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REVIEWS

NEW BRITAIN, CONNECTICUT

Jennifer Wen Ma New Britain Museum of American Art

Viewers first absorb Jennifer Wen Ma's *An Inward Sea* (on view through October 24, 2021) as a lyrical, room-filling composition of waves set under a full moon. But that initial response quickly shifts, as synchronized sound and mechanized elements intensify with charged momentum. Drawing on the experience of psychological transference, the installation—one of Ma's first works since the beginning of the pandemic, along with *Cry Joy Park—Lille Edition* at the Musée de l'Hospice Comtesse in France—plumbs the pent-

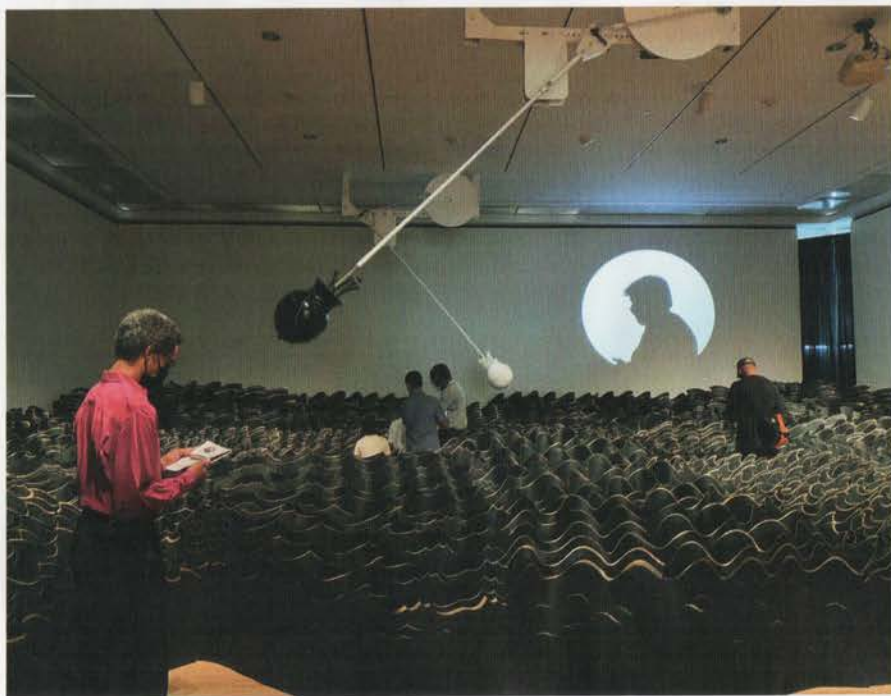
up emotional depths of the past anxiety- and adrenalin-soaked 18 months.

The waves, inspired by traditional Chinese landscape painting and laser cut to Ma's specifications in Beijing, were constructed from HDPE (high-density polyethylene), honey-combed together, then manipulated to expand accordion-style across the gallery floor. Unfolded, the forms transform into a three-dimensional nocturnal scene of undulating, cresting black water, tipped with gold to mimic the effect of shimmering moonlight. From a height

of four feet, the waves swell to six feet as they approach the walls. The sensation is of standing in the midst of an ocean.

Overhead, the projected lunar sphere serves as a screen for silhouettes of residents from New Britain and the surrounding area, who speak about their recent experiences. Ma worked with oral historian, interdisciplinary artist, and writer Nyssa Chow to develop the layered effects of their stories. Individual silhouettes speak, and sometimes voices overlap, culminating in a strident narrative. Initially heard in the background, they push into the middle ground to mesh with the sounds produced by two mechanical apparatuses, described by Ma as "pendulums," in a coordinated aural and compositional crescendo.

The two pendulums radically alter the mood of the installation as they swing like scissoring scythes. Attached to the end of each one is a massive hand-blown glass orb (one black, the other white). Diametrically opposed, their pace quickens. Their movement and sound in combination with the recorded voices and increasingly dramatic hand gestures visible in the silhouettes stage an operatic build-up of angst. (Among Ma's previous works is





the 2015 installation opera *Paradise Interrupted*, created with Huang Ruo, which continues to be performed worldwide.)

Presented as a head-on diorama, *An Inward Sea* is a Happening to reflect on, or in which to feel, a sense of participation. The brave can walk sandwiched between the waves, as the glass-orbed pendulums come uncomfortably

LEFT AND CENTER: LISA LÄPPE / OPPOSITE:
LITTLEMEAT PRODUCTIONS

close, like clubs or fists in a street fight, approaching quickly and unpredictably. The feeling is terrifying, transferring into fear, stoked by the chorus of voices. Although relatively compact, *An Inward Sea* engages epic monumentality, extending beyond its physical three-dimensionality to appropriate invisible psychic space.

—SUZANNE VOLMER

JENNIFER WEN MA

FROM OPPOSITE:

An Inward Sea,
2021.

Mixed media,
installation view.

Jennifer Wen Ma interviewing
New Britain Mayor
Erin Stuart as part of the
oral history portion
of *An Inward Sea*.

An Inward Sea (detail),
2021.

