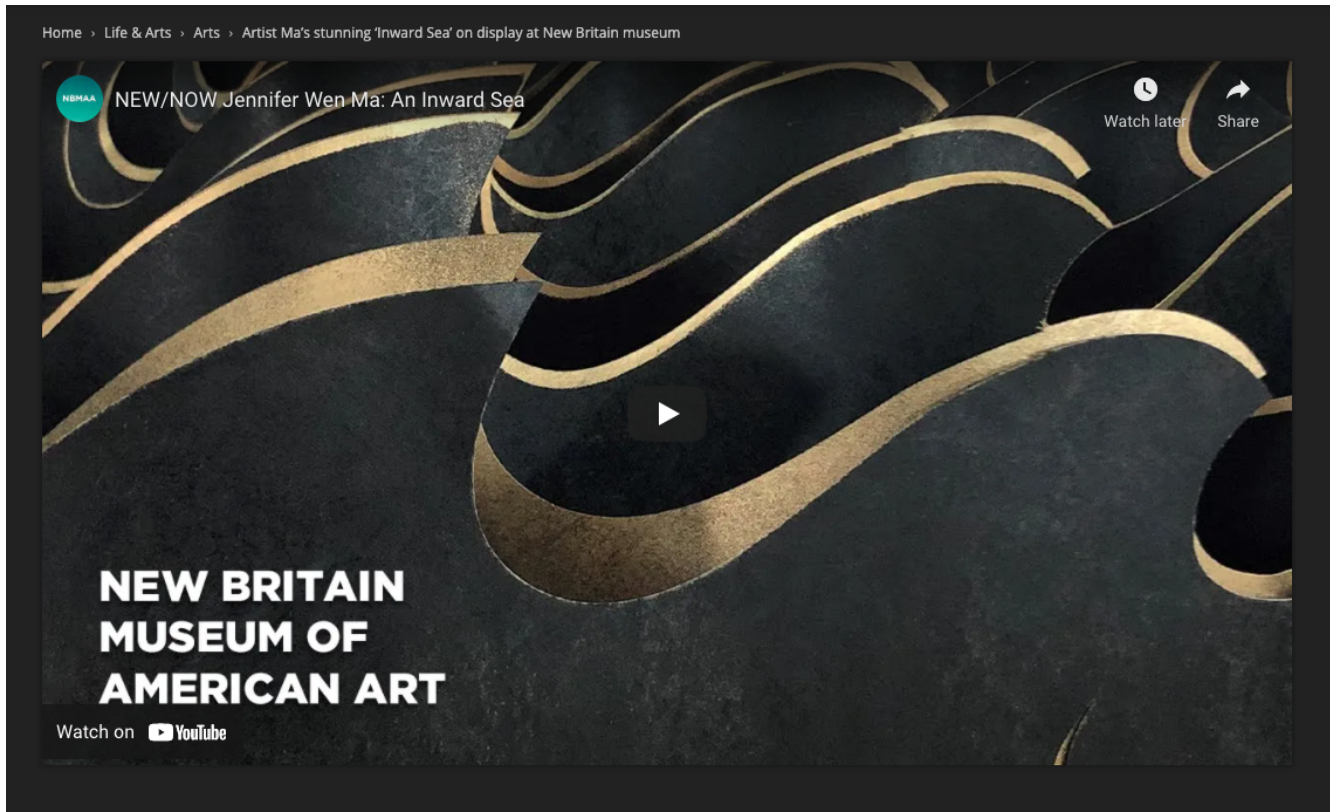


<https://www.rep-am.com/featured/2021/06/05/artist-mas-stunning-inward-sea-on-display-at-new-britain-museum/>



# Artist Ma's stunning 'Inward Sea' on display at New Britain museum

BY TRACEY O'SHAUGHNESSY REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN June 5, 2021

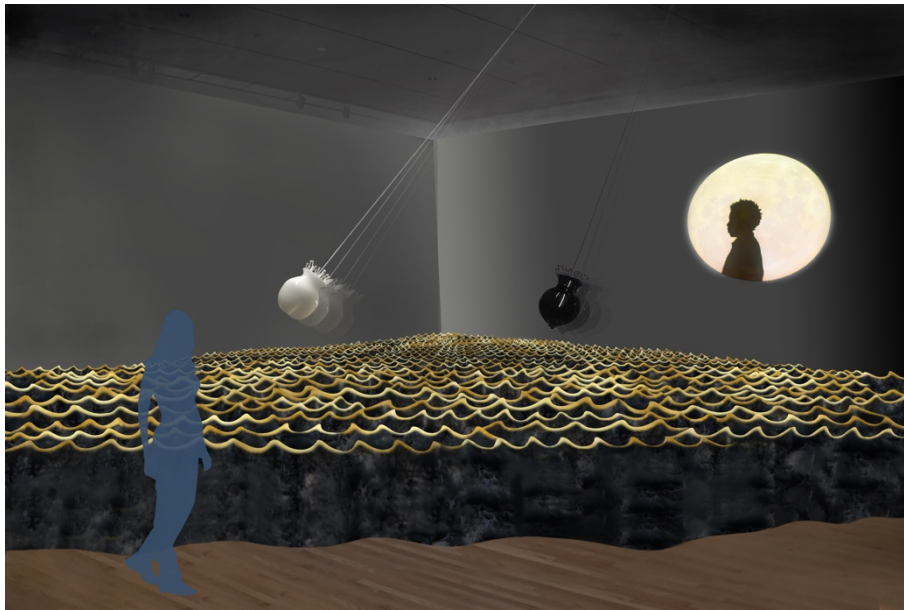
To Walt Whitman, it was a “howler and scooper of storms,” a place of convulsive breaths and “unshovell’d yet always-ready graves.”

To Jennifer Wen Ma, it is a force of chaos and calm, isolated and uniting, rhythmic and anarchic. It is, in the patois of her breathtaking new installation at the New Britain Museum of American Art, a churning, unfolding metaphor for a pandemic year.

Ma, a multi-disciplinary artist whose work bridges media from installation to video, drawing and performance, has created a stunning evocation of the raucous, terrifying, cacophonous

year we have just endured with a piece that puts us right back into the whorl again, with all of its din and horror.

“An Inward Sea” is a site-specific exploration of the pandemic’s effect on all of us. It draws from Ma’s own experience, as a Chinese-American immigrant, traversing a wide, dark sea, caught in a typhoon of caution and contradiction, peril and peace. She has created this seascape out of 10,000 linear feet of paper, painted black and laser-cut into undulating representations of waves. Ma links the paper through string, which allows it to stretch, accordion-like, across the muted gray space. Each of the waves is outlined in shimmering gold paint, which gives the work an iridescence that appears to be generated by a corner moon.



A rendering of “An Inward Sea.” (Contributed)

The moon itself is a spotlight that projects video silhouettes of local residents talking about their individual experience of anxiety, trauma, fury and peace that have inundated them through the last year.

Above all of this hang two motorized pendulums, 18 feet apart, each holding 25-pound glass vessels, one white and one black, each sexually suggestive. The pendulums move out of synch over the gold black waves, while the video layers speaker after speaker over one another to create a sense of aural fog.

It’s a brilliant evocation of the confusion, despair, anguish and loss that has resounded over the last year. Ma, who won an Emmy for helping to design the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony, managed to create an experience that is interior and collective, personal and yet pervasive.

This is an experience rather than a depiction. It is meant to be felt, not looked at. It includes passages through which visitors can walk to experience the sense of movement and imbalance the piece conjures. As with all turmoil, on the sea or in life, there are eddies of calm. The sea, which sustains as it devours, also offers buoyancy and wonder. That means that even as "An Inward Sea" destabilizes, it uplifts, a curious balance between hope and terror. Sure, the drone of the ceaseless sway of the pendulum and the dissonance of the voices unsettles, but it becomes numbing to the point of lulling. Now and again, a poignant voice emerges from the racket. "I've been waiting forever to live alone again," one older woman, who has raised three children and buried two husbands, says.

It's a realization that even as the pandemic unsettled some lives, it allowed others to flower in ways they had not before. The black waves sparkle with iridescent hope.

This is a site-specific piece, which means that Ma interviewed people from New Britain and the surrounding towns, many of them children and grandchildren of immigrants. For them, the gold-tipped sea was a passage to be traversed.

"I think the idea of the sea is so important to Americans," Ma said. "It's really a metaphor of what we all have gone through."

Those ticking pendulums, lurching incongruously, out of sync but occasionally in sync, speak not only to the incoherence of the last year, but also to time itself, warping in ways that seemed so much less rhythmic than in any year before. This is a piece that marries fragility with endurance, paper with metal, confusion with rhythm. All of it underscores the undulant beauty that can drown out time, suffering and memory itself. It is a must-see exhibit, arguably the best the New Britain Museum of American Art has had in decades.



Jennifer Wen Ma (Contributed)

***What: Jennifer Wen Ma's  
"An Inward Sea"***

***Where: The New Britain  
Museum of American Art,  
56 Lexington St., New  
Britain***

***When: Through fall***

***How: Call 860-229-0257 or  
visit [nbmaa.org](http://nbmaa.org)***