

Jennifer Wen Ma - Turning Ink Art into Theatrical Installations



In 2015, Jennifer Wen Ma debuted *Paradise Interrupted*, billed as an “installation opera”, at the Spoleto Festival. With a striking visual design by Ma, who also directed the work, the performance fused garden myths, ranging from the *Garden of Eden* to the *Peony Pavilion*, with a score by contemporary composer Huang Ruo inspired by the 600 year-old Kun opera tradition. Chinese opera star Qian Yi, who has not been allowed to perform in China since appearing in the historic 1999 rendition of the *Peony Pavilion* at Lincoln Center without permission, played the title role in Ma’s piece.

TEXT: Barbara Pollack

IMAGES : Courtesy of the artist and the galleries



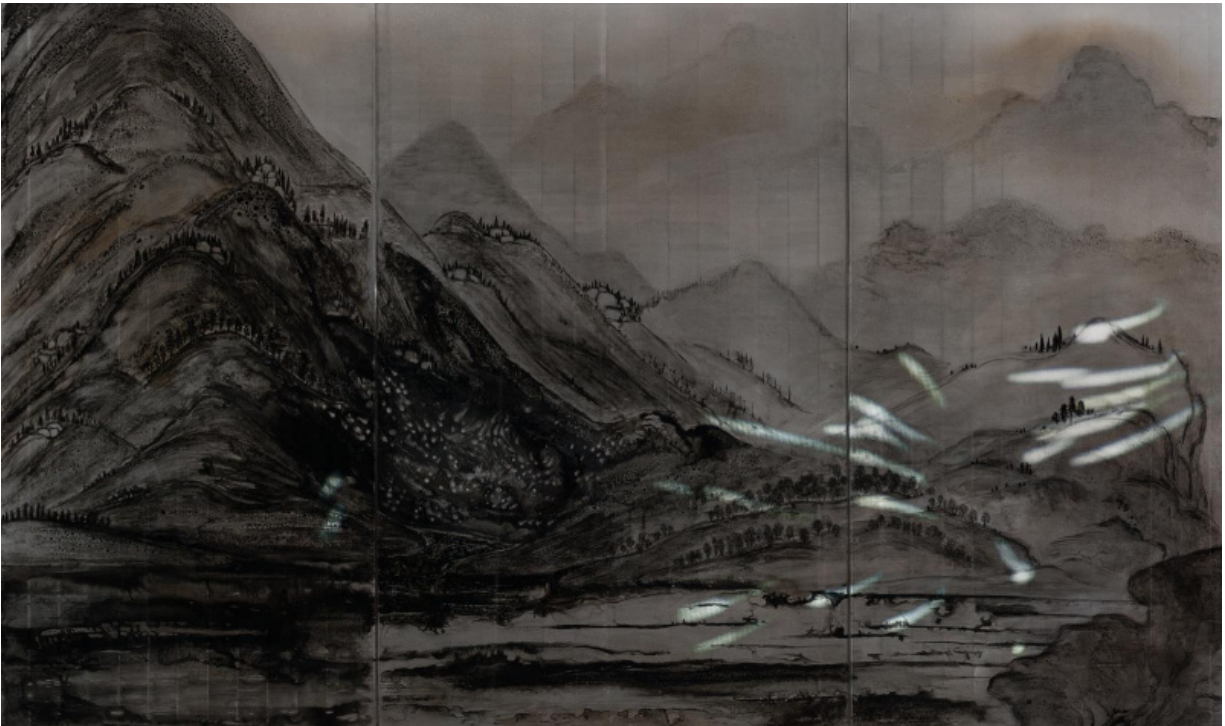
Installation view of Eight Views of Paradise Interrupted

This haunting and lovely performance plays a backdrop to the installation currently on view at the Sandra Gering Gallery, an environment that combines contemporary ink painting and innovative paper-cutting techniques to create an interior garden

setting. On the walls, Ma displays an extended scroll-like work titled *Eight Views of Paradise Interrupted*, 2017, inspired by the traditional Chinese literati painting, *Eight Views of Xiaoxiang*. Playing with multiple perspectives and a most creative use of ink on clear acrylic panels, the delicate panoramic landscape fills three walls of the gallery with sweeping scenes of mountains and waterways punctuated by miniature figures. Reaching 43 feet, the work lays out Ma's thoughts behind her opera, moving from a scene out of Milton's *Paradise Lost* of Eve, mournfully meditating on her reflection in a pond, to a moment in the Peony Pavilion when the heroine, **Du Liniang**, gazes at her self-portrait. The final panel shows a heroine, who could be Du Liniang or maybe even Qian Yi herself, gazing out on the sea, peacefully embracing a wolf.

But this installation has other layers that adds to the viewing experience. We can see ourselves in the reflections of the glossy acrylic panels, injecting a note of contemplation into the gallery. Ma also incorporates video projections—moving points of light—on the panel titled *Birth of the Fireflies*. The flickering illusion of

flittering insects enters the painted landscape seamlessly, making the entire room come alive. At other points, light casts reflections on the acrylic panels, causing the figures in the scene to appear to be shimmering in the haziness of the low-lit room.



Jennifer Wen Ma, Birth of the Fireflies, 2017. Chinese ink and paint on acrylic glass 48 x 78 inches

In order to see *Eight Views of Paradise Interrupted*, the audience must navigate around the magnificent installation in the center of

the room, a large-scale floor sculpture of a garden, made of dozens of sheets of folded and cut black paper. The entire installation can be compressed into a flat portfolio, measuring less than two inches deep, but when fully extended it reaches nearly 30 feet across the floor. Densely packed like an impenetrable thicket, this garden is both wild and cultivated, tropical and refined, referring to both contemporary installation techniques and ancient scholar's rocks.



Installation view of Eight Views of Paradise Interrupted

Ten blocks north of the Sandra Gering Gallery, Ma again works magic in a lobby installation at the Van Doren Waxter Gallery. In two discrete wall niche, she has created a pair of works, incorporating cut paper and blown glass, titled *Night Which Contains the Sea*, 2017. Standing back to view them together, we are confronted with contrasting use of materials posing a sense of duality. On the right, Ma has created an eerie chandelier flowing from the top of the space, with black curlicues of paper crowning a group of glass vessels that seem to fall from the sky. On the left, the black paper appears to crawl up the wall, like vines over taking a more refined shelter, energetically pushing towards the ceiling which, in this case, holds a single embryonic like orb. Combined, these works pull viewers in opposing directions—up and down, left and right—achieving a dynamic sensation compressed in a limited space.



Installation view of Eight Views of Paradise Interrupted

Based in New York and Beijing, Jennifer Wen Ma is best known in China for her work on the 2008 Olympics when she was part of the core team designing the special effects for the opening and closing ceremonies. She later created the permanent interactive light display on the exterior of the Aquatic Stadium, the “Water Cube”, in Beijing. But, in recent years, she has demonstrated that she can bring her mastery of media into interior settings, creating works for galleries and museums world-wide. Combining

elements of both ancient and contemporary Chinese culture, these artworks surpass more ordinary examples of “new ink art,” adding layers and subtlety to the viewing experience. She has demonstrated that she is capable of working on a monumental scale, but also in the confined space of a niche in a wall.

JENNIFER WEN MA:

Eight Views of Paradise Interrupted

Sandra Gering Gallery

May 11- July 28, 2017

Lobby Installation

Van Doren Waxter

May 11 – August 25, 2017