

ARTnews

CRITIC'S PICK JENNIFER WEN MA



Jennifer Wen Ma with characters from her upcoming musical, *Monstersaurus Vs. Super Defense Force*.

After the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics concluded, Jennifer Wen Ma fell into a brief depression. She and half a dozen other artists and designers had devoted the better part of two years to conceiving the elaborate opening and closing ceremonies, staged to dazzle an audience of 2 billion. Now that intensity was gone.

To emerge from her funk and regain her artistic voice, Ma, 36, turned her attention to painting again. She emerged with the video *Brain Storm* (2009), a meditative piece that opens with a wash of ink spreading across the screen. Slowly the ink lines, recorded as stop-motion animation, transform into a horse and man walking. "I had been thinking about landscape painting," says Ma. "Chinese scrolls are really multiperspective. The idea of traveling through time is embedded in the viewing of landscape." Video seemed the perfect format for making a moving scroll.

The piece—which debuted at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in March 2009 and then traveled to the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C.—stemmed from a project she did for the Olympics. She had designed an abstract ink painting, resembling the background in *Brain Storm*, that was to appear on the giant LED scroll when it was first unfurled in center field. "Even though the video ultimately was not used, it served as the main creative concept for several months, and I am proud that it helped secure ink painting a starring role in the opening," says Ma.

Considering *Brain Storm's* grand origins, the video's intimate feel is surprising. Phillips curator Vesela Sretenovic notes "the elusiveness, dreaminess, and esthetic beauty" of the piece. "It is very moving and mindful and introverted," she says.

In utterly contemporary forms, Ma's work is deftly able to reference Chinese traditions without seeming explicitly Chinese. Her family left Beijing for Oklahoma in 1986, when her father, a Communist Party member, found himself ostracized for being the son of a capitalist. Ma earned her M.F.A. from Brooklyn's Pratt Institute in 1999 and soon began working in the New York studio of Cai Guo-Qiang, best known for his pyrotechnic works (he also served on the Olympics ceremony committee). After becoming his studio manager, she quit, in 2006, to develop her own work.

Now Ma splits her time between New York and Beijing, working mainly on commissions, which are priced according to the size of the project (prices for video works begin at \$20,000). Recently she has been working with a collective called The Replaceable Meeps on *Monstersaurus Vs. Super Defense Force*, a multimedia installation and musical-theater piece about a battle between monsters and robots. And to the 17th Biennale of Sydney, which opens on May 12, Ma is contributing a grand outdoor projection work featuring the impishly destructive Monkey King, a figure from Chinese legend, flitting above the Sydney Opera House as points of light on a cloud of smoke.

—Carly Berwick

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