

# Chino-Latino: The Loisaida Interview

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My friendship with Martin Wong dates back to 1984 when I interviewed him for the East Village Eye. He had recently sold his painting *Attorney Street Handball Court*, 1982–1984, to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and many of us in the East Village art scene were in awe of him. We had a great time talking and that interview was one of the best I had ever conducted with an artist. Martin was pleased that I described him as a first generation Chino-Latino artist who bridged the gaps between the Asian and Puerto Rican communities on the Lower East Side. He also discussed how his work was related to traditional Chinese art by stating: “Basically I am a Chinese landscape painter. If you look at Chinese landscapes in the museum they have writing in the sky. They write a poem in the sky and so do I.”

We remained good friends throughout the 1980s and 1990s, hard years when so many of our peers died of AIDS or drug addiction. When he fell ill himself and began making arrangements for his first retrospective at the New Museum he asked me to write a catalog essay on his Lower East Side paintings and collaborations with the Puerto Rican poet and playwright, Miguel Piñero. I conducted this interview with Martin in 1996 to gather background information for the essay: “La Vida, The Life and Writings of Miguel Piñero in the Art of Martin Wong”. Martin was happy with the way it turned out and we continued our friendship until his death and beyond, I guess, because he lives in my heart.

YR: Why did you come to New York in 1978?

MW: Just to visit and then I ended up almost immediately living here. The first day, I went to the Empire State Building and Statue of Liberty, walking back from the Statue of Liberty I saw this old waterfront hotel and I was really surprised because I was told they didn't exist anymore, so I asked if there were any rooms for rent. He said no, but there were three rooms where the ceiling collapsed, and he said if I could clear out the three rooms then he would give me one of the rooms.

YR: Where was this?

MW: South Street, The Meyer's Hotel. I ended up very quickly as the night porter for the hotel. I was like the night watcher.

YR: Do you have any paintings of that time?

MW: I did my hotel room. It's called *My Secret World*, where you are outside looking through two windows. One window has perspective and the other doesn't.

YR: So when you were there, did you start doing paintings like this?

MW: No I was doing big cartoon paintings, you know, kind of Tibetan style. Then I started doing the sign language paintings.

YR: So you did the sign language paintings before the brick paintings?

MW: The first sign language painting was also the first brick painting. That's the first time I did bricks; I did them in the frame.

YR: Which one is the first sign language/brick painting?

MW: It's called *Psychiatrist Testify: Demon Dogs to Drive Man to Murder*. (laughs)

YR: And that is a title taken from the newspapers?

MW: Yeah. It was headline in the *World Weekly News*.

YR: Right, tell me a little about your mode of working. So you used titles from this wacky newspaper.

MW: I'd spell the headlines out in sign language.

YR: So we're talking 1978–1979?

MW: By this time 1980.

YR: Were you still living at the hotel?

MW: Yeah for three years.

YR: Who were the other artists you were meeting at the time?

MW: I wasn't meeting any other artists. (laughs) For some reason I didn't look fashionable enough so they never let me in the nightclub.

YR: So who would you hang out with?

MW: Nobody.

YR: You just stayed in a hotel?

MW: And painted, yeah.

YR: About how many paintings do you think you made around that time?

MW: Oh, I don't know maybe about 30.

YR: And of those 30 that were made in that hotel could you name just a couple so I have kind of a visual sense of what they look like.

MW: *Jimmy the Weasel Sings Like a Canary*. One of them was about Jodie Foster driving her fans wild. They were all loosely titled from the *World Weekly News*.

YR: So the early paintings they were inspired by the *World Weekly News* and your surroundings.

MW: Yeah. What happened is I got the idea to do the sign language from those cards the deaf people hand you in the subways. And it just happened that day I got one of those cards, I was looking at it and then I passed a news stand and saw the headline, "Demon Dogs Drive Man to Murder". So that was how the first sign language painting happened.

YR: That painting was that about Son of Sam?

MW: Yeah Sam Berkowitz.

YR I remember he said the dog was talking to him or something, right? So what happened next, why did you leave the hotel?

MW: I had to leave because somebody bought the building—all of a sudden they convinced me that I had no choice, and I had to move. I decided one night that I was gonna find an apartment, and that I would just ask people in the street if they knew of any apartments

for rent. Then I came here. I got to this corner and there were some kids down there—I didn't realize they were drug dealers. So I asked them about apartments and they said the top floor's been vacant for a long time. I went and talked to the landlord and he rented me the apartment. It was really different when I rented it because it was all empty. And it looked like a really large spacious apartment, now it's starting to look crowded.

YR: What was the neighborhood like then?

MW: It was like it is now except much noisier, there was more street activity.

YR: Who did you meet when you moved out here?

MW: Yeah, that's how I met Piñero in the neighborhood. He was doing a poetry reading at ABC No Rio. We just kind of hit it off. He used to show me around the neighborhood and tell me weird stories. He made the neighborhood seem dramatic and like it was back then because everything was in ruins with lots of debris. You know it looked like after a war.

YR: You guys would walk around the neighborhood....

MW: In the middle of the night.... He was an entertainer. One time I saw him reciting a poem he had just written to this wine-o that had passed out. (laughs) They were sitting on a bunch of like garbage in the street, and he was reading this poem to this guy that was unconscious. (laughs) Sometimes he'd give puppet shows for the kids across the street, you know, like through the window.

YR: Where did he live?

MW: He had an apartment with his girlfriend on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street. He used to come over all the time. Then he ended up living here.

YR: For how long?

MW: Months. That was really a wild time cause he used to hang around with his little posse of kids, like Pete and Marty the twins, Ivan, Little Ivan, and this white kid named Little Brian. And I guess what they used to do for a living was hold people up.

YR: Really?

MW: Yeah, they used to call it yoking, in fact that's how Piñero met Brian. They were trying to yoke, it was the middle of the winter and they were waiting under the Williamsburg Bridge, you know, it was like abandoned. And they had to wait a couple of hours before somebody came along and then they both tried to rob the same customer.

YR: Why was Piñero robbing anyway?

MW: Just for money. You know, junkies would come into the neighborhood to score. They'd usually rob junkies.

YR: For the money, huh, was he on drugs then?

MW: He always was. (laughs)

YR: So what did you guys do in here?

MW: Well, the apartment was kind of empty: I was living with Pedro Rodriguez at the time, he was an ex-prize fighter.

YR: How did you wind up with this guy too? Where did you meet him?

MW: At the fights, he was complaining because they counted him out on a short count, and everybody was howling and booing and everything and then finally he went to leave the boxing ring and he fell on me. (laughs) He got tangled up in the ropes.

YR: Where was this?

MW: Municipal Auditorium in New Jersey—Newark, New Jersey

YR: And what were you doing there? You liked the fights?

MW: Yeah, I always liked looking at the fights, the out of the way ones were more rowdy. You know people would be drinking beer in paper buckets.

YR: Was it a hobby for you?

MW: Well, not really a hobby just something I liked to do. It just seemed like a real New York thing to do. (laughs)

YR: So he fell on you and what happened, you took him home or what?

MW: Well, I just grabbed ahold of him, that's how we met.

YR: Wow people have to bump into you basically to meet you.

MW: Yeah. (laughs)

YR: What were the paintings that you were

doing then. We're talking now 1981 through 1985, right?

MW: Yeah, that. That was when I did that collaboration with Piñero that ended up at the Met.

YR: Which ones are the paintings that are collaborations with him?

MW: Hmm, *Attorney Street: Handball Court* which is at the Met, *For my Pito, Little Got Rained On, Cupcake and Paco*, I did a scene from *Short Eyes*, you know when it reverts to Spanish.

YR: What did the collaborations consist of?

MW: Oh, you know, it'd be a painting with words in the sky.

YR: Did Piñero paint some of it? Or did the collaboration consisted of his poetry and your painting?

MW: Yeah, his poetry, my painting: in other words, I would just letter the poetry right on.

YR: Right, and these were like things you picked out, like from his books, or stuff that he was reciting.

MW: They hadn't been published. I was starting to accumulate stuff that he would just write and forget about.

YR: So where are those things now?

MW: I gave them back to Miguel Algarin. He's going to give them to the University of Texas, because they have a little study center for Piñero's poetry. They published all his poetry.

YR: How would you characterize your relationship with him?

MW: I don't know, I was just painting everyday and then he would go out to work. Then, you know in the middle of night, he'd come back with all these kids or something.

YR: So how did you support yourself?

MW: Mikey kind of paid the rent. (laughs) Then after that I think I went to work at Pearl Paint store.

YR: How long did you live together?

MW: A year and a half.

YR: And what happened when you guys split?

MW: He just didn't come home one day and I didn't know what happened to him, and then I read that he was in Los Angeles.

YR: Doing what?

MW: He got busted with Anthony Quinn's daughter.

YR: Busted for drugs?

MW: Yeah. It was a big scandal. Then, I think he came back to the neighborhood, but when he came back he wasn't living here.

YR: Did you see him?

MW: Yeah, he was living in the back of a bookshop. One of the hooks he'd get people on was he would always say he knew where the manuscript for *Short Eyes* was. So the guy

at the bookstore thought, you know, he was going to get the original *Short Eyes* eventually, but later on he finally confessed, that his sister threw it away. So nobody had it.

YR: And how did he die?

MW: Cirrhosis of the liver in 1988. He was really wild when I met him, but towards the end when he died he really quieted out.

YR: So you knew him basically until he died.

MW: Yeah. But I didn't; I wasn't hanging around him when he died really.

YR: So your collaboration consists of how many paintings?

MW: Five that were collaborations and then I would put him into other paintings like, *Penitentiary Fox*. This is a picture of him in front of Sing Sing and inside the wall you can see the original cast of *Short Eyes*. Then there's one in my store room, right now it's like an apartment building, where he's standing on a fire escape and he's also in the windows.

YR: Tell me a little bit about your insights on the neighborhood.

MW: I don't know... it seemed more adventurous back then, it was like a new territory. Piñero pretty much introduced me to the neighborhood as a subject matter.

YR: You know, the whole thing with your paintings is that they don't reflect the whole East Village scene exactly—they are kind of lonely.

MW: Yeah it's not at all glitzy. I just basically came up with those people because I was kind of like an opportunist. It's like I had given my back to the world. While Mikey and Brian were going out at night, I would just be home painting. And I think Brian was the cook, he used to make dinner with like orange soda, Ding Dongs, Devil Dogs. (laughs)... stuff like that, Twinkies, Cheetos. Brian, I always considered he was like the incarnation of the old time gangsters because he was only 15.

YR: Who were some of your neighbors that you made pictures of?

MW: Well you know like *La Vida*, or something where I did all the little people in the windows? I basically photographed people in the neighborhood and stuck them in the painting. But, I don't really know that many people in the neighborhood.

YR: Did you feel like an outsider a little bit?

MW: Yeah like a tourist.

YR: How about the whole idea that you once wrote you were like a Chino-Latino?

MW: Well, that's the way it is, my father's half Mexican.

YR: He is?

MW: Yeah, you've seen him.

YR: Well, how the hell did I know? Now, I'm really mad at you because if I had said that at the Museo del Barrio they might have let me do the show I wanted to do with you.

MW: (laughs)

YR: You jerk.

MW: (Laughing) I thought you knew.

YR: How would I know that your father's half Mexican?

MW: Well you said I was Chino-Latino, so I thought....

YR: Because you're in this neighborhood and you made a lot of paintings about the neighborhood and put Spanish in the paintings. But, so your father's half Mexican and half Chinese?

MW: Yeah!

YR: But you never learned Spanish?

MW: No, all the Spanish in my paintings is lifted from this one comic book called "Los Sonámbulos" ("The Sleepwalkers"). I would just lift little dialogs from that one comic book and put them in.

YR: Did you ever feel that you were part of the Latino community though?

MW: No!

YR: No? Even though your father's half Mexican?

MW: I used to go to the parade.

YR: The Puerto Rican Day Parade?

MW: Yeah. That was my one-day to feel Spanish. (laughs)

YR: (laughs) But you've always felt comfortable around Latinos, right?

MW: Yeah, yeah!

YR: Did you know any Latinos or Mexicans in California?

MW: Well my relatives, but they didn't speak Spanish.

YR: So did you hang out at the Nuyorican Poet's Café at all?

MW: Uh, yeah the original one, where the Pyramid is now.<sup>1</sup>

YR: What went on there?

MW: You know just poetry readings.

YR: You like poetry readings?

MW: Yeah!

YR: Did you ever write any yourself?

MW: Yeah, I've done a little.

YR: Mhm, how good a reader was Piñero in your opinion?

MW: Oh, he was fantastic. Bimbo Rivas could do a good imitation of him.

YR: Oh really?

MW: Yeah after he died Bimbo would read some of his poetry, like you know, "Scatter my Ashes on the Lower East Side" and he would read it pretty much the way Piñero used to read it.

YR: What would you characterize as Classic Martin Wong themes?

MW: Bricks and jails.

YR: Have you ever been in jail?

MW: No, well one night for disturbing the peace.

YR: What is it about jail that is so interesting to you?

MW: Just that the way I painted them. 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.

YR: But what is it about jail as a subject matter that fascinates you?

MW: Just the fact that it's white on white.

YR: Is a jail really white on white?

MW: No! (laughs)

YR: (laughs) Well then....

MW: (laughing) The way I painted it, you know, I would simplify things a whole lot and then I'd like to play with the bars like have things going on behind the bars.

YR: Mhm, did you like Piñero's work because it was also about jail?

MW: Well that's how I started doing the jail paintings; he was always talking about when he was in jail.

YR: Well what did he like so much about jail?

MW: It was kind of a whole society that he was a part of.

YR: Were you attracted to that society?

MW: Well I knew a lot of the ex-cons, you know?

YR: How?

MW: Through Piñero, you know, like Peter Goya, all these people that had been in jail with him, so they used to sit around and reminisce.

YR: And the firemen scenes, when did that begin?

MW: Oh that just happened because I have a weird infatuation for the fire department.

YR: Yeah, but when did those paintings begin to happen?

MW: 1986. I don't know for some reason I just became a big fire nut.

YR: Were there a lot of fires going on around here or something?

MW: It wasn't the fires I was attracted to. It was the firemen. (laughs)

YR: How many paintings do you think you've made of the firemen?

MW: Not that many, well I mean they were in a bunch of paintings.

YR: Right



YR: Mmhm did you know any firemen personally?

MW: Yeah, Stevie.

YR: Where did you meet Stevie? Is he still around?

MW: Uh, I met him in the neighborhood.

YR: So you would dress him up?

MW: As a fireman and paint him, is that like abuse? (laughs)

YR: Would you pay him or....

MW: No!

YR: Did he like it?

MW: I guess so.... (laughs)

YR: Did they come out in one sitting or many different sittings?

MW: Many different sittings. Did you ever see me in my fireman's outfit?

YR: Yeah, many times. I remember you wore it in that X-rated show that I came to see. That was a pretty wild party. So we have firemen, policemen, what are we missing?

MW: Convicts.

YR: And who's in the convict series?

MW: Just different people, some of the neighborhood people, you know, I would just pose them sitting on a bed and then paint the

bed into a chair. I think one of the guys got really pissed about these paintings was Sharp, because I painted him so many times that everything started to look like him anyway.

YR: What was your relationship with him like?

MW: It was wild; it was like my second childhood or something....

YR: Really?

MW: Yeah...That's how I fell into all this graffiti stuff.

YR: Right, so let's go back, when did you meet Sharp?

MW: At Pearl Paint store, I think when he was 15. I can't remember the year; I think it was 1981.

YR: What was he buying?

MW: He was stealing from the other floors, but he couldn't steal from my floor because we were the canvas department. There's just no way you can steal canvas.

YR: And so you met him and....

MW: Oh, he would take me to the Tunnel and introduce me to all his friends. Sharp looked Hispanic but he is actually half black, half Jewish.

YR: Really?

MW: Yeah his father was pretty well off in a fire escape company.

YR: Did he live around here?



*War and the Rumors of War, 1983*  
Acrylic on canvas

MW: No, up on 96<sup>th</sup> street.

YR: So why was he one of your favorite subjects?

MW: He just had that look.

YR: What look?

MW: He was beautiful. (laughs) I mean he just seemed to sum up the neighborhood even though he wasn't from here.

YR: Well, okay yeah when you talk about summing up the neighborhood, I mean obviously you've summed it up in your work, but maybe you can elaborate more about what this neighborhood meant to you, or

what you see in it that you think makes it so special from any other place.

MW: Well, it's like when Piñero was here I would just meet all of these beautiful gangsters. (laughs) Yeah for a while I lived with Piñero, and for a while I lived with Lee Quinones and both times I guess it was like living with a Puerto Rican movie star (laughs) or an ex-movie star. Yeah, Brian was the wildest he was like white from a rich family in Forest Hills and he used to just come down here to rob people and he didn't have to, his parents were rich. But he was just like driven, and that's why I think he was a reincarnation of a gangster.

YR: You like to live on the edge.

MW: You know sometimes, yeah I just watch, you know, one time me and Brian were walking up around Christie Street and he goes watch this, you know. So he goes up, there was this pimp in a van, like a really fat pimp and he goes up to the pimp and he holds up a ten dollar bill and he says, hey mister can you change this for me and the guy goes yeah you know, and then he robs him.

YR: And what did you do?

MW: Nothing, he was busy trying to chase Brian. Another time we were walking down Houston Street and this really big guy comes out of a car, you know, and he goes okay I got you now, you know. And at that point Brian just grabbed the door, you know, it was like winter and all full of ice and snow and he just slammed the door on the guy a couple times and the guy fell over, slipped on the ice and fell down (laughs) and then we got home and I said, who was that guy? And he said oh somebody I robbed last summer. (laughs)

YR: So the neighborhood for you has a criminal aspect to it....

MW: It still does.

YR: That you find fascinating in a certain way.

MW: Well not fascinating, it's just there. And I'm here. I mean, I'm just here because of cheap rent. If I had ended up in another neighborhood, I can't imagine how different it would have been.

YR: And when did you start doing the Chinatown series?

MW: The Chinatown series is something I always wanted to do when I first came to New York, but I didn't have the technical facility yet, so after I did the Lower East Side paintings, that's when I did the Chinatown paintings, like I had wanted to do them for about 20 years and then suddenly I just did them.

YR: Was that 1987-1988?

MW: 1990s. They just happened all of a sudden.

YR: So the 1980s were mostly....

MW: All Lower East Side.

YR: You still do some Lower East Side back and forth haven't you?

MW: Uh, I tried to do some miniature tenements lately, but I'm not satisfied with them. I can't really paint the neighborhood because the time is too different now. I mean they cleaned up all the empty lots.

YR: So what are you painting now?

MW: Nothing. I'm retired.

YR: You can paint San Francisco.

MW: Well that's basically what I did in the Chinatown paintings. I was painting San Francisco even though I was doing it here. It took me about 20 years to accumulate all of the source material.

YR: I guess we're gonna go into formal aspects of how you paint. What kind of acrylic do you use?

MW: Goldens and Utrecht.

YR: Do you mix your paint?

MW: Yeah, I stick to earth pigments, like the kind that you come across in ceramics, like red iron oxide. I never used actual red for the bricks. I used red iron oxide.

YR: What kind of canvas do you use?

MW: Linen.

YR: Do you prime the canvas with anything in particular?

MW: I put primer with layers of paint.

YR: Any particular color?

MW: Sometimes red, sometimes gold, and sometimes black. Some of the paintings are painted on other paintings. There could be three or four paintings on a canvas, and sometimes the paintings that got painted over are better than the ones that got on top.

YR: What kind of brushes do you use?

MW: Just regular brushes, except to do the detail I use ceramic brushes, the ones for decorating porcelain.

YR: Do you consider yourself self-taught?

MW: Yeah, I mean, I took painting classes before, but the way I ended up painting is, I just started doing that by myself.

YR: Right, because it sort of falls in between cartoon and naïve painting.

MW: Yeah, the secret is when I paint people I like to have it look like I cut the faces out of an old faded newspaper and glued it directly onto the canvas. I mean there's a flatness to the pictures, they are like quilts or something.

YR: They have a fuzzy look to them.

MW: Yeah, and you know, no perspective.

YR: So tell me some of your favorite paintings.

MW: *Penitentiary Fox*, one of my favorites, *Attorney Street: Handball Court*, *Mikey Reads*, most of the, my favorite paintings were from back then. *Harry Chong's Laundry*, is another one of my favorites. My brick pricks, these are for over my bed, but they kind of fell down after I moved back to San Francisco for a while.

YR: Are you satisfied with what you've done?

MW: Yeah, that's basically why I stopped painting. I knew I couldn't equal what I had already done, you know. And everything I've ever wanted to paint, like the Chinatown paintings, I've painted. When I was younger, I was always paranoid that I would die before I could finish my paintings and at a certain point I actually finished them.

YR: It's good to know that you are in peace with what you made and you're happy with the way they look.

MW: Yeah.