

INK MEETS LIGHT

Artist Ma Wen returns to Beijing's Olympic venue with new designs for the Water Cube, and a new outlook on traditional Chinese painting, **Chen Nan** reports.

Ma Wen caught a bad cold recently. For the past 30 days, she had been walking outside for hours after midnight in Beijing.

The 39-year-old visual artist was one of seven members on the core creative team for the opening and closing ceremonies of the Beijing Olympics and Paralympics. Now she is designing new outdoor illuminations for the Water Cube, the National Aquatic Center.

From 1 to 4 am, she and her team tested and adjusted her fluid light show, which will change every day.

"I see bubbles on the Water Cube as human cells. In the daytime they absorb the power from outside and inside the human body, and at night they release emotions through colors," says Ma, who has spent the past six months designing the new work, which will be officially seen by the public in March.

She used a computer program to interpret ancient Chinese teachings such as the *I Ching*, *Tao Te Ching* and the traditional Chinese almanac, as well as daily weather and societal conditions. Each day's unique characters and aura are projected as light, color, rhythm and movements on the Water Cube's facade.

She hopes the images will connect with people who are passing by, rather than simply being just decorations.

In her designs, she left the roof of the Water Cube black, unlit.

"When I worked after midnight in Beijing, I saw a different city, a quiet, dreamy and real city," she says.

"I want to retain the top of the architecture's



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ZOU HONG / CHINA DAILY

natural outlook, which merges with the darkness at night."

The blackness also flows with the artist's philosophy about *mo*, or traditional Chinese ink, which she started to apply in her artworks after the Olympic Games.

Renowned choreographer Shen Wei created dance with the free flow of the Chinese ink painting at the Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony. The combination of the ancient ink painting and the advanced LED technology impressed Ma, who spent eight months working on the visual effects for the opening ceremony.

"Since I grew up in the US, I didn't have the same passion for ink as many other Chinese

artists, who grew up being exposed to traditional Chinese painting," Ma says.

She has developed a different perspective on the legacy of ink, which dominates the artistic vocabulary in her series of artworks.

In 2010's *Furious Bloom*, she composed pots of inked chrysanthemums — the flowers traditionally used in China for funerals — against a white wall, dedicated to a friend's husband who passed away six months after their wedding.

Her attitude toward life and death is also evident in another work — at the foot of Switzerland's Engadine mountain, which overlooks St. Moritz Lake, a 1,000-square-meter area of soil painted black with ink.

Over a few days, a fine layer of tender green grass broke through the black soil to spell the words "Amor Fati", Latin for "embrace your fate" used by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche.

"I am so touched by the scene of the fresh green shoots, the evidence of the perseverance and resilience of life," she says. "The ink is organic and made of natural ingredients. Though it smells, I love it."

In the spring of 2011, Ma had her first large exhibition, *Hanging Garden in Ink*, in the Beijing 798 Art Zone's Ullens Center for Contemporary Art.

The 20-meter-long, 3-meter-wide and 8-meter-high masterpiece is a tableau of 1,400 live plants painted in black Chinese ink, leaving only their flowers in vibrant colors. The lower half of the tableau consists of real plants that mirror the top half of the installation, creating the effect of a garden's reflection on water.

She also used ink and Chinese painting as the primary medium and driving concept in her ongoing collaboration with the New York-based fashion design team Eko-Lab.

In her first major monograph, *Jennifer Wen Ma*, which was released in Beijing on Jan 5 with traditional Chinese ink as the theme, the book gives a thorough overview of her accomplishments across media as varied as installation, video, drawing, fashion design and performance art.

Curator and writer David Elliott says: "A driving flux and energy characterizes her work rather than any single medium, approach."

The 63-year-old expert, former director of

the Museum of Modern Art (Oxford) also says the creativity of many artists has been rooted in the trauma of upheaval and diasporas and Ma's personal history is consonant with this.

In 1986, Ma moved to Oklahoma City in the US with her mother. She says she first thought of becoming an artist when she took an oil-painting class at the age of 16.

"I had the feeling that this was what I was searching for and I had finally found my refuge," she recalls.

She moved to New York and received her master's degree in fine art in 1999 from Pratt Institute, where she was introduced to Cai Guoqiang, a well-known contemporary artist from Fujian province who moved to New York from Japan in 1995.

From 26 to 34 years old, Ma worked as studio director for Cai.

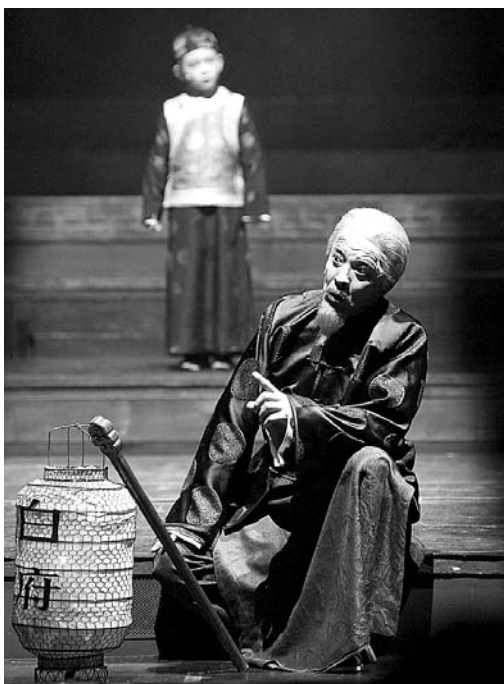
At first, she had no clear vision of how her own art would develop. Cai was and remains a significant figure for her as "friend and mentor", yet she admits that working with him has both "hindered and stimulated development", adding that "under a big tree ... you have to move away from its shadow to flourish."

While her friends have linked Ma's Chinese ink-based works with Cai's gunpowder-based works, Ma laughs, saying the influence is unconscious.

"He has been experimenting with gunpowder for 20 years and I have just tested Chinese ink for a few years," she says.

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artbeat ... finger on the pulse



QUICK PICK

Big Family on stage

National Theater of China's first major production of 2013, *The Big Family*, is a three-act drama that tells the legendary stories of the Bai family over 80 years, from the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) to the founding of New China in 1949. It was a 72-part TV series written and directed by Guo Baochang, based on the story of his grandfather. The series featured popular actors and leading directors such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige as guests. The theater production stars Liu Wei in the lead role of Bai Jingqi, and actress Zhu Yuan Yuan acts in three different roles, as his three wives. 7:30 pm, Jan 17- Feb 3. National Center for the Performing Arts, West Tiananmen Square, Beijing. 010-6655-0000.

— CHEN JIE

BEIJING Word art

The National Art Museum of China invites viewers to appreciate the beauty of calligraphy and literature with a display of more than 100 refined couplets, or *yinglian*. The recently created exhibits, by such established calligraphers as Ouyang Zhongshi and Wang Xuezhong, fall into three categories of couplets. They are composed to celebrate Spring Festival, or to admire natural and human landscapes, or to express emotions and opinions on social affairs. They vary in styles including *xingshu* (semi-cursive or running script), *caoshu* (cursive script), *kaishu* (regular script) and *zhuanshu* (seal script).

9 am-5 pm, no admission after 4 pm, Jan 18-Feb 24. National Art Museum of China, 1 Wusi Dajie, Dongcheng district, Beijing. 010-6400-1476.

Cross-talk tribute

A group of cross-talk performers, including Kang Songguang, Jiang Kun, Li Zhengrui and Chang Guitian, will gather for a show to celebrate the late crosstalk master Wang Changyou's centennial. Born in Beijing, Wang started learning crosstalk at 19 and was known for his good memory and skill of imitating other cross-talk performers. One of his students, Li Jindou, who is also a renowned cross-talk artist, will conclude the show by performing with Wang Wenlin, the late master's oldest son.

7:30 pm, Jan 26. Forbidden City Concert Hall, Inside Zhongshan Park, West Chang'an Avenue, Xicheng district, Beijing. 6551-3348/3349.

Voice, guitar, images

Cheng Fanyuan studied *erhu* (Chinese two-string fiddle) at the Central

Conservatory of Music in 1977. But the Beijing native became one of the first mainland singers to sing English songs while playing guitar in the early 1980s. With 10 albums under her belt, the 52-year-old will celebrate her passion for English songs at her upcoming concerts in Beijing. The style of the concerts is skewed toward drama rather than the normal singing and guitar playing. Cheng will tell the story of her life, and share her reflections on life and marriage. Along with her music, she will display her photography at an exhibition inside the venue. 7:30 pm, Jan 18-20. 5 Guanghua Road, Chaoyang district, Beijing. 400-610-3721.

SHANGHAI Muti's showcase

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra will present a concert under the baton of Riccardo Muti, playing *Vespre Siciliani: Overture* by Verdi, *Symphony No 4 Italy* by Mendelssohn, and *Symphony No 3 in E Major* by Beethoven. 7:30 pm, Jan 31. Concert Hall of Shanghai Oriental Art Center, 425 Dingxiang Road, Pudong New Area, Shanghai. 021-6854-1234.

Chivalry and swords

My Own Swordsman is a prequel of the popular TV series of the same title, and written by the same playwright, Ning Caishen, who made himself known first on the Internet. It's a story of comedy and love set in ancient China's martial-arts world. 7:30 pm, Feb 13-March 10. Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center, 288 Anfu Road, Shanghai. 021-6473-0123.

Art of Repetition

Chinese artist Qiu Xiaofei is presenting an solo exhibition titled *Repetition*

at Minsheng Museum of Modern Art. The artist has explored new possibilities of painting through his recent, diverse styles.

10 am-9 pm, Jan 18-March 7, except Monday. Minsheng Art Museum Shanghai, Building F, 570 Huaihai Road W Shanghai. 021-6282-8729.

GUANGZHOU Land and people



Guangdong Museum of Art is displaying 266 oil paintings by 242 talented artists from the country's south until Jan 23, opening visitors' eyes to the land. In diversified art styles, the paintings shown in *My Land, My People* share the same theme — showcasing a southern Chinese city's personality through its history, culture and life of people living there. The audience can "stroll" through bustling markets in Hainan's old streets and "meet" the shy Hakka young women in Jiangxi. Guangdong Museum of Art follows three peers in Shaanxi, Liaoning and Zhejiang to be the fourth organizer of *My Land My People*, which has been touring since October 2010. 9 am-5 pm, daily until Jan 23. Guangdong Museum of Art, 38 Yanyu Road, Ersha Island, Yuexiu district, Guangzhou. 020-8735-1468.

Chanel on show

Luxury brand Chanel launched an exhibition of its culture at the Guangzhou Opera House on Tuesday. Visitors can explore how Chanel is inspired by art through the 400 exhibits, which are in various forms including photos, oil paintings, design sketches, movies, wardrobes, jewelry and perfume. The most striking pieces are the huge backgrounds Picasso created for *Le Train Bleu*, a ballet drama for which Coco Chanel designed the costumes. The stage backgrounds help divide the Chanel culture exhibition into five parts, themed on "breathe, move, love, dream, and invent".

10 am-7 pm, daily until March 3. Experimental Theater, Guangzhou Opera House, Exit B1 of Zhujiang New Town subway station, Guangzhou. 020-3839-2888.

Romancing Dvorak

Yip Wing-sie, a conductor from Hong Kong well-known for her romantic, expressive style, will collaborate with 16-year-old gifted violinist Zhang Jinru and the Guangzhou Symphony Orchestra at a concert in Guangzhou on Jan 19 to draw the audience into Czech composer Antonin Dvorak's (1841-1904) world of music. The concert will include *Othello Overture*, *The Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in A Minor* and *Symphony No 7*. Bubbly folk tune and melancholy melody are weaved in each creation. Zhang was the gold medalist at the violin section of annual national Golden Bell Award in 2011 when she was only 15. 8 pm, Jan 19. Symphony Hall, Xinghai Concert Hall, 33 Qingbo Lu, Ersha Island, Yuexiu district, Guangzhou. 020-8735-2222.