

Whole-hog halftime

By Lawrence Cosentino



High art takes a flying wedge into Spartan Stadium

Halftime will unfold serenely at Saturday's MSU vs. University of Maryland football game — at first. A lone cellist will waft a tender Chinese melody over the Spartan Stadium turf. A delicate trill from a flute will evoke mist rising at dawn.

The dawn of battle!

An unprecedented mélange of high art, stylized war and sheer spectacle will end some 12 minutes later, with 500 musicians, singers, drummers, dancers and color guard personnel whipping up a sonic and visual tumult, 1,500 people flashing patterned cards in the stands and multicolored plumes of smoke bursting from dozens of explosive canisters.

There has never been, and may never be, a halftime show like “The Art of the March: Cues from Sun Tzu’s ‘The Art of War.’”

Spartan Marching Band director John Madden has produced themed shows before, including one on Marvel superheroes and a “1965” show that vigorously tromboned the Rolling Stones. But a multimedia extravaganza conceived by an acclaimed New York visual artist, based on an ancient Chinese military treatise, will be a new experience for him — and for the world.

“You can’t do this every week,” Madden deadpanned.

The visual architect of “Art of the March” is Jennifer Wen Ma, a Beijing-born artist based in New York. After 27 years commanding his marching legions from a 30-foot scaffold, Madden is proud to be a color in Ma’s palette.

“Jennifer is a brilliant environmental artist,” Madden said. “Her stage is Spartan Stadium, filled with people, a band that wears a military uniform and is known for precision, and it’s staged at the halftime of a gridiron battle.”



The mother of all mash-ups was conceived at a June 2015 meeting of MSU's benign Illuminati of deans and department heads, the Cultural Engagement Council.

Scrambling for a way to crown a year of China-themed events and programs, council member Kurt Dewhurst observed that there's no bigger stage in these parts than Spartan Stadium. Min Jung Kim, former deputy director of the Broad Art Museum, immediately thought of Ma, a longtime colleague and friend.

Ma has worked on a wild range of projects, from operas and outdoor festivals to the lighting for Beijing's stunning National Aquatic Center (aka the "Water Cube"). She's built a temporary island painted over with ink in the middle of a lake in Brazil, worked on the opening ceremonies in the 2008 Beijing Olympics and specializes in big events where a lot of things happen at once.

But when Kim pitched the halftime idea to Ma, the artist pronounced it "crazy."

"I know nothing about football and have no affinity to it," Ma said.

But curiosity is one of Ma's core principles. Another is to never turn down a chance to reach people. Especially 80,000 people.

She studied up on football and watched films of the MSU Marching Band.

"I was so amazed by the precision of movement, the artistry, the musicianship," she said.

The discipline and quasi-military feel reminded her of the revered Chinese text, Sun Tzu's "The Art of War," a heady mix of military strategy and Eastern philosophy. The prospect of choreographing latter-day Spartan warriors roused deep chords in Ma's cortex. (Sun Tzu lived in the fifth century B.C., the heyday of ancient Sparta.)

"It was a perfect marriage of elements," she said.

Usually, Ma takes about a year to plan a big project, but "Art of the March" needed to come together in half that time. The MSU/Maryland game was chosen because Maryland's band is not coming to East Lansing, leaving MSU to fill the entire halftime break.

While Ma worked out the show's visuals, Madden delved into research on Chinese music that could be spectacularly, but respectfully, tromboned.

He came up with a five-movement suite, starting with the music of Tan Dun, a leading Chinese composer known in the West for his epic movie scores.

"It worked beautifully with the visual narrative I imagined," Ma said.

"If this were an opera, Jen is writing the libretto," Madden said. "We're stealing the music from other composers and Jen is creating the seamless storyline thread that we don't typically do in a halftime show."

The thread evokes "a day in the life of a Spartan," in Ma's words, beginning with morning mist, or "the dust of a previous battle."

MSU cello Professor Suren Bagratuni and Lansing Symphony principal flutist Richard Sherman will gently set the mood. James Forger, the dean of MSU's College of Music and one of the halftime show's biggest boosters, likes the idea of sending football fans and classical musicians into a forced scrimmage.



"I don't think Suren's ever been to a football game, and now he'll be playing for 76,000 people," Forger said. It's a good bet many of the fans have never heard a cello at halftime before, either.

Columns of smoke, along with projected video images, will appear at first in stark black and white, representing the clash of opposing forces. As

conflict plays out in the music and choreography, more colors will blossom.

"It's not about good and evil," Ma said. "'The Art of War' is about balance, about conflict resolution."

The first three parts of the show are set to Tan Dun's score from the heroic/poetic martial arts films "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" and "Hero." The music, which Madden called "angst-filled, chaotic and warlike," whips up a lot of martial drumming and drilling, set to geometrically intricate battle formations.

"There's a lot of masculine energy," Ma said.

The fourth part is set to the wild "Dance of the Golden Snake," a traditional Chinese tune that whips to and fro with a delirious party feel.

"Then the evening deepens and romance sets in," Ma said.

A revered Chinese melody, "The Jasmine Flower," is the heart and soul of the show. Madden said "Jasmine Flower" touches Chinese people much the way "Amazing Grace" moves Americans.

"It's not a patriotic tune that connects people, it's deeper than that," he said.

Last week, the marching band's only Chinese student, supply chain management major Luyi Han, stood in front of his 250 bandmates at Madden's behest and told them "Jasmine Flower" was one of the first melodies he heard as a child.

Finally, the trumpet sounds and it's time for battle. All the elements of the show are brought back, and then some.

"It's very loud, there will be a lot of cacophony," Ma said. "Ultimately there is a resolution. It's a very powerful ending."

To complement the music and movement, MSU's Color Guard and dancers will wrangle a giant piece of PVC pipe loaded with 36 smoke canisters that will produce a multicolor smoke-and-light show, a Ma specialty.

"We have approval from the fire marshal," Madden said.

Meanwhile, old-fashioned card blocks wielded by 1,500 spectators in the east side of the stadium will flash in the stands. Madden has never seen card blocks used in his 27 years at MSU, although they were used back in the day to flash images of team mascots such as Gophers or Longhorns.

As they huddled to plan the spectacle, Ma was impressed by Madden's openness to experimentation. She also credited other MSU partners in the project, such as the Broad Art Museum and the College of Music, for "meeting people where they are."

"I love working in galleries and museums, where you're very protected and supported. But you're speaking to very few who (already) understand what you're doing," Ma said. "Going out of the white box and meeting people where they play, where they work, is very important for an artist." When the smoke dissipates, Madden is looking forward to actually reading "The Art of War."

"Someday, when I have time, I'm going to get my hands on the English translation, hunker down and get into it," he said.