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# CULTURE SEEN

## Paul Wong: Taking A Look

October 12, 2011. 5:03 pm • Section: Culture Seen

Paul Wong likes to look. Whether it's in his hometown of Vancouver or on the road travelling, Wong is out in the world looking at what's going on around him. Rather than carefully planning every move he takes in advance, Wong relies to a great extent on seeing something that interests him and acting. In other words, he relies on intuition.

That's what happened on a recent trip to Cuba. He was in Havana in the legendary [Habana Riviera](#), the luxurious hotel built by the U.S. gangster Meyer Lansky. The kind of place where mobsters smoked cigars and drank mojitos, it became such a symbol of U.S. imperialism in its first two years that Fidel Castro held one of his first news conferences in the hotel after the Cuban Revolution in 1959.

On the day Wong was there, a tropical storm blew in. As he looked out on the Malecon, the road and seawall that extends along the coast, Wong could see the storm lashing against passing trucks and pouring rain onto the windows and patio of the hotel.

At that moment, with his digital video camera in hand, he decided to record the storm. But not just from one vantage point but from seven. In one of the views, rain hits the windowpane and leaves vertical runnels of water while in the background, more rain falls in great gobs and dissolves the grid of the patio's tiles. By filling the entire area of the flat screen on which it is projected, the window pane becomes a second screen through which the world – and the work itself — is seen. Rain never looked so luminous.

Accompanying the video installation is a soundtrack that at first sounded entirely digital. But Wong said it was made by only slightly altering the sound of the rain falling during the storm. The combination of images and surround sound makes watching *Habana Riviera* an experience that goes right into the nervous system.

The video is one of 17 works in an exhibition opening Thursday at [Winsor Gallery](#). Called *Immanent*, the exhibition includes several video works along with photographs and neon.

Raised in Vancouver and strongly associated with the city, Wong was pioneer in making art with video starting in the mid-1970s. Since then, he has had numerous exhibitions in experimental and artist run spaces and in public galleries and spaces. But until the current exhibition at the Winsor Gallery, he hasn't had a major exhibition in a private

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gallery in Vancouver.

“I think it is really my time right now,” Wong said in an interview in his studio. “I’m having a lot of fun. I re-embraced the city four years ago. This is the city embracing me as well. After being out there in the dark for all those years, the market is ready for me.”

Over the years, Wong has created a reputation for making art about tough issues such as race, death and sex.

One of his videos was at the centre of what was arguably the city’s biggest art controversy of the past 30 years. In 1984, when the Vancouver Art Gallery cancelled showing [Confused: Sexual Views](#), his work about people talking about sex, it led to protests and animosity with the city’s art community for years. Since then, the gallery has made amends and purchased the work which is now on display in its own pink exhibition area as part of the [An Autobiography of Our Collection](#).

Last year, Wong staged one of the best visual arts exhibitions during the 2010 Olympic and Paralympics. Called [5](#), it was a collection of five site-specific performances, events and experiences around the city that included the *Zooooom Video Bus* and an installation at Mountain View Cemetery called *One More Than Three*.

In 2005, Wong was awarded the [Governor General’s Award in Visual and Media Arts](#).

Stormy weather appeals to Wong as the Winsor exhibition includes a second video showing rain. *Storm* shows a rainstorm as seen from the front windshield of a car driving along a freeway. It was shown at the VAG’s *How Soon is Now* in 2009.

The exhibition at Winsor includes the artist’s autograph in neon and four prints of Wong’s face superimposed on multiple copies of Wong when he was featured on the front cover of *The Georgia Straight* before the Vancouver 125th anniversary celebration in Stanley Park earlier this year.

A series of works shows how easily Wong moves from one medium to another. He took a series of photographs of the full moon with a camera that he jiggled slightly during the exposure. The bright squiggly lines against black backgrounds look like someone trying to scrawl out the beginnings of a written script. Grouped together in 21 photographs and called *9 Full Moon Drawings*, they look cinematic, like moments taken out of a flow of images. Using the original image in a new context, Wong has selected some of the drawings and made them sculptural and three-dimensional by turning them into neon.

*Immanent* is from Thursday, Oct. 13 to Saturday, Nov. 5.