



*The Midnight Sea,
A Little Dash of LSD*

Martin Wong and Paul P.

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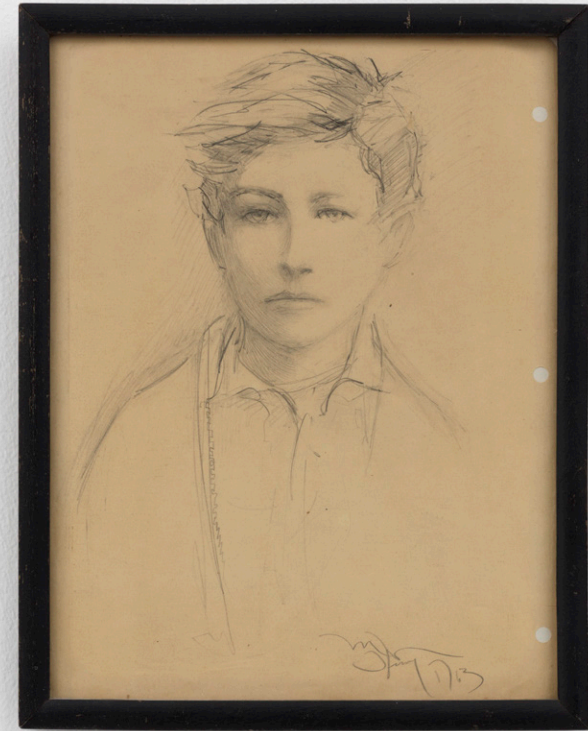
The Midnight Sea, A Little Dash of LSD

Text by Paul P.

In the exhibition there are two drawings by Martin Wong that approximately mark the span of his artistic life: *Portrait of Arthur Rimbaud*, 1963, the adroit juvenilia of a seventeen-year-old admiring the 19th century poet, and *Untitled (Study for Malicious Mischief)*, c.1997, a voluptuous contour drawing of a handsome man rendered by a fifty-one-year-old already in mortal decline. Wong would die of AIDS in 1999. Between these bookends the works primarily belong to a period from 1968 to 1976 when the artist was twenty-two- to thirty-years-old, and living in San Francisco and Eureka, California, where he was raised and educated. The temperamental nature of his young adulthood dovetailed with the revolutionary tremors of the era, and he participated in its subcultural experiments and uprisings, the myriad agendas of liberation, and their aftermath.

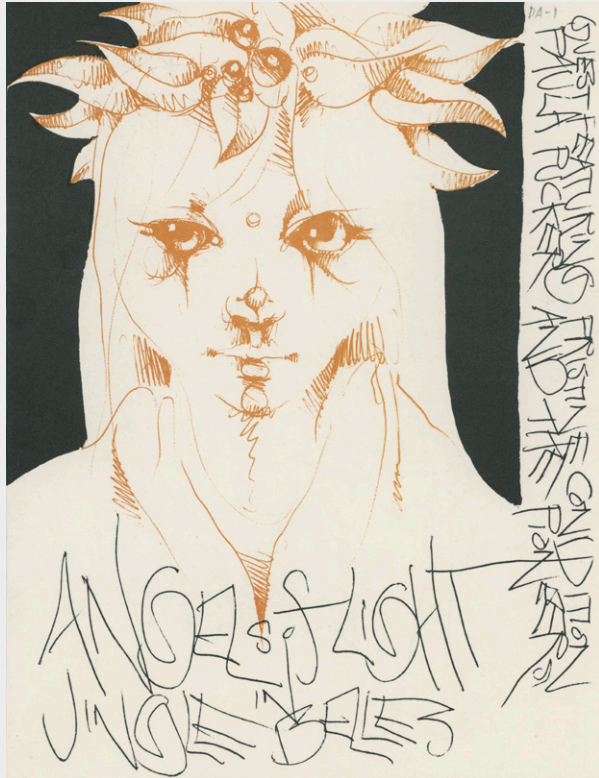
Before Martin Wong, painter of impenetrable brick walls, bleak Lower East Side cloisters, and dark visions of penitentiary life, there was Martin Wong, the hippy kid making airy pencil drawings like a Renaissance acolyte tripping on acid. During this period he was something of a polymath: painting played a relatively small part in his output until the mid-70s, giving way to his New York incarnation as a compulsive yet laborious painter. Certainly, as his material range condensed, Wong's artistic conceit flourished, but there is something so pleasurable in the immediacy and psychedelic atmosphere of these leaves-from-a-sketchbook he produced while studying printmaking, experimenting with ceramics, and self-publishing poetry in his distinctive calligraphic script. It was also during this time that he was running with the queer theatrical troupe Angels of Light Free Theatre—an even more radical off-shoot of the legendary Cockettes—designing props, stage sets, and flyers. The ephemeral, tangential, and diffuse quality of these collected elements and activities is critical to their charm and importance, not only within Wong's life's work, but as chronicles of their era's sensibility.

Queer and Chinese-American, Wong assumed the vantage of an observer in the margins. Always a welcomed presence, he nevertheless appeared something of a misfit among misfits. The late 60s and early 70s were volatile, wonder-filled years for Wong, marked by several stays as a patient in a psychiatric



hospital, but also by intrepid travel through Afghanistan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Turkey (along a route popularly known as the Hippie Trail), and Europe. These fluctuating states of confinement, anguish, solitude, discovery, and amazement would have undoubted bearing on his art. All bohemiae are transitory, and existing as he and his friends did at the outset of gay liberation, their political and social realities were protean, as every promise of progress demanded a part of their semi-outlaw status be relinquished. The psychological states and physical beauty he was eager to capture were diaristic and restlessly pursued. He slipped beneath the skins of figures and landscapes revealing their molten, quivering core, an esoteric vision that unfurled friends, lovers, strangers, as well as himself. Some of Wong's most wonderful compositions are of gaunt young men with wild hair, whose flesh appears to have been peeled away as in an anatomical drawing, sinews dissolving into air like licks of flame. The description sounds macabre, but the subjects' mellow, heavy-lidded eyes suggest they are

metabolizing the splendid and the ghastly with equanimity. Their bodies-aflame might alternatively be seen as composed of the burls and knots of an exquisite, vaporizing hardwood. The fairyland-esque landscapes of flora, fauna, and other beings, like a saturnine sunshine that expresses “I love you,” are on a similar frequency. Wong’s touch venerates everything with a latent halo of genius.



Some of these drawings might initially appear inchoate or indeterminate compared to the vast, allegorical paintings from the 80s and 90s that would give his career its ballast, yet they feel fanciful and free. They are products of a time during which he worked to make ends meet as a quick-sketch artist, and his milieu was suffused with extreme antipathy towards capitalism (Angels of Light, for instance, hailed from a commune and refused to perform for money). However, as much as Wong’s work would transform in scale, material, and articulation of its social objectives, his early drawings are preambles to the “young men with seraphic faces lounging melancholic,” which curator Antonio Sergio Bessa admires in the later paintings. The graceful yet frenetic touches devised in these

early works endure and reappear: the curlicues of the eyes and nostril of Wong’s then-boyfriend Tom Mueller in 1970 are those of the artist’s self-portrait from 1993.

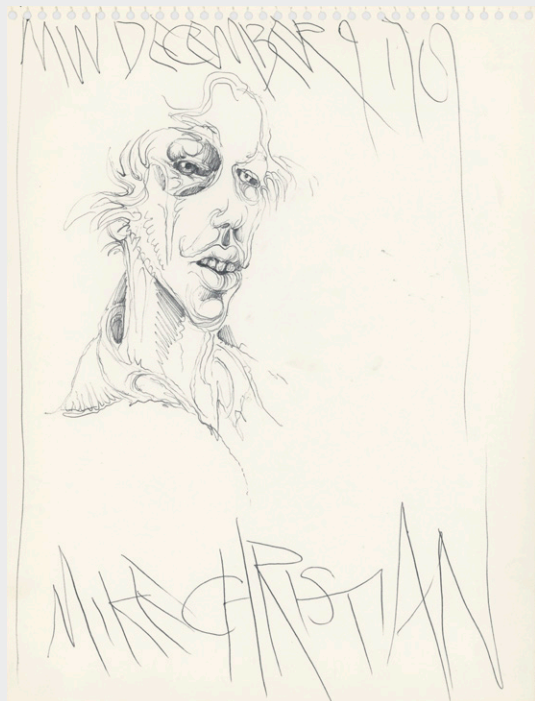
The exhibition’s title, *The Midnight Sea, A Little Dash of LSD*, is a pair of lines extracted from Wong’s 1968 book of poetry, *Footprints Poems + Leaves*. His poetry vibrates with Romantic affinities for the natural world, and for the company of other wayward souls, sublimities that Wong often interposed with queasy, twentieth-century realities: junkie, cockroach, pepperoni pizza, plastic orchid, and so on. Consider the following excerpts of two poems, evoking the suspended atmosphere of nighttime and daytime, respectively:

BLUE STARS THEY RAINING
 DOWN ON YOU
 TO SLEEP IN THE NIGHT
 TO WHEREDREAMS
 TO ESCAPE
 TO SLEEPING FREE

and

ROOFTOP CHILDREN
 SUMMER SUN
 COTTAGE KINGS WAVING
 ON THE TRUN
 CITY HILLSIDES SHINING
 WHITE
 FRIENDS SITTING
 FEELS JUST RIGHT

A spontaneous recorder of life, these lines, like Sappho's, would survive being shattered and dispersed, as each fragment seems to hold the essence of the whole's quotidian enchantment. The dense striated script with which Wong wrote out his poems serves as a dissolvable code, slowing down their reading; one deciphers them by tracing the letters with the eye. There is logic and precedent for such impediments and coded communication in the ingenuity of homosexual artists and writers over the centuries, whose deployment of thin veils granted queer sentiment safe passage through time. The practice has more recently evolved into a stylistic echo of its original purpose, but in 1968 there were vestiges at work in Wong's gestures. The fluid, graceful linework of his figurative drawing is, in turn, charged with the poetic intent of his calligraphic hand. The realities particular to himself and his friends are transmitted through oblique, sensually idiosyncratic beauty, and his words and pictures from this time harbor their messages to varying degrees, although they never outrightly declare their creator's motives or passions as legibly as his painted motif of kissing firemen from the 80s. Even then, Wong would describe this image as "Siamese twins connected at the lips," deliberately, it would seem, to confound its obvious homosexuality while heightening the rarity of its fantasy.



Wong and I share some temporal overlap. His magnificent energy was waning while I was just starting to grope for purpose in the same harsh climate. Born in 1977, my self-awareness developed in lock-step with the ravages of the epidemic. I walked in—so to speak—on tragedy, but an exhausted state of tragedy. I'd missed the halcyon days of liberation, and had been sheltered from the initial waves of chaos. The horrors of AIDS had compounded into collective loss, while the broken hearts and bitter waste of lives remained, and remain, acutely personal and untouchable. Full of life yet prepared for doom, this was the pervading atmosphere awaiting gay men as they came of age in the mid-90s.

I spent many hours digging through piles of magazines in the back of adult and gay bookstores, and was always struck by the profound erotic variety of the early 80s and the pre-AIDS 70s versus the contemporary iterations, which seemed homogeneous, even philistine, in their narrow range of lookist voyeurism. I was too young to feel nostalgia for the bygone era, but I began to see the anonymous faces—young men, about my age, in magazines from around the time of my birth—as minor stars and heroes: remote, mysterious, and worthy of adoration. Years later, the cornerstone of my artistic project became the appropriation and *reprises* of these faces; faces that seemed, to me, to hold foreknowledge of their potential destruction, as well as ulterior, ancient queer motives. Cropped to head-and-shoulders portraits, I positioned them beyond their pornographic origins and into a beaux-arts context; another world on the brink of collapse, diagraming the schism between the twin histories of implicit and explicit desire in homosexual art. *Untitled*, 2002, a china marker and watercolor drawing, is an early example. At the time of its making, I was a habitual, obsessional drawer. I think I believed that a devotional practice would lead to some kind of salvation. Certainly, I had no doubts about my brazen gay life, but like Wong, I was raised in a religious household, which left its traces. I was the son of a born-again Baptist minister who had emigrated from Peru to Canada. Perhaps due to the comparative desolation of my suburban backdrop I, unlike Wong, wanted little to do with family.

The colored pencil drawings included in this exhibition, from 2001 and 2002, were executed during quick sessions when I was about twenty-four-years-old. I was struggling to convey a sense of bewilderment—my own and what I assumed to be the condition of my subjects—that stemmed from a great rupture between queerness as it existed prior to AIDS and the foreboding that now existed in its long wake. These feelings generated a lexicon of motifs: firefly-like floaters;

bats copied from Goya's *Los caprichos*; Victorian fans, long grasses, reeds and other decorations from the mauve decade; Manet's last flowers, bouquets that he painted on his deathbed at age fifty-one; and, most importantly, pink masks that I overlaid onto faces. Much like Wong's tumultuous licks of liquid flame that contrasted with the placid demeanor of his sitters, these were my attempts at making hidden currents visible. As coy versions of S&M accoutrements, the masks were an acknowledgment, and undermining, of the prevalent organizing systems of desire and pain, which I saw as everlasting features of gay experience. And while it was nothing as revolutionary as *Angels of Light*, at that moment in my life I was participating in what would come to be considered one of Toronto's queer heydays, regularly dancing as a go-go boy in homemade masks in the mode of my colored pencil drawings, at impresario Will Munro's *Vaseline* club night and as a member of Joel Gibb's "gay-folk-church-music" band, The Hidden Cameras.

There are images of palm trees throughout this exhibition. Ubiquitous in Wong's Californian upbringing, palms act both as local backdrop and as a means of luring the viewer into more exotic, even palatial, imagined locales. Having grown up in northern climates (Winnipeg, Aberdeen, Toronto), these trees have always seemed otherworldly, with fronds like the boa feathers of a malevolent queen, or a giant tarantula perched atop a pole. My associations became specific to visits to Venice, Italy, and Venice Beach, California, where I envisioned the palm as gothic sentries, demarcating the entrance to historic places of queer exile and once burgeoning pornographic industries. Venice Beach's influence also led me to create a series of ink drawings of surfers from my own surreptitiously taken photographs. The figures are often loitering or languorous at the end of a day: bodies that have all but expended their powers. Another subtly overlapping motif is present in Wong's *Christina*, 1972. His portrait of a sullen, farouche face, head held in hands, displays a similar gesture to drawings I've made intermittently over the years of *Sleeping Boy*, 1774, a terra-cotta bust by Philippe Laurent Roland. In each instance, the daydreamer seems to emit a wave of insolence through their insouciance.

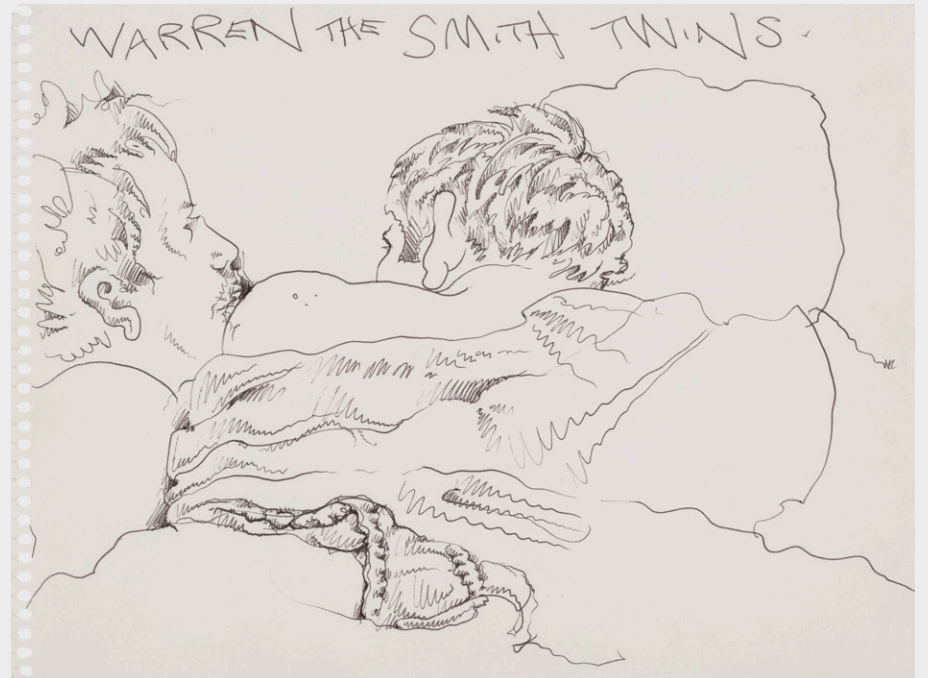
Placing my drawings alongside Wong's feels like a reanimation of my youthful search for some channel of communication or connection with those who've come before or died too soon. I still fantasize that the works of art and literature that enthral me are themselves parts of a relay, a living, perpetual call-and-response, ready for the next participant. I feel it is a particular quality of queer art, impelled and propagated by a magnetic attraction analogous to those forces that bring people together on a dance floor, or in the shadowy places where we

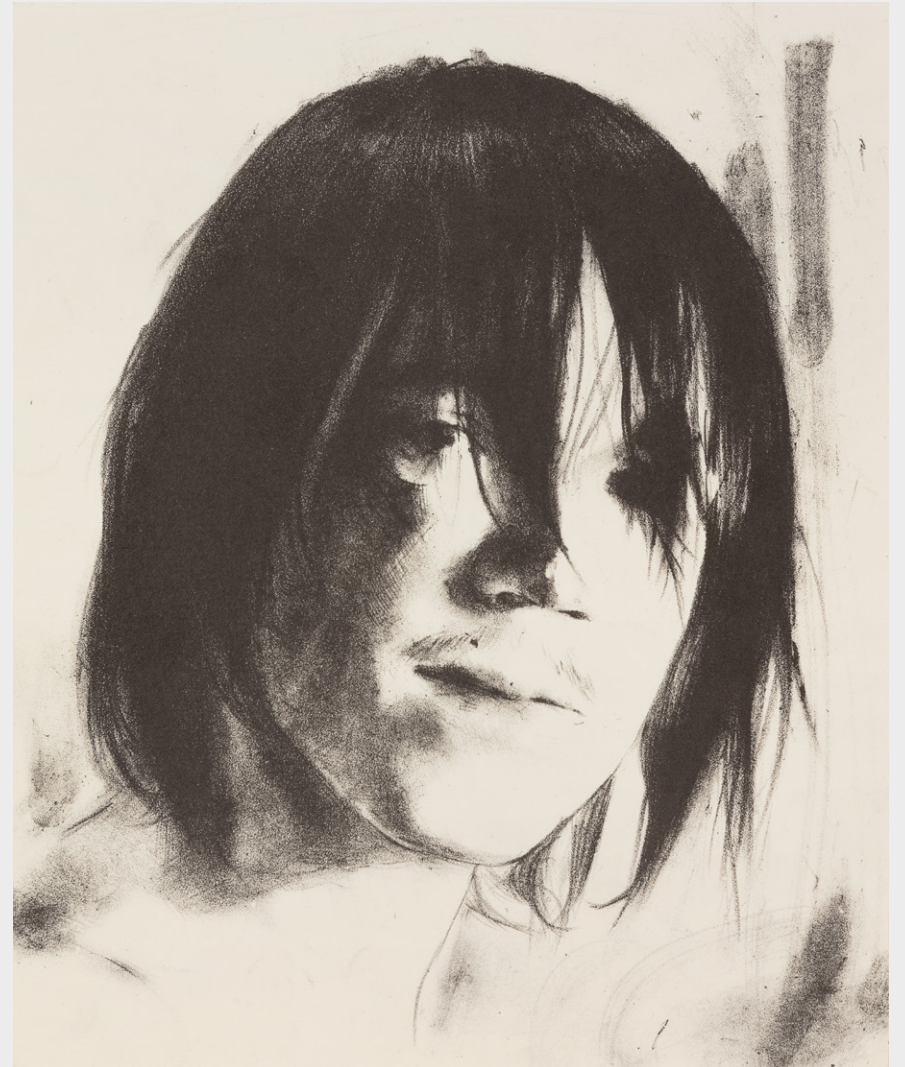
have always found one another. The work of one artist, the transmitter, seeking to pierce the isolation of some imagined, future others. A predestined delivery, sent along ethereal channels.











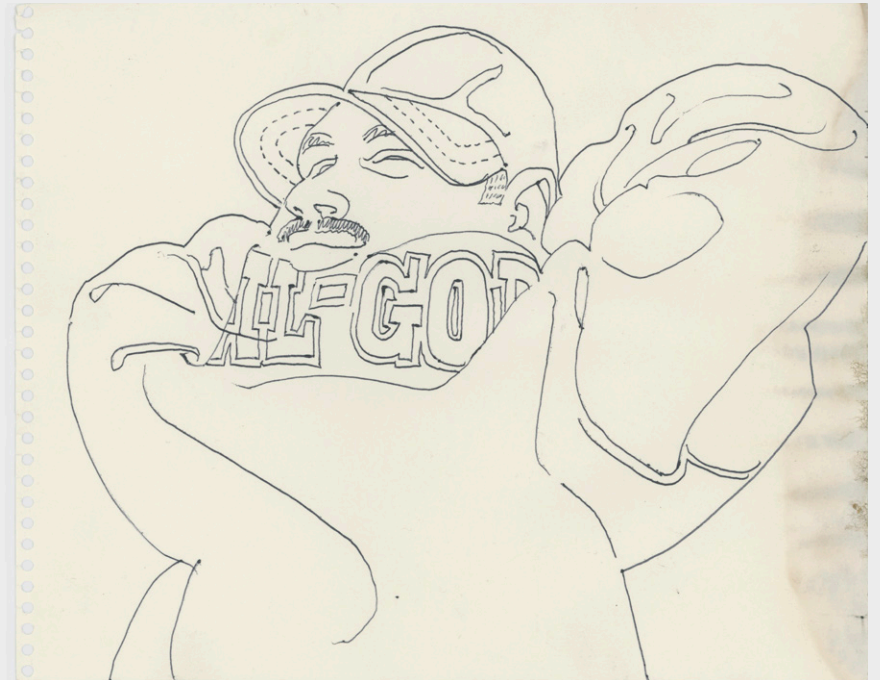
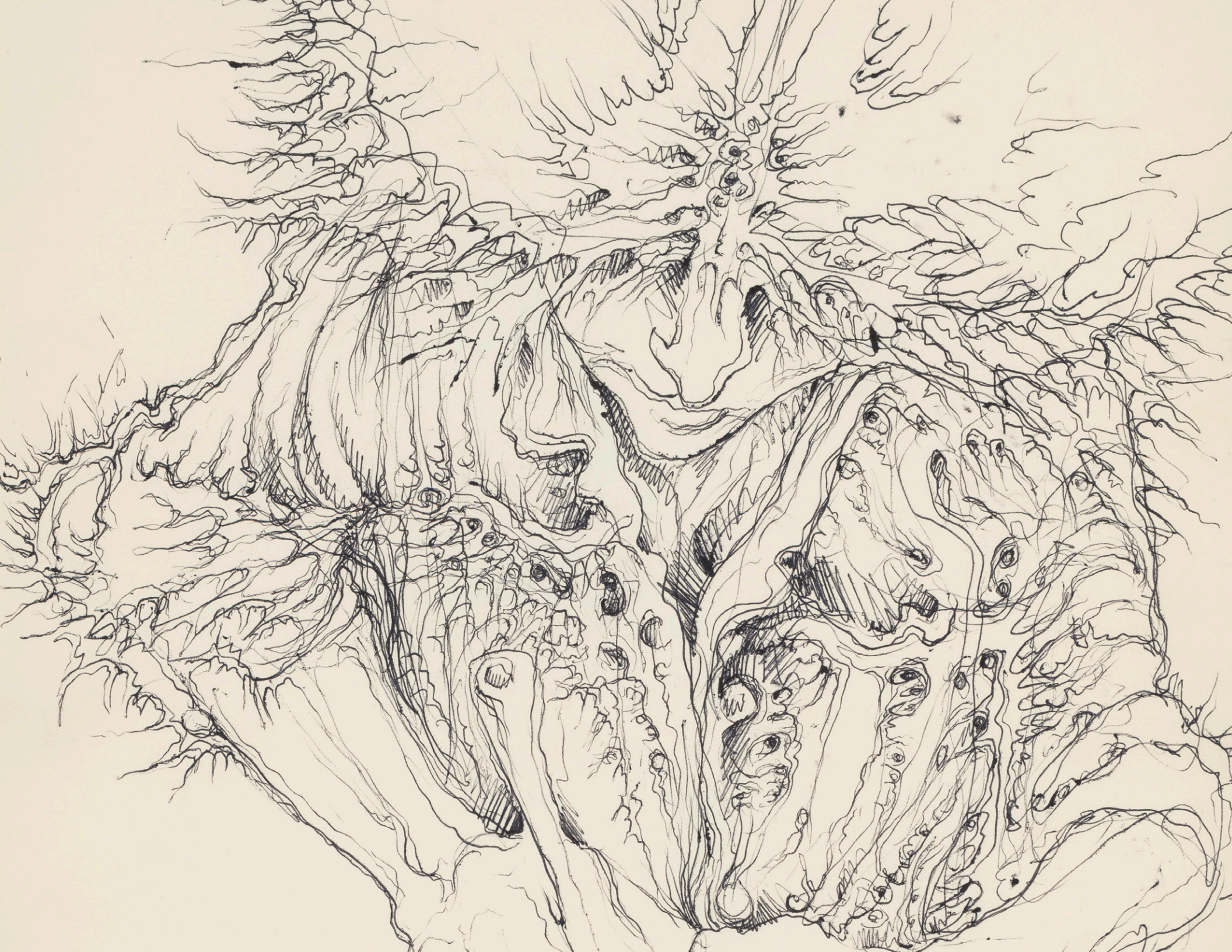


Image list:	p. 10 Martin Wong <i>Portrait of Arthur Rimbaud</i> , 1963 graphite on paper 11 3/4 x 9 1/4 ins. (29.8 x 23.5 cm)	p. 21 Paul P. <i>Untitled</i> , 2001 colored pencil on paper 8 1/2 x 11 ins. (21.6 x 28 cm)	Poem transcriptions, p. 12: BLUE STARS THEY RAINING DOWN ON YOU + SILVER TREES THEY SWIMMING TOO COBWEB IN THE MOONLIGHT WILL YOU GO WITH ME TO WHERE DREAMS ESCAPE THE SMOKEY NIGHT + GO SAILING FREE
Front cover Martin Wong <i>Self portrait</i> (detail), c. 1970 pencil on paper 11 1/2 x 9 ins. (29.2 x 22.9 cm)	p. 11 Martin Wong <i>Angels of Light in Jingle Belles</i> (detail), c. 1972 print on card-stock paper sheet: 8 1/2 x 6 1/2 ins. (21.6 x 16.5 cm) sheet open: 8 1/2 x 13 ins. (21.6 x 33 cm)	p. 22 Martin Wong <i>Warren the Smith Twins</i> , c. 1970 ink on paper 9 x 12 ins. (22.9 x 30.5 cm)	
pp. 1-2 Paul P. <i>Untitled</i> (detail), 2001 colored pencil on paper 8 1/2 x 11 ins. (21.6 x 27.9 cm)	p. 13 Martin Wong <i>Mike Christian</i> , 1969 ink on paper 12 x 9 ins. (30.5 x 22.9 cm)	p. 23 Martin Wong <i>Tom Mueller</i> , 1970 graphite and blue colored pencil on paper 12 x 9 ins. (30.5 x 22.9 cm)	ROOFTOP CHILDREN SUMMER SUN CLOTHES LINES WAVING ON THE RUN CITY HILLSIDES SHINING WHITE FRIEND SITS LAFFING FEELS JUST RIGHT
p. 3 Martin Wong <i>Untitled</i> (Tom Mueller in profile), 1970 pencil on paper 13 x 10 1/2 ins. (33 x 26.7 cm)	p. 16 Paul P. <i>Untitled</i> , 2002 china marker and watercolor on paper 10 x 6 7/8 ins. (25.5 x 17.5 cm)	p. 24 Paul P. <i>Untitled</i> , 2005 lithograph edition of 3 9 3/4 x 8 ins. (24.8 x 20.3 cm)	
p. 4 Paul P. <i>Untitled</i> (thorn puller), 2018 ink on paper 9 x 5 1/2 ins. (22.9 x 14 cm)	p. 17 Paul P. <i>Untitled</i> , 2008 graphite on paper 8 1/4 x 5 3/4 ins. (21 x 14.5 cm)	p. 25 Paul P. <i>Untitled</i> , 2001 colored pencil on paper 8 1/2 x 11 ins. (21.6 x 28 cm)	
p. 5 Paul P. <i>Untitled</i> , 2011 ink on paper 11 3/4 x 8 1/4 ins. (30 x 21 cm)	p. 18 Martin Wong <i>Untitled</i> (To Virginia from Martin), 1975 pencil on paper 12 x 15 ins. (30.5 x 38.1 cm)	p. 26 Martin Wong <i>Untitled</i> (Study for Malicious Mischief), c. 1997 ink on paper 8 x 10 ins. (20.3 x 25.4 cm)	
p. 6 Martin Wong <i>Casa Villia Senior - Ocean Side</i> , 1975 pencil on paper 14 x 11 ins. (35.6 x 27.9 cm)	p. 19 Martin Wong <i>Cristina</i> , 1972 graphite on paper 14 x 11 ins. (35.6 x 27.9 cm)	pp. 29-30 Martin Wong <i>Gregory</i> (detail), 1972 ink on paper 14 x 11 ins. (35.6 x 27.9 cm)	
p. 7 Martin Wong <i>I Love You</i> , c. 1972 pencil on paper 11 x 8 1/2 ins. (27.9 x 21.6 cm)	p. 20 Paul P. <i>Untitled</i> (sleeping), 2022 ink on paper 9 x 5 1/2 ins. (22.9 x 14 cm)	Back cover Paul P. <i>Untitled</i> (detail), 2010 lithograph 12 x 8 1/4 ins. (30.5 x 21 cm)	
p. 8 Paul P. <i>Untitled</i> , 2011 ink on paper 11 3/4 x 8 1/4 ins. (30 x 21 cm)			





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