

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

Paradise Interrupted Is a Cutting-Edge Opera for the Next Generation

Inside the set design of the jaw-dropping show that's taking New York's Lincoln Center Festival by storm

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Posted July 12, 2016



Photo: Julia Lynn



Opera lovers will find fertile ground when the curtain rises on *Paradise Interrupted*, cutting-edge young composer Huang Ruo's one-act, 90-minute exploration of unattainable love at New York's Lincoln Center Festival. Written for and starring the celebrated soprano Qian Yi—who performed to universal

raptures in the 16th-century, 20-hour Chinese opera *The Peony Pavilion* at Lincoln Center Festival back in 1999—*Paradise Interrupted* is an electrifying reverie set within a fantastical garden, one in which the black-and-white palette and stylized vegetation evoke traditional Chinese scroll paintings but the moving parts are absolutely modern.

Both magical and menacing, giant flowerbeds made of laser-cut black paper slowly unfold, grow tall, and floridly blossom. A tree fashioned of rope shoots from the stage and unfurls, spreading its spidery branches above the cast and sprouting huge leaves. Voice-activated video imagery (devised by artist Guillermo Acevedo) drips, splashes, spangles, sparkles, and swirls, and beautifully bizarre 3-D-printed flowers bloom on the wig made for Yi, who, dressed in fluttering white, wanders through the endlessly morphing obsidian-dark plant life.



Photo: Julia Lynn

The set is the work of Beijing-born, Manhattan-based artist Jennifer Wen Ma, who helped mastermind the Emmy Award–winning visual and special effects for the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and directs *Paradise Interrupted*. Fascinated by age-old Chinese ink, which is made from charcoal, Ma uses the material to paint live plants for gallery installations and in the creation of temporary black landscapes such as *Alpha Lillstrom Portrait Garden*, a plein-air 2014 public artwork commissioned for an empty lot in Washington, D.C. Last year Ma blackened 126 live trees for *A Winter Landscape Cradling Bits of Sparkle*, a public artwork set up in Pittsburgh’s Market Square, and in Brazil in 2013, she conjured up *Isle of Enchantment*, an artificial island that she planted with 6,700 live plants and hand-painted with more 1,400 pounds of Chinese ink.

Paradise Interrupted, which made its debut last year at Spoleto USA in Charleston, South Carolina, appears at Lincoln Center’s Gerald W. Lynch Theater on Wednesday, July 13, Friday, July 15, and Saturday, July 16.