

# From the collection

As part of the third Auckland Triennial, Chinese art collective the Long March Project has raised questions around the importance of having a Chinatown to create a sense of community and identity for a growing community of Chinese migrants living in Auckland.

But New Zealand also has a significant community of Chinese people who were born here and for artists such as Wong Sing Tai (aka Harry Wong) and his younger brother Brent Wong, cultural identity never played an obvious role in their work.

Born in 1943, Harry Wong emerged on the art scene at a time when abstract painting was on the wane and a new generation of New Zealand painters, including Rick Killeen, Dick Frizzell and Paul Hartigan, was returning to figurative images while sidestepping the earnest regionalism of their predecessors. Picturesque landscapes, patriotic motifs and classical poses were replaced with a more international language of contemporary urban images drawn from beyond the world of fine art, including comics, movies, graffiti and advertising. For Wong, growing up above a Vivian Street shop in downtown Wellington must have provided an inspiring environment. One of these stores was also a focus for the local Chinese community, some travelling from Greytown or Featherston in the Wairarapa.

Embarrassed by the success of winning the 1968 Benson and Hedges Art Award with a slightly surreal depiction of a prison cell as a metaphor for emotional angst, he stopped working in that fashion and switched to a simpler, more universal use of symbols, which he still considered as containers for energy and psychic states. Using a distinctive technique of painting flat, unmodulated areas of colour by painting onto the reverse of Perspex to intensify the image helped push this directness even further.

A favourite subject of Wong's was vehicles, including comic book bomber planes and sci-fi rocket ships. "The most potent contemporary art is not to be found in galleries but in the mass media", he was quoted as saying in the catalogue for Francis Pound's 1983 exhibition *New Image. Vehicle*, his work in The University of Auckland Art Collection seems less typical, resembling an undulating field of abstract colours. Wong says it was painted at a time of intense internal struggle during which he became Buddhist. This image is a more symbolic vehicle, based on Buddhist meditational yantras with the colours representing emotional states.



Having declared that he never saw himself as a painter but as an artist that is free to choose his medium, he switched to making films in the mid-1970s. Still working in the film industry, he now makes social and historical films about different eras of Chinese settlement in New Zealand and the social environments they created, including opium dens and Chinatowns.

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