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### New uses for Chinese ink: Jennifer Wen Ma paints hanging garden in Beijing

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#### CHINESE ARTIST CONTEMPORARY INK INSTALLATION

Jennifer Wen Ma, a Beijing-born New York-based artist, alters the traditional impressions of ink artwork with her new four-dimensional installation *Hanging Garden in Ink*, composed of 1500 live plants and 400kg of Chinese ink.



Jennifer Wen Ma, 'Hanging Garden in Ink', 2012, 1500 living plants, 400kg of Chinese ink, 20 x 8 x 3 meters, at UCCA Beijing. Courtesy of UCCA



### Four-dimensional ink art installation

Traditionally, ink is closely associated with and limited to two-dimensional carriers, such as a still drawing on paper, or an animation on screen. *Hanging Garden in Ink*, a site-specific artwork at **UCCA Beijing's The Nave**, transcends this limitation and, due to the arrangement that the lower half of the installation mirrors the top half, creates the effect of a garden and its reflection on water. The fourth dimension of the work is achieved as the live plants continue to grow and change the installation subtly during the exhibition period.



Jennifer Wen Ma, 'Hanging Garden in Ink', 2012, 1500 living plants, 400kg of Chinese ink, 20 x 8 x 3 meters, at UCCA Beijing. Courtesy of artist.

Referencing the **Hanging Gardens of Babylon**, Ma meditates “**on the illusion of material wealth, declarations of love, and the power of nature and myth, among other things**”. The work was difficult to complete and, according to UCCA Beijing, members, staff and volunteers were called to join Ma in hand-painting the plants with Chinese ink. Even with the extra help it took a total of twelve days to finish painting the 1500 plants.

To understand more about this exhibition and the artist herself, *Art Radar* spoke to Ma about the creation and background of *Hanging Garden in Ink*.



Jennifer Wen Ma, 'Hanging Garden in Ink', 2012, 1500 living plants, 400kg of Chinese ink, 20 x 8 x 3 meters, at UCCA Beijing. Courtesy of UCCA

**When did you accept this commission? Did the concept change during the preparation period?**

The commission was formalised last fall following my site visit in September. While the concept of the work was very clear and focused from the start, I did discover multiple nuances that I had not anticipated. The analogy for the rise and fall of civilisation through the reference of the Babylonian legend linked to Chinese history was something that didn't become fully apparent until I was on site. We have also further developed a plant adoption program that invites the public to take de-installed plants into their private homes for long-term care. This shift from public space to private space holds interest for me.

**How long did it take you to complete this work, from first contact to installation?**

I would say it took about a year. The first casual conversation about it began last spring.

**How many different species and/or types of plants are used in this work? Why did you choose these species?**

In total, 1500 plants of eleven types are used. I chose them for their relative ease of care, formal aesthetic qualities, and the feelings that they evoke.

**Is the arrangement of the plants done purely for aesthetic**



**reasons or is there a further reason for the choices you have made in terms of the structure of the piece?**

The arrangement of the plants was done quite particularly. I wanted the first view of the work to be striking and singular, so I chose a fir, which is from the Northern landscape. In the middle of the garden, the viewer will see lush plentiful Southern trees. Towards the end there is a quiet, contemplative literati bamboo grove. The garden was designed to allow the audience to go through a varied journey as they walk around the work.



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**You mentioned that you began exploring ink as a medium about three years ago. What motivated you to use this medium in the first place?**

I began working with ink in video format in 2008, and showed the first piece in 2009. What drew me to the medium were its historical richness, the temporal quality of landscape ink painting, the physical strength of the black ink and its generosity and nurturing possibilities with live plants. Also, black is the lack of all colours of light, or an exhaustive combination of multiple colours of pigment. It is a powerful

symbol of void and muteness. This duality of inclusiveness and expulsion gives great opportunity for artistic exploration.

### **When did you decide to put ink on three-dimensional materials and on live subjects, like living plants?**

The first work that began my ink painting in three-dimensional space was "You Can't Always See Where You Are Going, But Can't You See Where You've Been?" for the Echigo-Tsumari Triennial in 2009 in Japan.

### **You worked as an administrator at Cai Guo-Qiang's New York studio for eight years. Is any aspect of this experience reflected in your artwork and career?**

I was the studio director at Cai studio and being involved in every phase of Cai's artistic practice vastly varied the experience. I did everything from art management to developing concepts for large-scale works and exhibitions and implementation. Having that rich experience has certainly helped me with the practical end of my art practice. Furthermore, years of in-depth discussions with Cai looking at art from every angle also informed my approach to art making.



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### **About artist Jennifer Wen Ma**

**Jennifer Wen Ma** was born in Beijing in 1973, moved to New York at the age of thirteen, and graduated from **Pratt Institute**, New York, with a master's degree in fine art in 1991. Her works involve a variety of media, including installation, video, drawing, fashion design, performance and public art.

Besides her participation in various international exhibitions, Ma was a member of the core creative team for the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Since then, Ma has been spending more time in Beijing.

**SZ/KN/HH**

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