Text from the forthcoming publication:

Julie Ault/Danh Vo/Heinz Peter Knes/Martin Wong
"I M U - U R 2"
with text by Julie Ault and photographs by Heinz Peter Knes

published by Galerie Buchholz, February 2013

Julie Ault

SOME PLACES IT WILL ALWAYS BE EUREKA
AND IN EUREKA IT WILL ALWAYS BE VALENTINE'S DAY

"Have you seen my Mondrian drawing?" We went into the kitchen. He grabbed the frame facing the wall next to the sink and held it up so I could see it, though there was no light to speak of. Neither the fact that Martin Wong owned a work by Piet Mondrian nor that he stored it close to splashing water in his sixth-floor walk-up apartment in a run-down building on New York's pregentrification Lower East Side was incongruous. There, at 141 Ridge Street in apartment 9, Martin painted incessantly.

In Martin's private cosmos, cultural expression from distant eras and origins cohabited nonchalantly. There were Chinese blue and white porcelain stools to sit on and a drop cloth cum rug to catch wayward paint. Valuable ceramic figurines, books, and cartoon toys stood on every surface. Works of fellow artists that Martin had bought or traded for were interspersed with prints by Utagawa Kuniyoshi and his own paintings on the walls. Tags by graffiti-writer friends covered the refrigerator. In spite of the treasured objects throughout, the place was primarily for painting, so it was pretty messy.

In his collecting activities and in his art, Martin embodied a multiplicity of passions: Chinese ceramics, the paintings of Thomas Eakins and Winslow Homer, calligraphy, archers' thumb rings, children's lunchboxes, Mickeys and Minnies and Donalds, sign language, astronomical constellations, graffiti, Loisaida, the writing and person of Miguel Piñero, men in prison, firefighters, Chinatown . . .

By the mid-1980s, Martin had established himself as a virtuosic painter and a faithful and imaginative chronicler of the Loisaida neighborhood he lived in—his primary subject between 1982 and 1988, despite his outsider status as a Chinese American transplanted from San Francisco into the predominantly Latino ghetto. Martin's pictorial scenes of neighborhood residents and tenement environments are lovingly built, brick by realistic brick, on the firm foundation of his innately romantic outlook.1 Taken together, Martin's Loisaida paintings reveal the complexity of the area; they tread along an axis that is at once realistic, apocalyptic, and optimistic. Many works are imbued with the writing of the Nuyorican poet Miguel Piñero, his friend and sometime collaborator, whom he met in 1982 and who infinitely deepened Martin's feeling for the neighborhood. Many works incorporate outlines of constellations in the night sky that illuminate the portrayed ground-level magnitude of life in perpetual poverty.

Martin Victor Wong (1946–1999). "Human Instamatic, I M U, U R 2." Self-dubbed Martin "Genghis" Wong. Self-styled vamping cowboy dandy. Martin had taken all the art courses available at Humboldt State University in Eureka, California, in order to gain insight into every medium, but he settled on ceramics as his principal means. After college, he got involved in San Francisco's performance art groups, creating backdrops and props for the Angels of Light and graphics for the Cockettes. Martin moved to New York in 1978 to make his fortune as an artist. There, his performative inclination relocated to personal style. Self-assured, casual, and eye-catching, he typically dressed in cowboy garb—jeans and a cowboy shirt on top of a second shirt and a tie, a vest, western boots, and a leather jacket. Martin gave up ceramics and devoted himself to inventing painting techniques that would allow him to faithfully evoke his surroundings.

Being of sound hearing did not deter Martin from illustrating the message "Martin Wong Deaf Artist" on the backs of his leather jackets with the signature manual alphabet—stylized bulging hands sporting shirt cuffs reminiscent of another era—that he developed soon after arriving in New York. Sequences of finger configurations line up to spell out messages and news headlines—Psychiatrists Testify: Demon Dogs Drive Man to Murder; Love Is Where It's At, Freak Freely Can You Dig It; Atlantic City Pandemonium Beauty Queens in Peril—which initially formed the total composition of Martin's paintings. In later works, the finger spellings caption and overlay other images and scenes. Martin's first New York showing in 1980 consisted of sign-language paintings and took place not in an art gallery but at Elli Buk Antiques on Spring Street.

The supernatural-looking disembodied hands that seeped into Martin's work and letters home indicated his fascination with visual codes of communication, from language to painting to dress to graffiti. They also reflected his knowledge of Asian painting. In a 1984 interview, Martin told

Yasmin Ramirez, “Basically I’m a Chinese landscape painter. If you look at all the Chinese landscapes in the museum they have writing in the sky. They write a poem in the sky, and I do that, too.”2 In 1990, Martin recollected the multiple catalysts for his visual sign language:

"My first sign language painting happened on August 10th, about 11 years ago, all of a sudden. I was at the subway station at City Hall and I saw a newspaper headline that said, “Psychiatrist Testifies Demon Dogs Drive Man to Murder.” Then, as soon as I got on the subway car, somebody handed me one of those 25-cent “Hello, I’m Deaf” cards [containing the hand-language alphabet on one side]. The headline was still in my mind, so that became my first sign language painting.
When I first came to New York, I could see that the graffiti artists were really experimenting. There was a different script being invented every week—there’s Broadway Script, “wild style,” and all the others. I wanted to have my own script.
But it’s not just a graffiti script. I used to collect old manuscripts, too. One time I had a ninth-century Kufic manuscript that I brought back from Afghanistan. When I elongate the fingers in my paintings, a lot of times it relates to the stylization that happened in Kufic, when they tried to use it in architecture."3

The press release for Martin’s first solo exhibition at Semaphore Gallery was drawn in sign language.

Not for immediate release:
SoHo pandemonium
deaf pictures sick
secret world of chinese
potato head panic
hits arts art market on
eve of exhibit
c u there!

Born in Portland, Oregon, Martin grew up in San Francisco, where his parents, Benjamin Fie and Florence Wong Fie, worked as engineers for the Bechtel construction company. A boy wonder bustling with creative energy, an insatiable mind, and innate, multifaceted artistic aptitude, Martin knew he would be a great artist; as a kid of only ten years old, he began painting self-portraits. During lunch breaks from Bechtel, Florence often stopped to find a toy or some little thing for Martin for when she picked him up from day care after work. As soon as Martin began making drawings, Ben and Florence framed and hung a selection of them. When he went off on his own, Martin did his own framing, so to speak, by painting illusionistic wooden frames on the perimeters of his compositions.

Florence had always gone to antique shops and bought things for fun, but it was Martin who researched and learned about objects from an early age and became a collector and connoisseur, inspiring his mother to do the same. As a kid, Martin frequently visited the Japanese and Chinese antique shops on Grant Avenue in Chinatown. He read up on everything. Impressed with so much knowledge in a young boy, the shopkeepers gave him generous discounts, thereby arousing his appetite for bargains. Martin liked to buy something he thought he could eventually sell for more, and he'd do so when the timing was right. Martin initiated Florence into collaborative collecting. Ben didn't share their acquisitive fever but amiably drove them to countless shops. Whenever they bought something Ben just smiled and said, "More treasures?" As the family's one-story house filled to capacity, Ben built shelves in the basement for the scores of salt and pepper shakers, creamers, figurines, and other accumulating miscellany.

Endlessly eager for inspiration and information, in New York Martin visited museums, auction houses, antique dealers, and secondhand shops to absorb the characteristics of historical objects and learn how to discern their authenticity and potential market value. To supplement his income, Martin worked in the canvas department at Pearl Paint, where he encouraged graffiti writers to paint on material that would not get painted or washed over as buildings and subway cars did. He also bought works and tag books, in part to support the younger artists. Working as a clerk in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's bookstore, Martin deepened his knowledge of cultural histories and objects.

Martin was an enthusiastic documentarian who collected for pleasure and who had the ambition and prescience to profit from his knowledge. Letters between Florence and Martin during the New York years involve a lot of back-and-forth about acquisitions and prospective purchases—from cartoon figures to "that Ching dynasty bowl" to an Andy Warhol Campbell's tomato juice box, as well as

instructions on what to hold on to, what to sell and when, etc.

By the late 1980s, Martin was a key figure in downtown New York culture; his paintings circulated in venues from the funkiest alternative outpost to the Met, from commercial SoHo galleries to after-hours clubs. Like his paintings, Martin inhabited a multiplicity of communities and was categorically adored; he had a beguiling personality. (Martin's close friend Sandra Fabara, aka Lady Pink, nailed it: "When Martin has anything to do with anyone they become good friends.")

In 1989, Martin consigned his Mondrian drawing to Sotheby's, requesting that its sale be designated, "To benefit the Museum of American Graffiti." Martin dreamed up the museum, a heartfelt though short-lived enterprise, with his friend Peter Broda, in part to advance graffiti as an art form, in part to publicize his extensive collection. Snapshots show Ben and Florence beaming at the museum's opening, standing amid a salon stuffed with paintings and spray-painted tags, surrounded by a crowd composed almost exclusively of young Latino and black men. They appear completely at home sharing in Martin's triumphs.4

A friend of Martin's and of Peter's had introduced the two men on a hunch they would hit it off since both nearly always wore a tie, however casually dressed. Their affinity reached well beneath the surface. Degrees of outsiderness due to dogged devotion to unusual obsessions, combined with acute specific intelligence, united the two men as long-term friends. Endowed with entrepreneurial flair, both Martin and Peter had a knack for the deal—for acquiring diverse, under-the-radar, even outcast objects for personal enjoyment and profitable resale. When Martin died at age fifty-three in the summer of 1999, it was Peter whom Florence and Ben entrusted to dismantle his New York apartment and oversee the distribution of his belongings.

Beginning in the late 1980s, Martin sometimes wore a firefighter's jacket. Snapshots kept in one of the many photo albums meticulously organized by Florence as part of her ongoing cataloging of Martin's lifework show him wearing the coat in restaurants with family and friends, at public events and openings, and at home. "After I was on television with the kissing firemen painting [Big Heat, 1989], these strangers would just show up with uniforms in pieces, like the coat, the helmet, the boots, and the I.D. plate. And then they'd warn me not to wear it in the street. It's a felony to impersonate a fireman. So of course I wore them."5

In 1994, Martin learned he was HIV-positive. Temporary afflictions landed him in the hospital. Rumor has it that one day he snuck out to go to a museum. He simply got dressed and left with some friends who were visiting. When he returned that night, the hospital staff wouldn't let him in;

he had to wait until morning to get back to his bed.

Like any New York resident with an affordable apartment and an uncertain future, Martin kept the lease when he moved back to San Francisco in 1995, which offered a more advanced approach to AIDS and access to better treatments. He lived with his parents but missed New York and was anxious to be in his studio. During the next three years, Martin went to New York every two or three months to work and visit museums and friends. All he wanted to do was paint and see art, so Florence accompanied him to make sure her son ate well and took his medication.

When it became clear to Martin that he would not outlive his parents, nor would he be able to give them proper arrangements when they died, as is customary in Chinese culture, he decided to visit the nearby San Francisco Columbarium and took Florence. They instantly loved the grand building and took Ben there as well. The three agreed, and Martin arranged with the Neptune Society for "Mom," "Pop," and himself to be cremated and their remains kept together in a niche he procured in the nineteenth-century, Roman-style Columbarium. Benjamin Fie died unexpectedly a year after his son. Florence treats the family alcove like a satellite of the house, adorning it with photographs of Martin and Ben and objects that signify their passions—paintbrushes, an archer's thumb ring, a golf ball. A metal office clasp holds a snapshot of Martin wearing it as a tie clip. Two matching silver pocket tape measures that Martin bought for his parents at Tiffany's after reading that Jackie Kennedy had one are joined by fresh, colorful flowers. During the holiday season, Florence takes the miniature Christmas tree to the Columbarium that she and Martin strung beads for and decorated when he was four and a half years old.

Florence Wong Fie's house is devoted to preserving and displaying everything that is Martin Wong, and the myriad collections that Martin and she accumulated. Martin's early artistic endeavors—from woodcuts to hippie-esque ceramic goblins to sensitive self-portraits to calligraphed scrolls to psychedelic works to the small paintings of uniform size he periodically sent from New York of dice displaying lucky-seven sums "for Mom" and of eight-ball and golf motifs "for Pop"—intermingle with the abundance of cabinets utterly filled with both valuable and banal objects of sentimental significance.

The dense totality of the Wong Fie house evokes the detailed and layered picture-within-a-picture compositional space evident in some of Martin's paintings. Martin seems to have been attuned to the ways Florence situated and arranged every item in the cabinets, drawers, and cupboards and on the walls of the house. Martin's installing hand and sensibility are likewise evident all over the house.

In 2001–2002, Florence and a few of Martin's close friends decided to institute a nonprofit foundation in Martin's name. In 2003, the Martin Wong Foundation began awarding grants. The foundation provides scholarships to painting and ceramics students at four schools: Humboldt State University; San Francisco State University; Ben's alma matter, Arizona State University; and New York University, which houses the Martin Wong Papers in the Fales Downtown Collection. In addition, Humboldt has a Martin Wong Studio, SF State has a Martin Wong Gallery, and ASU has a Martin Wong Painting and Drawing Studio. The Martin Wong Foundation has an art-education program managed and directed by Sandra Fabara (Lady Pink), which works with the Frank Sinatra School of the Arts and other New York high schools. The foundation also promotes Martin's paintings to museum collections.

As she has for decades, Florence fastidiously catalogs every moment in Martin's career. Shelves running nearly the length of his former bedroom are filled with binders containing photos taken at each of Martin's exhibition openings, announcement cards, exhibition brochures, press write-ups, correspondence; virtually any mention of Martin Wong's name is catalogued. Books, catalogs, magazines, and newspapers containing articles, reviews, paintings, and acknowledgements of Martin Wong are preserved with brightly colored Post-its marking the relevant pages. Martin's sketchbooks, drawings, scrolls, and writings are tucked in drawers and on and under tables throughout the house. Florence wholeheartedly greets curators, researchers, old friends, and new enthusiasts of Martin's work, making the material collection available for research and narrating the trajectories of what resides together in the house.

I wrote Florence a letter after visiting her for the first time in order to convey the utter delight and awe I felt being in her home, amid the family's precious things and signs of Martin's mind and hand throughout. I told Florence I wanted to spend more time there someday so I could research and eventually write about what I perceived to be an inspiring project of preserving and broadcasting Martin's brilliance. Florence responded graciously, forwarding me a copy of the meticulously hand-printed index of the material she archives, and inviting me to come to San Francisco again when I had the time. At the end of the letter she added, "But, please, if you would write anything, just write about Martin, not me. I would appreciate that."

1 See Barry Blinderman, "The Writing on the Wall (Ever Picture Tells a Storey, Don't It?)," in Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong, ed. Amy Scholder (New York: New Museum Books and Rizzoli, 1998), 23. "Each of the hundreds or even thousands of bricks on one of

Wong's paintings is individually rendered; there are no impressionistic shortcuts or aerial perspective tricks obviating the need for detail. If we add the red iron oxide content of his paint to the labor intensity of such a task, we begin to see this part of Wong's project as bricklaying: he is building the paintings as much as he is painting the buildings."

2 See Yasmin Ramirez, "Writing in the Sky: An Interview with Martin Wong," East Village Eye, October 1984, 25. Quoted in Ramirez, "La Vida: The Life and Writings of Miguel Piñero in the Art of Martin Wong," in Scholder, Sweet Oblivion, 41.

3 Martin Wong in David Hirsch, "From the Lower East Side," New York Native, October 15, 1990, 44.

4 In 1993, Martin donated approximately three hundred graffiti works to the Museum of the City of New York.

5 Martin Wong, "Martin Wong Meets Martin Wong," Giant Robot, Summer 1999, 48–50.