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The Halsey's immersive art exhibition, *Cry Joy Park*, examines social issues in Charleston

Shadow sides

By [Rachel Pendergrass](#)



Jennifer Wen Ma

Cry Joy Park features two gardens of cut paper foliage, one light and one dark.

When internationally renowned artist Jennifer Wen Ma was in Charleston developing *Paradise Interrupted*, her opera that saw its world premiere at Spoleto Festival 2015, her mind was already on her next project. She saw something hiding in the genteel, charming Southern culture of Charleston that she knew she wanted to investigate and use as inspiration for a new series of work.

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That work, *Cry Joy Park — Gardens of Dark and Light*, opens at the Halsey Institute of Contemporary art on Thursday, May 17th, as part of the 2019 Piccolo Spoleto Festival. *Cry Joy Park* is an interdisciplinary artistic installation that blurs the lines between art, community organizing, and social activism. It features two Eden-esque gardens made of cut paper foliage, one light and airy, and the other dark and oppressive, through which Ma explores the concept of paradise and utopia and how those concepts overlap with the social and political dynamics of Charleston.

The gardens are just one facet of the installation. In a room where the dark and light foliage come together is a communal dining area where Ma plans to host dinners for social activists, political leaders, and artists. Each dinner will be themed around a difficult topic that deeply affects the Charleston area, like food security, equal access to education, and re-entry into society after incarceration.

Dinner guests have been chosen with the intent of giving a platform to those who have been instrumental in shaping and serving Charleston, but who don't always get the recognition or resources they need.



Jennifer Wen Ma

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"It takes so many hands to build a paradise," says Ma, "but often at the time of harvest, not everyone is invited to the table to partake equally."

Invited guests include Dr. Ade Ofunniyin, founder and director of the Gullah Society; representatives from the Turning Leaf Project, an organization that provides skill-building, job placement, and support for formerly incarcerated men; and founder of Ideas Into Action Jessica Boylston-Fagonde, who Ma worked closely with in organizing the dinners.

Appropriate for the surreal aesthetic of the room they're hosted in, these dinners will have a strong artistic component to them as well, that Ma hopes will provide context and new perspectives on these issues.

Dances for Solidarity, an organization that works with incarcerated people in solitary confinement to create original choreography that is then performed by professional dancers and formerly incarcerated people, will be featured at one of the dinners. Sarah Dahnke, the founder and director of Dances for Solidarity, is going to lead dinner guests in a performance of one of these dances.

Other dinners will feature beat poetry, music, dancing, and storytelling performed by members of the Charleston artistic community, including a number of College of Charleston students.

This open-arms approach to collaboration extends all the way into menu planning. For a dinner focusing on the issues facing children, Ma and College of Charleston's executive catering chef Trey Dutton are collaborating with an unusual team of experts.

"We're working with these group of kids on designing a dinner menu from their perspective," says Ma. "It's risky, because we might just end up having mac and cheese, but OK!"

In addition to the invite-only dinners, Ma will be hosting brown bag lunches for the public on select Saturdays throughout the run of the exhibition, tackling the same topics as the dinners. There is also a website under development that she hopes will serve as a resource for learning about social justice issues in Charleston and finding actionable ways to get involved.

To Ma, this experience is just a beginning or a reinvigoration of these conversations. She would love for this to have a longer lasting impact, even for the dinners to continue past the run of the installation, but her main goal is to just provide a platform for these conversations.

"I'm not looking to answer all the questions, but if it can make every individual ask questions that they never thought to ask before, then it's planted a seed for more."

Cry Joy Park — Gardens of Dark and Light *will be on display at The Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art, May 16-July 6, with an opening reception on May 16. Learn more online at halsey.cofc.edu.*