

Artist showers with Chinese ink

By CHEN NAN

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When artist Jennifer Ma Wen set out to create her latest installation, *Hanging Garden in Ink*, she envisioned it as her conversation with the plants and ink.

"The black ink, the green plants and I express ourselves through our own language," she explains at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) in Beijing, where her work is on display until May 27.

Her 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.

"Chinese ink is organic and made of natural ingredients. So, while the black coverage will slow the plants' growth, it will not terminate its life," says Ma, pointing to some newly-grown green buds in the lower half of the tableau. "You can see that those plants continue to grow with tender shoots, giving evidence of the perseverance and resilience of life. I am touched by the scene, especially now that spring is here."

The 38-year-old artist's large scale installation was inspired by the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. Legend has it that King Nebuchadnezzar II created the garden on the walls of his palace as a gift for his wife, who longed for the green mountains of her homeland.

Ma explains that her work is also a way of exploring the contemporary use of Chinese ink, which has been the main medium of expression and communication for centuries in China. Within 12 days, Ma used up around 400 kg of Chinese ink to paint the plants, which ranged from pine, fir, bamboos to orchids.

"It's like showering those plants. I painted from 10 am to 6 pm," Ma says, showing off her black ink-dyed nails. "In the coming five to six weeks, visitors can also observe how the live plants survive and grow with time."

The artist has been obsessed with Chinese ink ever since she worked as



ZOU HONG / CHINA DAILY

Jennifer Ma Wen's latest installation, *Hanging Garden in Ink*, is displayed at Ullens Center for Contemporary Art.

IF YOU GO

Hanging Garden in Ink will be on display until May 27, at UCCA central alley, 798 Art District, 4 Jiuxianqiao Lu, Chaoyang district. 010-5780-0200.

Ma will explain her masterpiece in the *Artists' Talk Series of UCCA*, on April 22, 1:30 pm to 3 pm at UCCA Auditorium. She will also conduct a children's art workshop, *Imagining Chinese Ink*, also on April 22, 10 am to 11:30 am at UCCA Cafe. In Chinese with English translation.

the chief designer for visual and special effects in the core creative team for the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics Games, which was led by artist Cai Guoqiang. She won an Emmy as an associate producer for the NBC broadcast of the Beijing Olympic Opening Ceremony.

In 2009, she served as a guest curator of the *Ink Storm* exhibition, which looked at the use of ink through the works of three artists in Washington DC, United States. Last year, Ma had her solo exhibition, *Inked Cypress*, in Taipei, using ink to paint five plants, namely cypress, bamboo, chrysanthemum, plum and orchid. She also had cherry trees, stones, silk and other mediums dyed in ink in another solo exhibition, *Tide Inked Spring*, at Art Space Niji, Kyoto, Japan.

"Every artist tries to find their personal style. For me, it is Chinese ink," Ma says.

In the coming fall, she will hold her solo exhibition in Hong Kong. Titled *44 Sunsets in A Day*, the exhibition will see a large planet built by the artist, which has a 100-meter-long scroll forming a pillar and will turn 44 circles within 24 hours.