that evoke the era's disarray; rows of cartoon hands spelling out phrases in American sign language; kissing firemen; images of, or inspired by, the life and art of Miguel Piñero(http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/miguel-pinero), the playwright and founder of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe(http://www.nuyorican.org/), as well as Wong's lover and sometimes collaborator.

The Wattis show, sadly, does not give a true sense of Wong's abilities as a painter. It features only one canvas, the large diptych *Sweet 'Enuff*(1988), on loan from the de Young Museum(https://art.famsf.org/martin-wong/sweet-enuff-2007103a-b). On the left panel, a pair of firemen observe a man, collapsed or asleep, hunched over a boombox. In the facing panel, three youths are suspended in the air in a heroic moment of skateboarding derring-do, sailing improbably towards freedom over the crest of a barbed-wire fence. At the top of the canvas is one of Wong's classic romantic touches: the sky is webbed with gold, forming the outlines of hands spelling out the painting's title in sign language, and tracing the constellations in the sky, each of them labeled – Leo, Virgo, Ursa Major.

Most of the Wattis show is dedicated to Wong's more peripheral material, much of it from before he moved to New York in 1978: small early ceramics, some of angels and monsters, from his student days at Humboldt State University in Eureka, California; sketchbook pages; and a large selection of scroll-like text paintings rendering his febrile poems in dense, spidery calligraphy. The text paintings capture a very characteristic tension in Wong's whole artistic approach: his writing radiates passionate and urgent need to say something; but the stylized-to-the-point-of illegibility style puts up a barrier, making that something hard to access.