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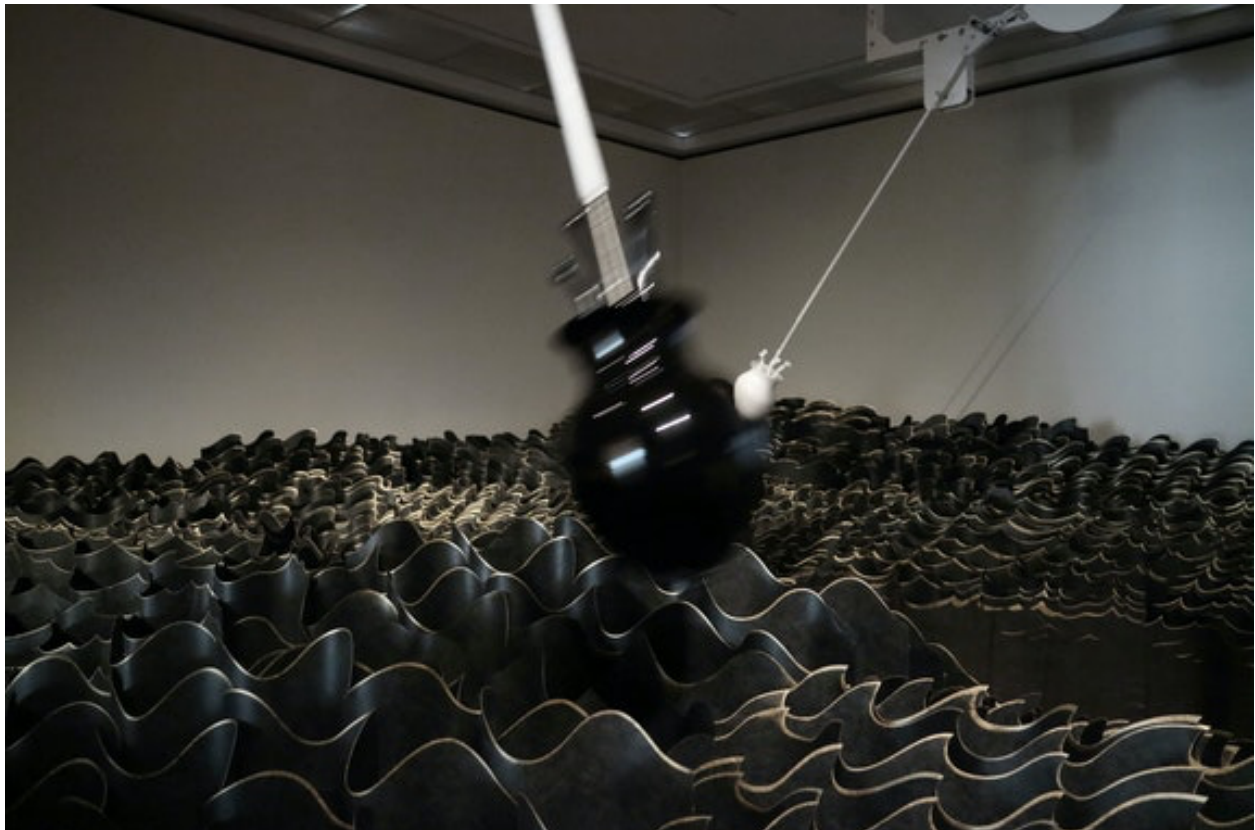
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<https://brooklynrail.org/2021/09/artseen/Jennifer-Wen-Ma-An-Inward-Sea>

ArtSeen

Jennifer Wen Ma: *An Inward Sea*

By [William Corwin](#)



Jennifer Wen Ma, *An Inward Sea*, 2021. Laser-cut flashspun non-woven HDPE, pigments, glass sculptures, metal mechanisms, video, and audio tracks. New Britain Museum of American Art, CT, 2021. Photo: Olivia Saporito.

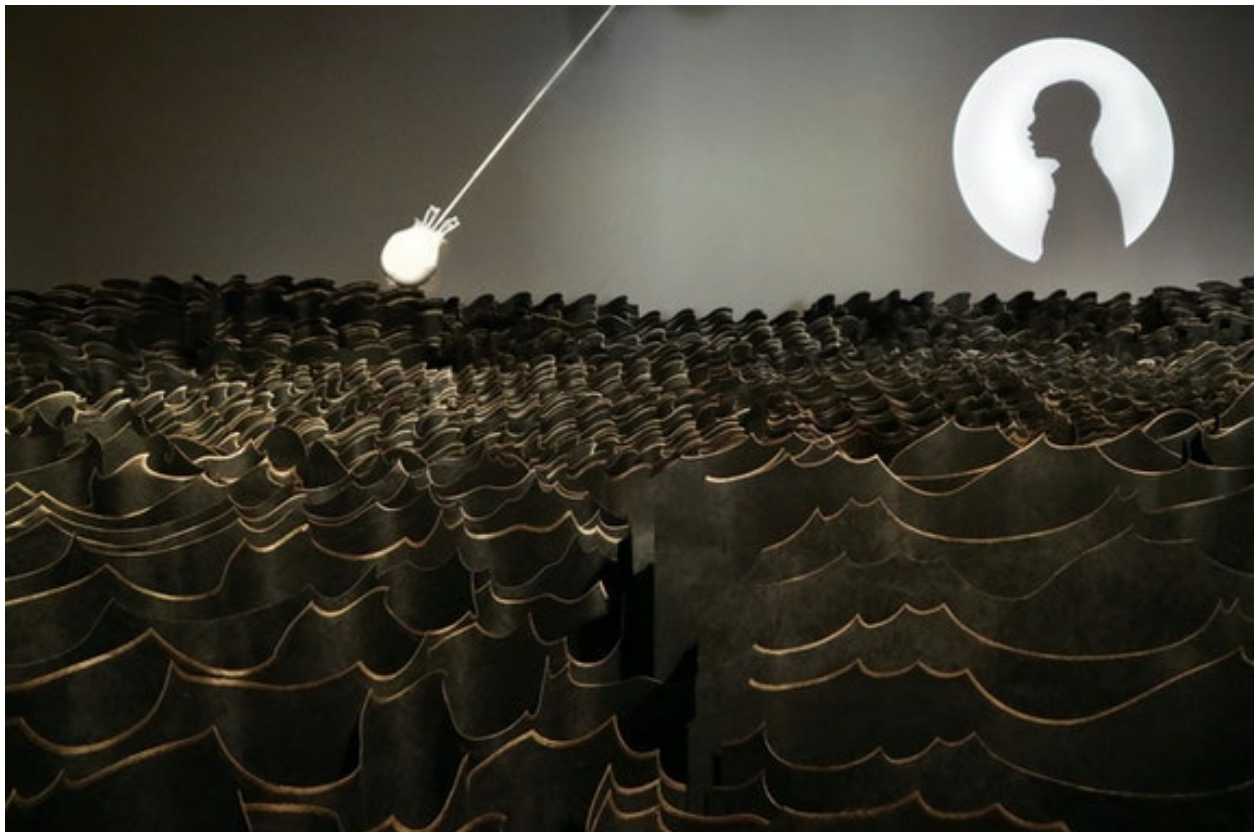
ON VIEW

NEW BRITAIN MUSEUM OF ART

MAY 13 – OCTOBER 24, 2021

CONNECTICUT

Above a roiling, swirling sea of troubles, a pair of heart-like vessels oscillate precariously at the ends of two wide-swinging pendulums. Jennifer Wen Ma's work consistently engages the imagery of life teetering on the edge of oblivion, and her current installation *An Inward Sea* at the New Britain Museum of American Art (part of their "New/Now" programming) addresses this through the lens of COVID. The main character in this life-size interactive diorama is a black sea of wave cutouts made of Tyvek (a high-density polyethylene fabric). The thin sheets are sturdy and intersect to form a honeycomb structure that can expand across the floor or contract into a thin band of material. This flexible and adaptive entity is Ma's avatar for an ambiguous force, both creative and destructive. On the one hand it represents black ink, the source of language and poetry and calligraphy vital to Chinese culture, but on the other hand, she frequently uses this ink, and its Tyvek incarnation, to swallow up life. In past projects she has painted entire forests and islands in black ink, as well as created looming Tyvek forests which consume actors on stage, as in her 2015 operatic production *Paradise Interrupted*. In these earlier works, green shoots burst forth from their ink-coated stalks and life seemed to triumph over adversity or indecision, but in *An Inward Sea* the resolution seems much less certain, and to an extent we are locked into an ambiguous balance while standing in the room.



Jennifer Wen Ma, *An Inward Sea*, 2021. Laser-cut flashspun non-woven HDPE, pigments, glass sculptures, metal mechanisms, video, and audio tracks. New Britain Museum of American Art, CT, 2021. Photo: Olivia Saporito.

Ma often collaborates, sometimes with fellow artists, but frequently with viewers or populations engaged with the institutions with which she is working. In her piece in Atlanta, *Bending the Arc* (2015), she projected a line of light onto a wall in that city, one that could be manipulated by the voices of the viewers, and action which referenced Dr. King's statement, "the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice." *An Inward Sea* utilizes a very similar tender sensibility between artwork and prospective viewer. In this case, the words of local people elaborate on the dark, seemingly intractable situation playing out centerstage between pendulums and sea. Ma interviewed and filmed folks from New Britain, Connecticut, to provide the "plot" for her piece. These witnesses to COVID describe their ordeals over the past 18 months: some people's stories are brutal and depressing, but others enjoyed the peace and quiet. As dark or joyous as the stories may be, though, they are all, in effect, tales of survival, and played out against the endless clicking and whirring of the swinging pendulums, it is perceived as some forward momentum, however hesitant.

While visitors cannot actually transform the work themselves, the inhabitants of New Britain stand in for our own pandemic experiences, and we watch their silhouettes talk in a wide circle of light in the far corner of the room. Many of the details in *An Inward Sea* installation are deeply romantic, referencing nostalgic traditions—the silhouettes could be shadow puppets, or some depiction of a lover from the credits of a rom-com or the ancient Greek myth of Kora of Sicyon. The Tyvek waves are tipped in gold, adding a strange detail of refinement to this enigmatic and brooding inky maelstrom. The two heart-like vessels are ceramic and glisten in the somber lighting: one is white, one is black—a reference to the two interlocking forces of Yin and Yang. For the most part, the voices telling their COVID narratives are clear and distinct from the creaking of the fly wheels which control the pendulums, but at times, two narratives overlap, and the silhouettes and mechanism become a multi-faced cacophonous phantom. At this point, the circle of light becomes the inconstant moon: what we thought might be a light at the end of the tunnel is in fact a mirage. Perhaps this moon setting over a sea of troubles is the artist's reference to the reflection that lured the great poet Li Bai out of his boat and into a watery grave—the same appealing illusion that suggests an end to our troubles?

Contributor

William Corwin

Will Corwin is a sculptor and writer from New York. He has written for *Frieze*, *Bomb* and writes for *ArtPapers*. He will be part of the Root/Anchors show at The Newhouse Contemporary Art Center, Snug Harbor, this fall and is represented by Geary Contemporary.