

REIMAGINING THE GARDEN

Multidisciplinary artist Jennifer Wen Ma creates stunning world in “Paradise Interrupted”

By SUSAN MORRIS • August 4, 2016



Qian Yi in *Paradise Interrupted*. (Courtesy Stephanie Berger)

When one thinks of gardens, lush, fertile and verdant settings with splashes of color usually come to mind. But the Edenic world created in Jennifer Wen Ma’s *Paradise Interrupted* is black and white. And yet the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Peony Pavilion, and the Garden of Eden were all on Ma’s mind

when she conceived the “installation opera” that just opened the 2016 Lincoln Center Festival, which she designed, directed and co-authored. This monochromatic world is inhabited by The Woman (Qian Yi, who the *New York Times* calls “China’s reigning opera princess”) who, garbed in simple, flowing white and a 3-D printed headdress, awakens from a vivid, rapturous dream of pleasure. By contrast, the real world feels barren and alone, a black stage with black/grey video behind and an outlined square around her, first white and then black. Highlighted by a constellation of light, she follows the Earth’s four wind elements (embodied by four male singers) through a gate into a white space boasting a black line which lifts into a stylized young tree. As the branches multiply and grow, black paper cutout foliage appears to form the origami-like dark lushness that is the garden. Digital fireflies dart and swarm, voice activated in real time by the Woman’s singing. The fireflies coalesce into a man, who then dissipates.



Transformation is key—the four Elements become wolf spirits; the tree continues to grow taller and fuller. An ink drop on the ground marks the spot where a large white geometric flower unfolds like a pop-up book, the symbolic fulfillment of the Woman’s paradise, where she once again falls asleep. When she awakes, she is stuck in the flower’s clutches, realizing that desire has imprisoned her. As the Woman frees herself, the flower collapses, the garden deconstructs, black ashes rain down, and the garden returns to nothing. With new clarity, the Woman, in her white gown now with black splotches at the base, rises up from the black ink pool, where she can paint any world she

imagines. Ma worked closely with architect Matthew J. Hilyard of FTL Design Engineering Studio to realize the design.



Qian Yi in *Paradise Interrupted*. (Courtesy Stephanie Berger)

Probably best known as Chief Designer for the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, which earned her an Emmy for the U.S. broadcast, Ma's interdisciplinary practice bridges video, drawing, performance, public art and fashion design. Those ceremonies could be considered a dry-run for opera.

Currently, her work can also be seen at the [Cass Sculpture Foundation](#) in West Sussex, England (July 3- November 6) in the exhibition *A Beautiful Disorder*. Her piece is called *Molar* (referring to biological mass), a site-specific work that is also about a paradisiacal garden that brings the landscape indoors with an upside-down, suspended black Tyvek tree with flash-spun non-woven HDPE fiber leaves and glass teardrops that drip down from the ceiling and birth a landscape below. Note that the materials are cast-offs from "Paradise Interrupted." Ma notes that the word "paradise" means "walled enclosures" in Old Iranian, hence her landscape is lined with walls made of mirrored Plexiglas featuring etched trees that form a rectangle filled with 75 kilograms of black Chinese ink and golden-colored glass balls. Here, she also worked with Hilyard.



*Molar, 2016 Commission for the exhibition *A Beautiful Disorder* at the Cass Sculpture Foundation. (Courtesy Barney Hindle)*

These continue Ma's garden-inspired artworks, many of which were run-ups to *Paradise Interrupted*: in 2012 at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing, she initiated an opera performance from the Peony Pavilion under her installation called *Hanging Garden in Ink* that proved to be a catalyst. The following year at the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in [Rotterdam](#), she staged *In Search of the Garden of Eden*. Also, in 2013, Ma was an artist in residence at Performa 13 where she prototyped *Paradise Interrupted*, which premiered at Spoleto. Other garden-related installations include Pittsburgh's Market Square (*A Winter Landscape Cradling Bits of Sparkle*, 2015), the Shanghai Contemporary Art Fair (*Who Would have Expected to Encounter Ni Zn's Gentlemen in S-Chant?*, 2011), St. Moritz lakeside (*Germinating Thoughts*, 2011), and Art Gallery of New South Wales (*Petrified Garden*, 2010). She has even used the motif in fashion with her *Dark Blossom* dress (2012) and *Hanging Garden Scarf*.



Nature and Man in Rhapsody of Light at the Water Cube. (Courtesy Wang Xin)

Another work currently on display is *Nature and Man in Rhapsody of Light at the Water Cube* at the National Aquatic Center in Beijing by PTW Architects of Australia, built for the 2008 Olympics. In 2013, Ma and lighting designer Zheng Jianwai were commissioned to illuminate the Cube to activate and reimagine the skin of this iconic building. The daily interactive programming for the Cube, which was crafted by video designer Guillermo Acevedo, collects Emojis used on a Chinese website and interprets them using the *I Ching*; this process uses the same technology he employed for voice activation in “Paradise Interrupted.” Perhaps the water here is nourishing Ma’s gardens.

And if you’re in New York on November 11, see Ma at the Asia Contemporary Art Week’s *Field Meeting*, curated by Leeza Ahmady, at the Guggenheim Museum, where Ma will present a lecture/performance on the four-year long alchemical process of creating “Paradise Interrupted” with another artist playing the voices in her head. In a marked contrast, the fluid, serendipitous, improvisational artist process of her art-making plays out against the codified and rule-based traditions of Chinese opera.