

Bricks and Jails: On Martin Wong's Queer Fantasies

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Both a realist and a fantasist, Martin Wong captured the life and landscape of his Lower East Side neighborhoods in paintings of storefronts, back alleys, high rises, and their inhabitants—places signaled by the ubiquitous bricks in his paintings. At the same time, he was the painter of erotic dreams of prisoners, firemen, and sky-borne symbols and codes. Wong's reputation rests on the tenderness and commitment with which he documented these environments while also conjuring the ways his desires might fill them. Those desires came to center an unabashedly homoerotic perspective in which fireman passionately kiss, prisoners confess unrequited love for each other, or brick-faced urban buildings are reimagined as towering penises.

During the 1980s, Wong's paintings of queer fantasy contributed to a newly emergent boldness in the representation of homoeroticism, same-gender desire, and queer life. The decade had been wracked by the global AIDS pandemic, censorious attempts to erase and suppress queer artistic expression, legal injunctions on same-gender sex and relationships, and a punitively limited discussion of queer life in national mainstream media that reduced it to charges of contagion, pathology, and criminality. In New York City especially, those working in art, theater, film, and dance became increasingly strident in demanding self-representation over the course of the decade. The representation of queer life in the 1980s was a political and contentious act made in opposition to forces that would see it erased. Wong's paintings reflect this increasing impatience and frankness about the need for queer representation, and in the mid- to late 1980s he became more unabashed, subversive, and committed to depicting homoeroticism. Through his paintings Wong dreamed of situations in which same-gender desire, sex, and love burst into the everyday. In the agonistic and homophobic environment of 1980s America, such dreams were defiant.

Wong populated his fantasy landscapes with queer antiheroes and heroes, and those paintings that were most direct in their engagement with homoeroticism and queer life were of prisoners and firemen. Prisoners, in particular, occupied Wong's imagination, and he built from friends' and lovers' accounts of incarceration a narrative of sexual potential and conflict. These are complex works, and they balance advocacy and prurience in dreamlike scenes of sexually charged prison encounters and the intimate dramas of prison life. Wong cast his inmates as objects of both compassion and desire, and his paintings reflect the interdependence of his identification with and objectification of his prison subjects.

In focusing on these important, yet conflicted, attempts to visualize queer desire, I follow Wong's own

1 Yasmin Ramirez, “Chino-Latino: The Loïsaida Interview,” in *Martin Wong: Human Instamatic*, ed. Antonio Sergio Bessa, exh. cat. The Bronx Museum of the Arts (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2015), 116.

statement of his priorities. In a 1996 interview, Yasmin Ramirez asked him, “What would you consider as Classic Martin Wong themes?” To which he replied, “Bricks and jails.”¹ However terse, this formula aptly describes what we might see as the two main obsessions of his practice. Bricks seem evident, since Wong painted brick buildings, brick frames, brick walls, and covered other objects with skins of bricks. But, in this statement, Wong gave equal emphasis to the smaller group of prison paintings with their white, cloudlike interiors that were visually distinct from those red-bricked street scenes.

The series of prison paintings began in 1984 and continued for over a decade, with the majority of them in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Earlier in the 1980s, he had more often hinted at queer content—as with the book spines of the 1981 painting *Voices* (which include “New York After Dark” and the double entendre “Fishing For Boys”; p. 80) or with the implication of cruising in *Stanton near Forsyth Street* (1983; p. 106). However, the prison pictures became the format through which he began to more directly and consistently depict images of intimacy between men. The bulk of the prison paintings were rarely seen, and some are lost. However, the remaining works and documentation of lost paintings nevertheless indicates how much Wong invested in them as his most open and explicit depictions of queer desire.

Whereas Wong’s paintings of Lower East Side communities, buildings, and storefronts were based on careful observation, the prison paintings were conjured from others’

Fig. 1
Martin Wong, *Untitled*
(*Pop-Eye*), ca. 1984
approx. 45.7 × 61 cm



- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Miguel Piñero, *Short Eyes* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).
- 4 See Yasmin Ramirez, "La Vida: The Life and Writings of Miguel Piñero in the Art of Martin Wong," in *Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong*, ed. Amy Scholder, exh. cat. Illinois State University Galleries, Normal; New Museum of Contemporary Art (New York: Rizzoli, 1998), 32–47. For a discussion of the queer themes of Piñero's practice, see Karen Jaime, "Walking Poetry in Loisaída," in *The Queer Nuyorican: Racialized Sexualities and Aesthetics in Loisaída* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 27–55.
- 5 Ramirez, "La Vida," 47n17. Wong often used photographs, images from magazines, and other found imagery to compose his works. For instance, in their detailed account of one of the prison pictures, the 1988 *Portrait of Mikey Piñero Tattooing*, Tanya Gayer and Julian Myers-Szupinska discuss how such source material was used and obscured in order to both locate Piñero in prison but also abstract that scene. See their essay "The Actionability of the Archive," in *My Trip to America by Martin Wong*, ed. Caitlin Burkhart and Julian Myers-Szupinska (San Francisco: California College of the Arts, 2015), 22–23.
- 6 Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 25.
- 7 Antonio Sergio Bessa, "Dropping Out: Martin Wong and the American Counterculture," in *Martin Wong: Human Instamatic*, ed. Bessa, 22. Bessa also provides a list of the prison-related books in Wong's archive (22n17).

recollections. Wong had little direct experience of incarceration; he once claimed that he had only spent one night in jail.² His knowledge and fascination with prisons derived in large part from his relationship with the poet and playwright Miguel Piñero, most remembered for his involvement in establishing the Nuyorican Poets Cafe and for his complex account of divided ethics and loyalties among prisoners in his award-winning 1974 play *Short Eyes*.³ Wong and Piñero met in 1982; the two became collaborators, friends, and lovers, living together for a year and a half. Wong's understanding of prison life was determined by his years with Piñero, and Wong's image of prison was consequently infused with desire, love, friendship, and fantasy.⁴ Piñero was not his only guide; Wong also heard the reminiscences of Piñero's friends and others. Another artist friend who had been incarcerated, James Rivera, had made drawings while in prison that he subsequently sold to Wong and that became some of the source material for the prison paintings of the late 1980s.⁵ Despite having little direct experience of prison, Wong gradually amassed a compendium of stories and imagery from lovers and friends. As happens, these reminiscences were likely reshaped as narratives that created dramas, heroes, villains, and other incomplete visions of what day-to-day life was like. It was this second-hand history of prison life (as well as his reading of Piñero's work) that fueled Wong's paintings from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s. While Wong's depictions were informed by these intimacies, it is also important to recognize that Wong's paintings do not reflect what Nicole Fleetwood has astutely characterized as "carceral aesthetics," or "the production of art under the conditions of unfreedom."⁶

Wong's works derived not from the experience of unfreedom and incarceration, but, rather, from his loving and desirous identification with those men he knew who had created art, drama, or poetry in and about prison. Wong's accounts of incarceration came to be infused not just with stories told to him by intimates but also with his fantasies about prison life and prisoners, a topic which he avidly pursued. As Antonio Sergio Bessa noted, Wong came to have a "serious interest, if not pure obsession, in the matter" and read many books on the topic of prison life during this time.⁷ Wong's paintings of prison life are two-fold. They reflect the intimacy of the stories and images shared with him by people he knew, loved, and respected. But, at the same time, they have little to do with the actual experience of punitive captivity; instead, they imagine the same-gender environment of the prison, almost singly, as one of homoeroticism and sexual potential. These cross-purposed but mutually reinforcing themes underwrite these most overtly queer of Wong's works.

[from pp. 212–13]



Martin Wong, *The Annunciation According to Mikey Piñero (Cupcake and Paco)*, 1984. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 72 in. Syracuse University Art Museum

Wong made his first prison painting, the 1984 *The Annunciation According to Mikey Piñero (Cupcake and Paco)* (pp. 212–213), by loosely adapting a scene from Piñero's *Short Eyes*. In the play, a pivotal interaction occurs between two Puerto Rican men in the group shower: Paco, a seasoned and turbulent inmate, propositions the newly arrived Cupcakes only to be rebuffed. This scene sets in motion the core plot of the play in which that confession of desire becomes displaced and amplified, leading to a collective act of vigilantism in which a white prisoner, convicted of child molestation, is raped and killed. On the painting itself, Wong inscribed their names and, accidentally or not, changed "Cupcakes" to "Cupcake." The text of the shower dialogue (in its original Spanish) between Paco and Cupcakes is also written on the painting, leaving little doubt about the content of their interaction. The dialogue text is verbatim, but Wong made two significant alterations: he shifted the location of the scene from the group shower to a prison cell, and he added a third character, the prison guard Mr. Nett, who now looks on through the bars in Wong's painting (this recalls a moment much later in the play when Nett is complicit in the murder). Further modifying his source, Wong drew upon Christian iconography to style the scene after the composition of the Annunciation. This reference served to make this declaration of love sacred—despite its conditions and the harshness of Piñero's dialogue. On the wall behind the two men, a prominently drawn rose references the work of Jean Genet and its eroticization of criminality. With all of these adaptations, Wong's painting utterly transforms the desperate sordidness of Piñero's narrative into a scene that is vulnerable, tragic, holy, homoerotic, and heroic. *The Annunciation According to Mikey Piñero* sanctifies its frank depiction of same-gender desire and elevates its protagonists.

Wong's handling of the prison cell, with the dominance of white, stands in contrast to the ruddy reds and browns that characterize his paintings of urban buildings and their interiors. In that same 1996 interview quoted at the outset, Wong elucidated his two-part formula of "bricks and jails," explaining, "My jails are white on white because you know, some of the brick paintings were kind of brick colored. As a relief, I would paint a jail painting where it was white on white, but you wanna leave the flesh tones."⁸ This is an important comment because it articulates concisely how much the prison paintings (and their homoerotic content) were seen by Wong as categorically different from his red-bricked street scenes. While those were observed from the walls that surrounded the inhabitants of his neighborhoods, the prisons were, by contrast, never directly seen. They were stage sets for his fantasies, and their white palette continued in

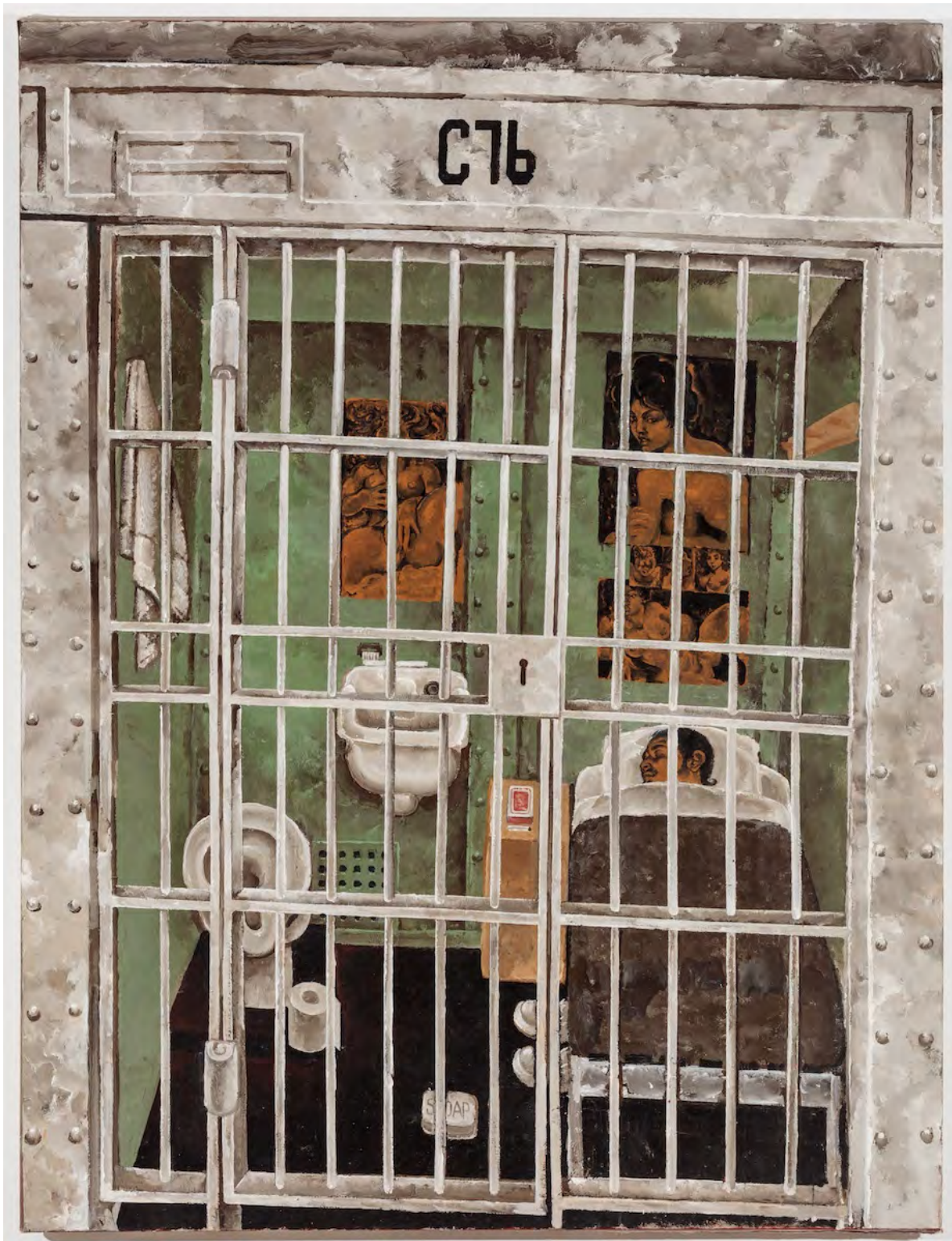
all of his subsequent prison pictures. These now brightened interiors also became, as Wong developed his series, increasingly less specific, more atmospheric, and cloudlike.

In addition to their white interiors, many of his prison paintings were also characterized by the formal device of looking through bars or apertures. Wong's paintings both block visual entry into the picture (through their grids of bars or walls) and invite intrusive inspection of those spaces. In this way, they thematize the visual vulnerability of constant surveillance that is a central feature of the panoptic prison. For instance, two of the earliest prison pictures Wong made after the *Annunciation*, the 1985 *Lock-Up* (p. 214) and the 1986 *Cell Door Slot* (p. 215), emphasize the act of being looked at or looking out. In *Cell Door Slot*, the representation of the inmate has been reduced to searching eyes that peer out from a small aperture engulfed by the white bars

Fig. 2
Martin Wong, *Cupcake and Paco (Corot)*, 1988
Acrylic on canvas
152.4 × 121.9 cm



[from p. 214]



Martin Wong, *Lock-Up*, 1985. Acrylic on canvas, 92 x 70 in.

[from p.215]



Martin Wong, *Cell Door Slot*, 1986. Acrylic on canvas, 18 x 28 in.

- 9 Aaron “Sharp” Goodstone recollection, in Sean Corcoran and Carlo McCormick, eds., *City as Canvas: New York City Graffiti from the Martin Wong Collection*, exh. cat. Museum of the City of New York (New York: Skira/Rizzoli, 2013), 233.
- 10 Here I am thinking in particular of *Iglesia Penticostal* (1986), which has the same cloudlike handling as the prison pictures. This painting, as with the religious imagery in *The Annunciation*, collapses the quotidian with the heavenly in its depiction of a shuttered church. Perhaps to differentiate this theme from the ways in which this palette came to characterize the prison pictures, Wong painted another church facade painting, *La Iglesia de Dios* (1986), with a sky theme—but this time in blue.
- 11 Wong, in Ramirez, “Chino-Latino,” 116.

that surround it on the door. In the near life-size painting (at over 2.3 meters) *Lock-Up*, we see a portrait of Wong’s friend, the artist and graffiti writer Sharp (Aaron Goodstone), sleeping. As Sharp later remarked, “I sleep in the painting because I, like those other [graffiti] kids had no fear.”⁹ Wong painted his sleeping friend seen through the bars into a cell decorated with pornographic images of women masturbating. With this ad hoc gallery of erotica, the solitary prisoner is showcased first and foremost as characterized by sexual desire (and, implicitly, its frustration due to punitive confinement). Such an emphasis reflects Wong’s fascination with prison as infused with the question of sexual potential and with the ways in which it was voyeuristically available to others because of the denial of privacy for inmates. Wong was deliberate about the details in this important painting and its staging of the visual intrusion. In particular, the sexual undercurrent of Wong’s view of incarcerated life is indicated not just by the pornographic drawings on the wall but also, tellingly, by the bar of soap that lies prominently in the foreground at the foot of the painting. (I will return to this imagery in a moment.)

The Annunciation, *Lock-Up*, and *Cell Door Slot* are among the very earliest of Wong’s prison paintings, and all are characterized by a treatment of the steel and concrete built environment of the prison as white, cloudy, and almost otherworldly. He only occasionally used this cloudy grisaille in paintings on other themes.¹⁰ Consequently, it seems important to investigate further Wong’s claims about how this whiteness was both contrasted to his brick paintings and how it was used in relation to skin color—as Wong said, they are “white on white, but you wanna leave the flesh tones.”¹¹ In the initial prison painting, *The Annunciation According to Mikey Piñero*, the whiteness of its walls and the clothes contrast with the skin of Cupcakes and Paco—who are, following Piñero’s use of “negrito” in the lines of dialogue written on the painting, themselves further racially distinguished, with the Afro-diasporic heritage of Puerto Rico signaled through Cupcakes’s darker skin. This deliberate attention to the skin of the two men as the only deviation from the grisaille whiteness of the environment serves to visually reinforce the painting’s focal point on the intense intersubjective dynamic happening between them. The white Mr. Nett, however, is almost indistinguishable from the walls and the bars through which he peers. Despite his lack of visual prominence, Wong also identified him with a written name as he had with the two protagonists, and we should recall that it was Wong who added him to this scene (unlike in *Short Eyes*). Interestingly, in the commentary on this picture, Nett’s presence is rarely mentioned other than briefly, perhaps because of the ways in which

- 12 However, Wong would characteristically deny any political content for these paintings. For instance, he recalled in 1991, "One time *New York Magazine* called Exit [Art] to get transparencies for this [painting]. They wanted to use it as an illustration. Some people assume because I paint this subject I'm really political or something. The caption they printed was some guy saying that he thought New York should try juvenile offenders as adults." Martin Wong, "It's Easier To Paint a Store If It's Closed," in *My Trip to America*, ed. Burkhart and Myers-Szupinska, 94. Wong was referring to the 1985 *Lock-Up*, a partial detail of which was reproduced as an illustration for Kevin Phillips, "Shrinking Ambitions," *New York Magazine*, November 26, 1990, 39–40. The short essay was one of many included in the magazine's forum on "How to Save New York." Interestingly, the illustration of the detail of Wong's painting was also on the same page as Larry Kramer's contribution, "Equal Love" (p. 39).
- 13 Ramirez said this most directly and clearly in her presentation at the November 11, 2017 symposium on Wong's work. BAMPFA, "Roundtable Discussion: Martin Wong in New York," YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXqN4kToHz0>. See also Ramirez, "Chino-Latino."
- 14 Roy Pérez, "The Glory That Was Wrong: El 'Chino Malo' Approximates Nuyorico," *Women & Performance* 25, no. 3 (Spring 2015): 282.
- 15 On the Chinatown works, see especially Lydia Yee, "Martin Wong's Picture Perfect Chinatown," in *Sweet Oblivion*, ed. Scholder, 53–63; *Martin Wong's Utopia: A Peaceful and Heavenly Place / Taiping Tien Quo*, exh. cat. Chinese Historical Society of America Museum and Learning Center (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America, 2004); Rui Tang, "The Dynamic: Martin Wong and the Asian American Community," in *My Trip to America*, ed. Burkhart and Myers-Szupinska, 103–12; and Marci Kwon, "A Secret History of Martin Wong," in *The Present Prospects of Social Art History*, ed. Robert Slifkin and Anthony E. Grudin (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2021), 113–30.
- 16 Pérez, "The Glory That Was Wrong," 281.

he chromatically blends into the white environment of the prison. He is, however, the third actor in this new scene imagined by Wong, creating a trinity in which the message of love being spoken by Paco to Cupcakes is lorded over by the watchful yet spectral presence of the prison guard. Following the Annunciation's iconography, Mr. Nett's role above this earthly scene is one of deific authority. I believe this positioning was strategic, as it works in conjunction with the whiteness with which Wong rendered Mr. Nett to make him coextensive with and indistinguishable from the prison walls. Effectively, these choices seem to equate the white guard with the dominating power of incarceration itself—and incarceration is the ground against which the humanity and drama of Paco and Cupcakes is set in relief.¹²

In Wong's depicted dramas of prison life, the protagonists were almost always Puerto Rican and/or Black. This focus derived not just from Wong's source in Piñero but also his wider engagements with the Lower East Side neighborhoods that provided him with much of his other paintings' subject matter. Throughout his work, Wong made an ardent attempt to bridge perceived differences, and his paintings and poems relay his affections and identifications with other people and communities of color. Wong's position is vastly more complex than that of the outsider looking in. Ramirez has argued that Wong is best understood as a first-generation Chino-Latino artist who forged an identity out of these identifications and engagements with communities of color.¹³ Further, Roy Pérez has brilliantly discussed Wong's earnest yet tangled and incomplete relationships with *latinidad* and *Loisaida* (as the Latinx neighborhood in the Lower East Side was called by its residents). As he argued, "Through his poetics of lack and excess, Wong offers us approximations of *latinidad* full of productive misreads that do not fail to capture *latinidad* but in their imaginative captivation produce new ways of seeing Latina/o."¹⁴ In later paintings, Wong also turned attention to Chinatown, expanding his account of the complexity and depth of the multiple communities of color in which he was a participant.¹⁵ In all of Wong's work, there is a complex mixture of sympathy, exoticization, belonging, identification, advocacy, appropriation, and poetry in his representations of other people of color, and Wong is exemplary for the ways in which his position short-circuits single-issue accounts of identities. For instance, in contrast to a binaristic accounting of identities across differences (such as Latino vs. Asian or insider vs. outsider), Pérez considered Wong's "erotic and romantic depictions of the Puerto Rican body as an important archive of cross-racial contact that troubles deterministic and culturally facile conceptions of *latinidad* in which *being* too easily trumps *doing*."¹⁶

- 17 This understanding of prison sexual culture was popularized as the “deprivation model” following on the argument made in Gresham M. Sykes, *The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958).
- 18 The facilitation of same-gender sexual violence as a structural condition of American prisons (and the public fantasies about it) has a long literature, starting with the 1934 book by Joseph F. Fishman, *Sex in Prisons: Revealing Sex Conditions in American Prisons* (New York: National Library Press, 1934).

In the prison paintings, nevertheless, there is a more fraught relationship between sympathetic identification and desirous objectification, and the mise-en-scène of these paintings was shaped by Wong’s fantasies about the sexual undercurrents produced by the same-gender segregation of the carceral system. Unlike the paintings of the neighborhoods and communities of which he was a part, these works depict an environment he did not experience. By contrast, they are fabrications, and Wong populated his imagined prisons with images of Puerto Rican men who doubled as martyrs and as objects of desire. There is an uneasy tension in Wong’s work between his projective homoerotic fantasies about prison life and what I nevertheless see as his compassionate attempt to demand dignity for the incarcerated. With this in mind, the whiteness of the prison interiors seems twofold: it can be read (as in *The Annunciation*) as a critique of the whiteness of carceral power and its systemic targeting of men of color, and, concurrently, as conjuring an unreal and dreamlike space of erotic potential and desire imagined to be engendered by that captivity.

The predominant theme of the prison paintings is Wong’s fascination with the ways in which the gender-segregated environment of prison facilitated sex and desire between men. A significant proportion of these paintings imply or outright depict rape. This is perhaps clearest in his use of the iconography of soap. A widely repeated, crass, and homophobic joke about prison life was that the accidental dropping of a bar of soap in the shower would incite sexually deprived men (presumed to be otherwise heterosexual) to engage in same-gender desire (both unconsensual and consensual).¹⁷ The joke about soap crystallized the dehumanizing conditions of prisons by relying on a homophobic characterization of same-gender sexuality as shameful (and, further, as justifiable punishment for felons).¹⁸ The shower scene from Piñero’s play engages with these mythologies, and it is significant that Wong removed that context for Paco’s declaration of love. However, he would come to signal it in later paintings through the depiction of soap on the floor. In the prison painting that followed the *Annunciation*—the monumental 1985 *Lock-Up*—Wong painted the bar of soap unmistakably on the floor in the foreground (even spacing its letters so we can still see all of the letters spelling “soap” between the bars). This was a highly coded, but nevertheless assertive, registration of the potential for same-gender sexual activity. Wong repainted the 1985 *Lock-Up* (with its bar of soap in the foreground) in 1988 as the smaller painting *C-76, Junior* (fig. 3). In this new version, the cloudy whiteness of the environment overtakes the image of the sleeping inmate, obscuring most of the cell. The images of women are gone from the walls, but

Fig. 3
Martin Wong, *C-76, Junior*, 1988
Acrylic on canvas
73.6 × 48.2 cm





Fig. 4
Martin Wong,
Soap, ca. 1991
Acrylic on board
76.2 × 86.4 cm

- 19 Wong stated that he purchased a second-hand painting (mainly for its elaborate frame), and the frame had a tag with the name “Corot” on it. Wong, “It’s Easier,” 95.
- 20 For instance, an undated poem written in Wong’s calligraphic rendering of sign language contains the lines: “his body had the strong odor / of cypress and axle grease / and whenever he’d ripened / I’d get drunk off the smell.” Transcription from the Guide to the Martin Wong Papers, Fales Library, New York University (MSS.102, Series II, Box 15).

the bar of soap lying on the floor at the bottom of the painting remains as an unmistakable indication of the sexual theme. An undated grisaille painting, *Soap* (fig. 4), links the bar of soap to the image of rape through its pairing with a set of handcuffs, one of which is fastened to cell bars. And, if we needed further confirmation of how this image came to stand in for prison sex in Wong’s paintings, we need only note the title of his 1991 exhibition at New York’s Pyramid Club—*Soap: Erotic Jail Paintings*.

Not all of Wong’s prison paintings are overt in their depictions of intimacy or sex. Some merely depict prisoners sleeping. Even those works, however, emphasize the proximities and intimacies between men in close quarters or imply that incarceration and deprivation are the conditions for a concentration of pent-up sexual desire and potential (as with the posters and soap in *Lock-Up* or, a later painting, *Reckless*, which depicts an unclothed inmate in bed, his hand reaching under his sheets). Across his prison paintings, an underlying theme was Wong’s criticism of the conditions and cruelty of prison life—even as he filtered it through pornographic and erotic scripts about prison sex. Many of the paintings attempted to resolve these cross-purposes by casting inmates as simultaneously martyr-like and eroticized (again following a pattern set by others such as Genet). Religious themes recur in the prison paintings. The *Annunciation* painting remained a touchstone for Wong, and he repainted it in a smaller format in 1988 with the title *Cupcake and Paco (Corot)* (fig. 2), linking it to the French painter famous for his landscapes in which a distant light was visible through middle and foregrounds dominated by shadow.¹⁹ This was one of a few paintings that Wong recreated at a different scale in the late 1980s; both *The Annunciation* and *Lock-Up* have second, smaller versions. A painting from 1984, *INRI*, became, in 1990, a more overtly religious prison picture, the *Sacred Shroud of Pepe Turcel*, in which a sweat-stained tank top covers a back tattoo with Turcel’s name astride a Crucifixion (p. 220). Swirling around the figure in the later octagonal painting is Wong’s cloud-white prison interior that the original painting lacked. This new prison painting linked the dirty garment to the Holy Shroud of Turin as a way of further casting the suffering of inmates as both sacred and sacrificial. However, this focus on the T-shirt cannot be seen as entirely separate from an erotic fascination with the sweaty undergarment or with Wong’s other works about the erotics of smell (as with the work, *I Really Like the Way Firemen Smell* (p. 202), discussed below).²⁰

Beyond such paintings that rely on iconography—be it the bar of soap or the Crucifixion—to imply or evoke homoerotic desire, Wong also boldly painted explicit sexual

- 21 Julie Ault, "Martin Wong Was Here," in *Martin Wong: Human Instamatic*, ed. Bessa, 83–96.
- 22 Due to the inaccessibility of the Martin Wong archive during the COVID-19 pandemic, I have been unable to further investigate the details of this exhibition or its contents.
- 23 For a recent statement on the need to take pornography seriously as history, see João Florêncio and Ben Miller, "Sexing the Archive: Gay Porn and Subcultural Histories," *Radical History Review* 142 (January 2022): 133–41.

scenes of prison life. In perhaps the best account of the queer themes in Wong's work to date, Julie Ault discussed an installation of prison paintings (including *Cell Door Slot*, p. 215) that Wong hung in his neighbor's apartment (fig. 6).²¹ In addition to the imagery of prison walls, there are paintings of anal insertion, a gang rape, and two guards presumably violating a naked inmate. It is likely that some of these were among the paintings Wong showed in *Soap: Erotic Jail Paintings* in 1990.²²

Wong often worked from photographs he either took or found, and some of these scenes were likely sourced, directly or indirectly, from pornography. To recognize this borrowing is not to dismiss Wong's paintings. Rather, the connection to pornography is a way of seeing how Wong's paintings are more than individual expressions of fantasy; they reflect larger cultural patterns.²³ In the photograph of the installation in his neighbor's apartment, one can see the reliance on pornography in the ways in which the bodies have been angled for maximum visibility. Overall, the ensemble of five paintings created a dramatic narrative of voyeuristic looking as if it were a storyboard for a film's shots and countershots. In this drama, the viewer's own gaze is reflected back by the eyes of *Cell Door Slot*, making it clear how much the sexual agonisms of Wong's prison fantasies were tied up with being looked at—and being able to look. These works critically address the constant surveillance of prison life and the ubiquity of prison rape (including by guards, who have historically been perpetrators of a significant portion of the sexual violence reported in prison). At the same time, however, they partake in a scopophilia in which sexual violence against others is eroticized for the viewer. That is, these paintings convey contradictory aims: they replay a fantasy of prison sex even as they, concurrently, can be understood to present a case against the dehumanizing conditions of punitive captivity. Such mixed feelings run through all of Wong's prison pictures and their unresolved identifications.

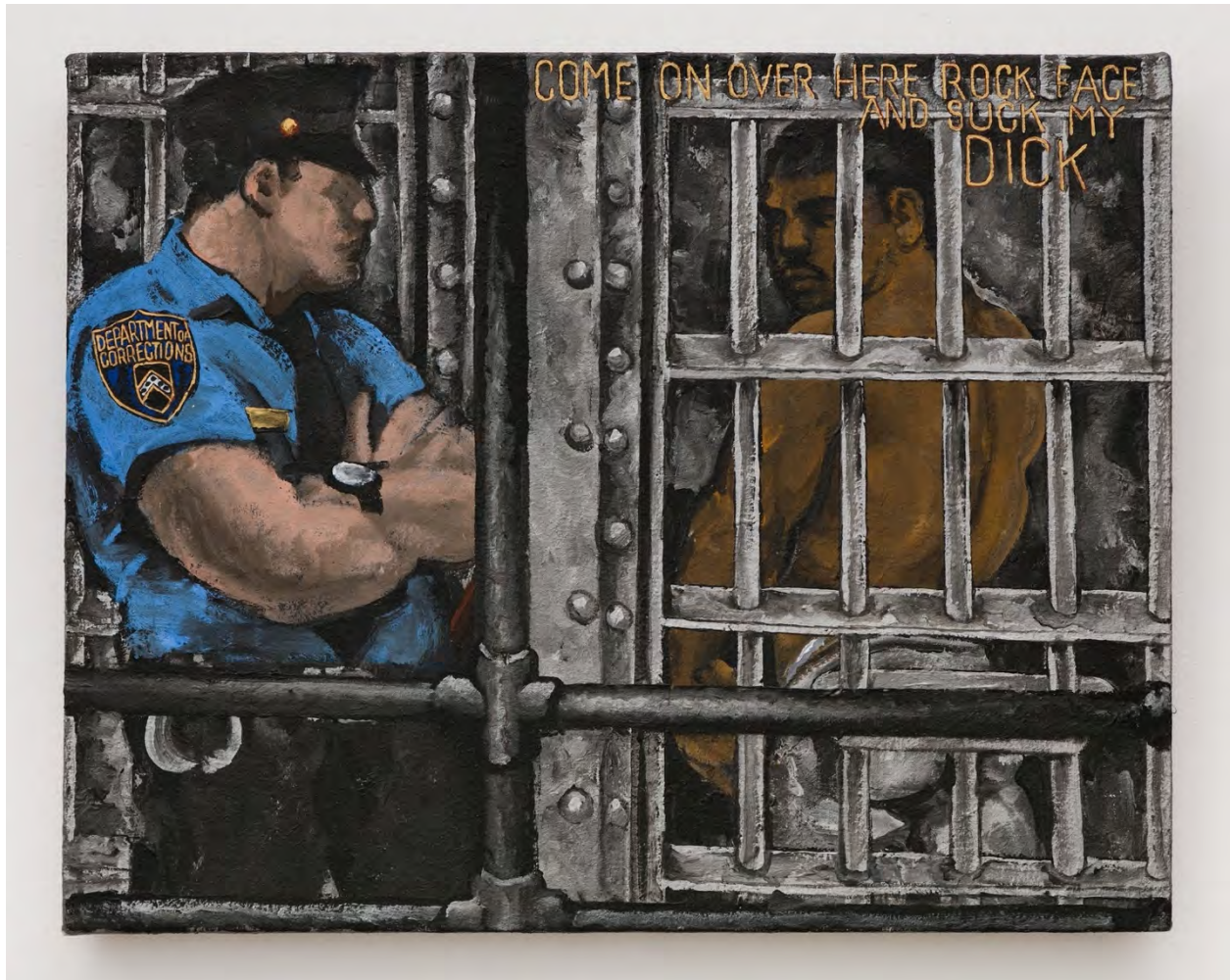
Many of the paintings hung on his neighbor's wall have been lost, but Wong later incorporated one of them in a composite work, *Mintaka* (1990; fig. 7), that more directly juxtaposed depictions of anal sex with a critical view of their carceral context. The painting of the three men from the earlier apartment installation was paired with two other paintings: one of sex between inmates (swathed in Wong's cloudy grisaille atmosphere), and a depiction of the view from inside a prison yard with words and diagrams identifying constellations of stars overhead. *Mintaka* establishes a comparison between the painting of the three-way scene (that is presumably an image of rape due to the knife held by one of the tops) and the three stars in the constellation

Fig. 5
Martin Wong, Invitation,
*Party at Bob and Gregg's:
Featuring Never Before
Seen Jail Paintings by
Martin Wong*, 141 Ridge
Street, Apt. 4, New York,
April 13, 1984

Fig. 6
Photograph of the
exhibition *Party at Bob and
Gregg's: Featuring Never
Before Seen Jail Paintings
by Martin Wong*, 141 Ridge
Street, Apt. 4, New York,
April 13, 1984.



[from p. 219]



Martin Wong, *Come Over Here Rockface*, 1994. Acrylic on canvas, 23 x 29 in.

- 24 Stuart Krimko, "Spring Begins Today!" in *My Trip to America*, ed. Burkhart and Myers-Szupinska, 126–27.
- 25 Ault, "Martin Wong Was Here," 96.

Orion's Belt. (Mintaka is the brightest star of the three.) Wong affixed the three-way rape scene on top of another painting, in gray, of prison walls and a watchtower—above which two constellations (Orion and Gemini) and their names are written. To the right, these layered paintings are paired with another depiction of anal sex between two inmates, again viewed through obscuring white bars and cloudlike forms. This two-person scene reflects the bi-partite constellation of the Gemini twins Wong wrote in the prison sky. As Stuart Krimko argued about another painting featuring the constellation, *Gemini*, Wong thematized queerness through doubling and an erotics of sameness.²⁴ The coupling of Gemini's two and Orion's three in *Mintaka* prompts an open question about how the two-person and three-person scenes of sex might narratively relate (or differ). For all its complex symbolism, Wong's painting is nevertheless direct in its focus on prison sex as being generated by the prison complex itself. The walls of the prison, as Ault noted, are anthropomorphized and appear to be "extending outward like legs flung open."²⁵

It is unclear how many small "erotic jail paintings" Wong created, but two later works are indicative that this remained a theme for him. In 1994, he painted an octagonal study of a prisoner looking over his shoulder with his

Fig. 7
Martin Wong, *Mintaka*, 1990
Acrylic on canvas
74.9 × 167.6 cm



- 26 On Danh Vo's 2013 work *IMUUR 2*, which focused on Wong's collection as preserved by his mother Florence Wong Fie, see Joshua Chambers-Letson, "The Queer of Color's Mother: Ryan Rivera, Audre Lorde, Martin Wong, Danh Vo," *TDR: The Drama Review* 62, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 46–59.
- 27 From a March 31, 2013 e-mail from Sharp to Danh Vo, quoted in Ault, "Martin Wong Was Here," 94.
- 28 Wong, in Ramirez, "Chino-Latino," 117. Or, in a 1991 lecture at the San Francisco Art Institute, Wong stated, "When he hit 24 he told me it was a violation of his personality. I stopped painting him for about three months. Then he went to Europe and I started painting him again." Martin Wong, "It's Easier," 94.



thumbs in his waistband pulling the front of his pants down. The grisaille and cloudlike handling of the interior identifies this work as clearly within the pattern of Wong's earlier prison fantasies. The figure of the inmate from the study becomes covered by cell bars in the final painting, *Come Over Here Rock Face*, also from 1994 (p. 219). In that work, the white prison guard lingeringly stares at the inmate as he urinates in his cell. The divisions and the racial dynamics of this late work are clear. The cruciform railing in the foreground vertically divides the two figures while, along the horizontal, connecting the pelvises of both figures. In this painting, the blue of the guard's uniform stands out, and Wong has painted his skin in color (rather than the grisaille with which he had, ten years before, painted the other guard, Mr. Nett). Wong's inmate is defiant, and he taunts the guard: "come over here Rock Face and suck my dick." Wong fantasizes here about a power reversal, and his earlier scenes of guards raping prisoners have become the stuff of standard over-the-counter pornography in which lust is imagined as being able to supersede the harsh realities of power and cruelty.

Wong's prison pictures were fueled by his personal relationships and his impersonal fantasies, and they are equal parts humanizing and objectifying. They exhibit a criticality about whiteness and race, but nevertheless they exoticize the men of color depicted in them. In a telling anecdote, Ault relayed a story that the artist Danh Vo uncovered about Sharp—who was a friend of Wong's and model (directly or indirectly) for at least some of the figures in the sexually explicit prison pictures (as well as for some of the earliest, such as *Lock-Up*).²⁶ After seeing the installation of five paintings shown in the photograph, Sharp took them down because of the ways in which he had been transformed into Wong's erotic fantasy. Sharp wrote, "It was hard for me to absorb this series, it really felt like a violation at the time. In retrospect, it is like a love letter."²⁷ In his 1996 interview, Wong relayed, "I think one of the guys [who] got really pissed about these paintings was Sharp, because I painted him so many times that everything started to look like him anyway."²⁸ Sharp's and Wong's comments on this incident remind us how much the prison pictures were serial repetitions of erotic fantasies ("everything started to look like him anyway"). Though they might have been rooted in a sympathetic attempt to humanize their subjects, they nevertheless also relied on the dehumanizing structure of incarceration and its culture of prison rape recast as erotic fantasies about taboo same-gender sex. Looking at *Come Over Here Rockface*, we must remember that whatever occurs after its depicted moment of confrontation and

[from p. 203]



Martin Wong, *Big Heat*, 1986. Acrylic on linen, 60.125 x 48.125 in. Whitney Museum of American Art.

- 29 Published in Jill Freedman, *Firehouse* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 127. Wong's clipping of the photograph is reproduced in Burkhart and Myers-Szupinska, *My Trip to America*, 56.
- 30 "So here are firemen as I saw them.... Handsome men, whose boots look good on their legs. Kids trust them. Buffs hound them. Junkyard dogs adopt them. Because they are something special. Here are real men, and let me tell you, they cry all right. And they joke around, hugging, kissing, and they mean it. They love each other and boy, is it nice to be around that. I hope a lot of kids see these pictures. There's no way you can call a fireman a sissy. Let kids see that truly strong men are also soft and gentle; that men can love and respect each other; that being nice instead of nasty makes you feel good." Freedman, *Firehouse*, 16.

locked gazes could never escape the unequal power and structural racism of the carceral system.

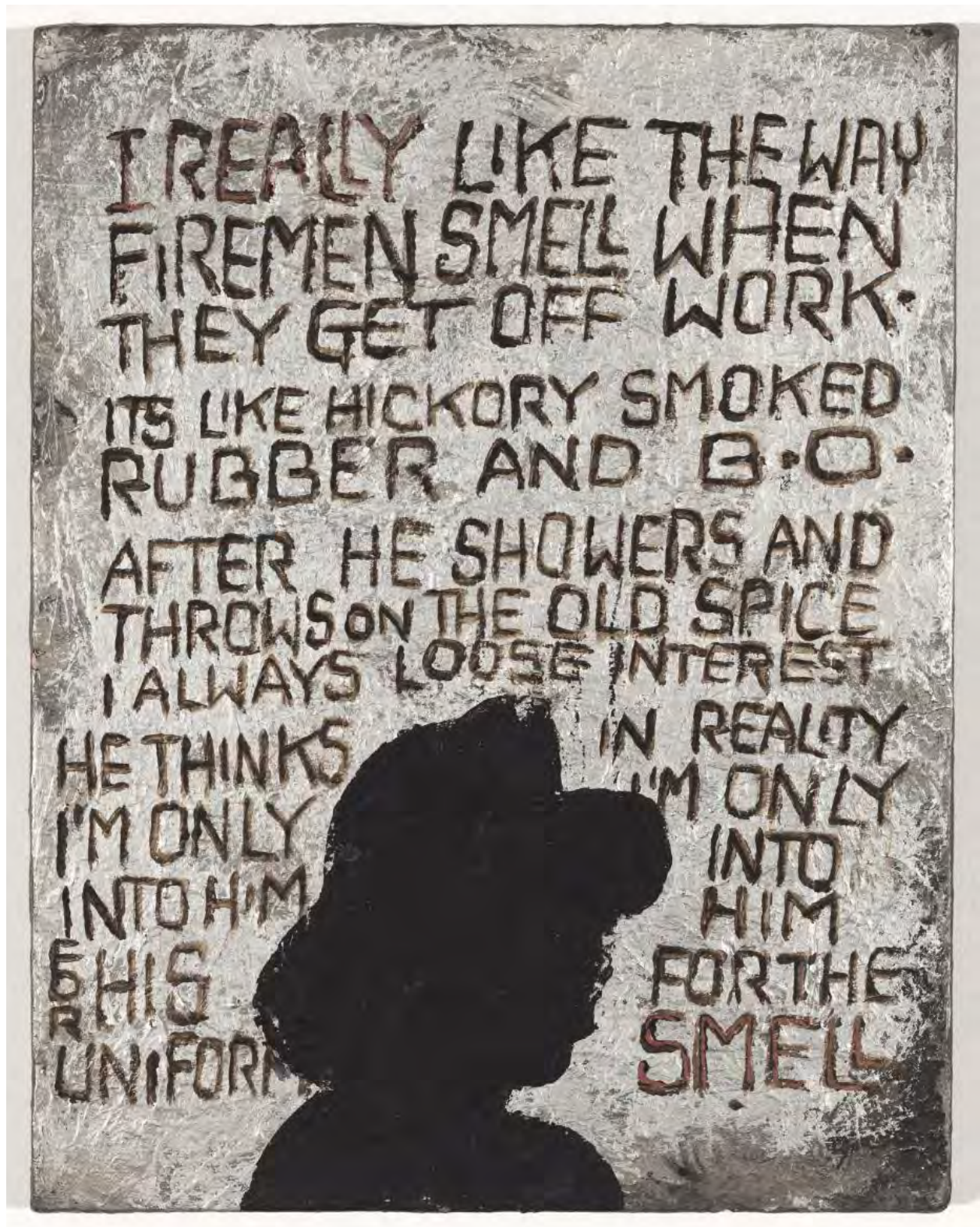
As mentioned earlier, Wong repainted his large-scale prison pictures as smaller works; they were shown in his major exhibition at Exit Art in 1988. (It was also the year of Piñero's death). *The Annunciation* and *Lock-Up* were repainted as the smaller *Cupcake and Paco* (Corot) and *C-76, Junior*, respectively (fig. 8). Importantly, they were shown along with the other series of homoerotic fantasy paintings that characterized Wong's work of the late 1980s—the fireman pictures. The fireman pictures are also tied up with fantasy and objectification, but they do not incorporate the same level of sexual display. This is the case with the most famous of Wong's homoerotic paintings, *Big Heat* (p. 203).

Big Heat features two firemen passionately kissing while wearing their full protective gear. Wong based the figures on a 1976 photograph by Jill Freedman that showed a celebratory and cathartic embrace of two firemen (fig. 9).²⁹ In Freedman's photograph, this is a somewhat awkward contact at the chin, whereas Wong locked their lips in passion. (In her preface to the book in which the photo first appeared, Freedman asserted that firemen were "real men" and that "There's no way you can call a fireman a sissy."³⁰) In Wong's painting, the kissing figures are truncated at mid-torso in front of a red brick mid-rise building, the lower floors of which are engulfed in flames. It is an image of abandon as the world burns, and it has been seen as an allegorical image of the AIDS crisis that had been ravaging New York City throughout the decade. The firemen, after all, are in protective gear that hinders, but does not inhibit, their passionate contact.

Fig. 8
Installation view of
Martin Wong: *New
Paintings*, Exit Art,
New York, November 5–
December 23, 1988.



[from p. 202]



Martin Wong, *I Really Like the Way Firemen Smell*, 1988. Acrylic on canvas, 14 x 11 in.

There are many reasons for the new radicalism and visibility in AIDS activism and, with it, queer political and social movements around 1987, and the founding of ACT UP is representative of this larger shift. One important factor in this change was the anger and activism sparked by the homophobic decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1986 *Bowers v. Hardwick* case, which sanctioned the stripping of any right to privacy for (and the criminalization of) same-gender sexual activity.

Close-ups of the kissing firemen appear in later paintings such as *Stevy* (1990–92), which pictures Wong's fireman friend in the tub wearing his helmet, and *Sanja Cake* (1991; p. 265). Perhaps the most direct engagement with a sexual (as opposed to romantic) view of firemen is the painting *I Really Like the Way Firemen Smell* (1988; p. 202), with its first-person statement about having sex with a fireman who knows he is being fetishized. This work only depicts a figure in silhouette, and—like the other fireman paintings—compromises between its own erotic or romantic message and the avoidance of the depiction of sexual activity. It is also important to note that Wong's paintings of firemen do not emphasize race to the degree that the prison paintings do, and in works like *Fireman Smell* and *Big Heat* Wong's objects of desire are less racially specified than in his white prisons against which the skin of Puerto Rican and/or Black men stood in relief. Both groups of paintings indulge in fantasy, but the organizing terms and protagonists in those erotic dramas in cold cells are different than those in the blazing streets.

The saviors and those that needed to be saved—that is, the firemen and the prisoners—became Wong's homoerotic figural vocabulary. With his paintings of these eroticized roles, he navigated the homophobia that sought to delimit any expression of same-gender affection, love, or desire in the 1980s—a decade, we should remember, in which queer sex became a central political and health issue for the nation due to the U.S. government's genocidal neglect of the AIDS crisis coupled with a media panic about it. Wong explored different ways of representing homoeroticism in his works—from the subtle double entendre to the romanticized firemen to the explicit paintings he showed only in friends' apartments or nightclubs. (He also, albeit infrequently, depicted intimacy between women, as in the 1992 painting *Saturday Night*.) In this essay, I have centered the prison paintings because their representation of sex and desire—however complicated and conflicted—was nevertheless brave and still rare in queer art of the decade. It is worth remembering that the history-making activist group ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) was only founded in 1987, and this year marked a break (for this and other reasons) in the demand for confrontational visibility, the refusal of censorship, the celebration of queer sex as political, and the greater representation of queer lives.³¹ Wong's paintings of desire straddle this watershed year, and the more explicitly queer works of 1988 and after are a significant contribution to this new activist attitude toward visibility.

While I have focused on the most overt (and intractable) of Wong's paintings, I also believe that there are other ways of seeing the queer themes in his work. I want to conclude by briefly asking about the other half of Wong's

- 32 Charlie Ahearn, "Martin's Graffiti Obsession," in *City as Canvas*, ed. Corcoran and McCormick, 23.
- 33 See also Pérez, "The Glory That Was Wrong," 283–85.
- 34 I have outlined some of these stances elsewhere in David J. Getsy, "Ten Queer Theses on Abstraction," in *Queer Abstraction*, ed. Jared Ledesma, exh. cat. Des Moines Art Center (Des Moines, IA: Des Moines Art Center, 2019), 65–75.

two-part formula—bricks. They are, after all, everywhere in his paintings. They dominate many of his paintings, both in terms of the buildings he would depict or his evocative canvases filled with them. Many of Wong's friends talked of how obsessed he was with painting bricks, staying up all night to cover his canvases (large and small) with them. As Charlie Ahearn once remarked, "Martin adopted Piñero's Lower East Side as his muse and painted the neighborhood's brick walls with the patience of a lover's gaze."³²

Much has been written about how these bricks represent Wong's urban environment and the crumbling housing infrastructure of the Lower East Side, but I also wonder if the brick could also be seen as a queer figure?³³ Making art from queer experience need not always involve the direct

Fig. 9
Jill Freedman
Brotherly Love, 1976.
Martin Wong bought a
postcard featuring Jill
Freedman's photo, which
can also be found in the
Martin Wong Papers at
Fales Library and Special
Collections, NYU.



As Ault noted, “*Heaven* likewise refers to carnal ecstasy, given that Wong intended the black holes in the center of his brick tondi to symbolize glory holes.” Ault, “Martin Wong Was Here,” 96.

depiction of sexuality, love, or romance—or even the human form—and other artists have used abstraction, allusion, and code to convey queer themes.³⁴ While decidedly a representational painter, Wong nevertheless flirted with abstraction in his paintings of brick walls and storefronts. Paintings such as *Flagstone Boogie Woogie* (1984), *Houston Street* (1986; p. 160–161), *Rapture* (1988; p. 256 pp. 256–257), or *Heaven* (1988; p. 127) knowingly play with Wong’s art-historical knowledge of modernist painting, abstraction, and flatness. In these, the brick is the core element, repeated endlessly. It establishes surfaces that block, refuse, seal off, and turn their backs on the viewer. They become impenetrable surfaces (or, as with *Heaven*, with one central glory hole through which contact might be established to the other side).³⁵ With these brick paintings, Wong deliberately denied the conventional approach to painting as a window through which one looked. He even transformed a shell of a television into *Brick T.V.* (1983; p. 113) as a sort of manifesto.

Perhaps Wong chose to invest in the brick as the most recognizable element of his works because they were everywhere and essential but nevertheless overlooked and ignored. The brick is a unit of sameness that must join with others of its kind to produce strength. Bricks can be put in different orientations precisely because they have the same form. They are a unitary—rather than binary—form, and their expansive potential comes from the fact that any two ends can butt up against each other to start making a structure. Other artists who have pursued abstraction to relay queer themes or experiences have often used units of sameness as a means to signal same-gender potential, and we might see Wong’s persistent foregrounding of joining bricks as a visualization of relations (and, indeed, communities) not structured by binary differences. He took such care to paint brick after brick so meticulously, and he covered surfaces in brick that otherwise would not be. His loving attention to the brick as his signature visual element might be seen, allegorically, as an image of open-ended connection and potential in which any two or more units could fit together to make something more. Like the prison paintings, I see this investment in the brick as twofold. First, it can be understood in relation to Wong’s engagement with the communities of color in the neighborhood in which he lived. The overlooked, common brick was the stuff out of which Lower East Side buildings were made (in contrast to, say, gray-stone townhouses or institutions more commonly found further north in Manhattan). Second, the brick can also be seen as demonstrating the potential of relations and connections that are not determined by difference; they are, by contrast, made possible by sameness. Any two bricks can form a bond, and it is a queer stance to value relations not determined by preconceived binary differences.

[from p. 127]



Martin Wong, *Heaven*, 1988. Acrylic on canvas, 72 in. dia.

This unforeclosed potential of the mundane brick to combine differently with others, in other words, gains a new urgency and depth if we see it from a queer perspective that refuses to be limited by the heteronormative rules about how things are supposed to fit together.

My utopian reading of the brick in Wong's paintings is both conjectural and hopeful, but it helps me to imagine the broader queer themes of his work above and beyond the depictions of homoeroticism and sexual fantasy—however important, vulnerable, and urgent those were for him. In addition to his images of sex or intimacy, Wong's queer perspective also informed his work more broadly. Through it, he saw possibilities for connection and desire where they were not allowed or expected. He worked to depict outcast lives, to identify across differences, to recast the terrible into the sacred, and to visualize his queer experience of the city and its people. We can see those aspirations as manifesting in his love for the disregarded and the disenfranchised—in “bricks and jails.”

