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Gray Areas

A Conversation with

Jennifer Wen Ma

BY LILLY WEI

Multi-disciplinary artist Jennifer Wen Ma has been busier than usual as she takes the critically acclaimed opera *Paradise Interrupted* (2015–ongoing) on the road. Her visually stunning installation, enhanced by interactive digitalized technology designed by Guillermo Acevedo, sets the stage for an intriguing score by prominent Chinese composer Huang Ruo, who deftly blends traditional Kun opera with contemporary Western formulations to form a bewitching aural hybrid. The tale itself is an interweaving of cultures, as the Garden of Eden merges into *The Peony Pavilion*, one of China's most famous operas, its 22 hours compressed here into 90 minutes. The tale focuses on a woman in search of an unattainable dream as she attempts to return to a mythical garden and her ideal, idealized lover. In a metaphorically apt conceit, all of the multimedia projections are cued to her voice and activated by it, which underscores the premise that she creates her own garden, her own world.

MARINA LOVTSKAYA, COURTESY JENNIFER WEN MA STUDIO

Paradise Interrupted, 2015–ongoing. View of performance at Lincoln Center Festival 2016, NY.

Lilly Wei: *Could you talk a little about what you've been doing recently?*

Jennifer Wen Ma: It's been all about *Paradise Interrupted*, which I worked on for three years. It debuted at the Spoleto Festival USA in 2015, with a preview performed at the Temple of Dendur at the Metropolitan Museum of Art just before that. It launched the Lincoln Center Summer Festival in 2016, and I am now touring it. It's been very consuming, but it opens up a whole area of the dramatic arts that I only dabbled in when working on the 2008 Beijing Olympics.



Above: Installation view of "Eight Views of Paradise Interrupted," 2017. Ink, paint, acrylic panels, and hand-cut Japanese paper garden, garden: up to 25 ft. long. Left: *Paradise Interrupted*, 2015-ongoing. View of performance at the Spoleto Festival USA 2015, Charleston, South Carolina.



voice, and the other was a female voice—the star-crossed lovers singing duets. The song is the same, but the rhythm is different, the swing not quite synched. If they ever met, the glass would shatter, which would mean destruction. It was like parallel scenes, maybe an alternative universe that didn't appear in the opera but could have.

LW: I thought the transformation of the space from an abstract, minimal site into a lush, representational garden in the original opera was astonishing. Does your garden refer to the Garden of Eden, with its tree of knowledge, the loss of innocence, and the acquisition of consciousness and self-consciousness?

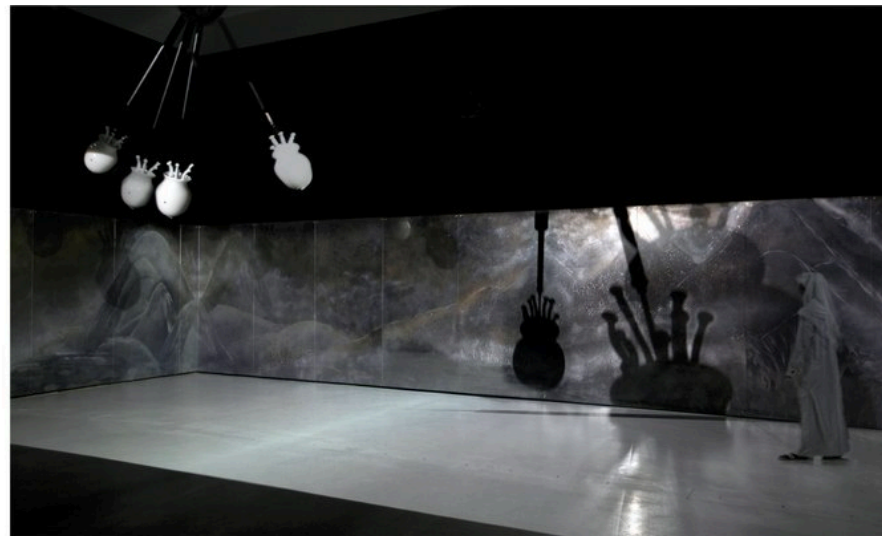
JWM: It refers to many mythologies. The fruit I made combines a pomegranate, a peach, and an apple; they look like sexual organs. In this work, they were not meant to burst, but because of technical difficulties, they actually crashed into each other and shattered. Luckily, no one was hurt.

LW: That sounds startling—and maybe an idea for another project?

JWM: I would love to do a piece with the shattering of the glass. Last year, I proposed it to UrbanGlass for the exhibition "Glass Ceiling," but they said no. I'd still like to do it and am thinking of how to do it safely.

I feel that this whole thing has led me on a new path. I want it to be theater in the

TOP: DANIEL TERNA. © JENNIFER WEI MA. COURTESY SANDRA GERING INC., NY / BOTTOM: JULIA DYK



The Furthest Distance in a Paradise Interrupted, 2016. View of installation at the Qatar Museums Gallery Al-Riwaq, Doha, Qatar.

round, and I'm hoping that will happen by 2020. It will mean a whole new set of elements, including the staging, the placement of musicians, singers, and audience. One thing I loved about rehearsals was that you could hear the singers' voices around you. A proscenium stage doesn't let the audience experience that. When the singers are around you, you get the vibration that comes from their diaphragms, and it is deeply moving.

LW: What are you doing now?

JWM: In December 2018, *Paradise Interrupted* will go to the National Theater and Concert Hall in Taipei. Then, I hope to bring it to China, which is why I recently spent three months in Beijing. All the main collaborators are Chinese, and its sources are rooted in Chinese culture and history. I'm glad to have had this amazing stage in the West, but I would like to see what kind of resonance it will have with audiences in China. Qian Yi, the opera singer, hasn't performed there since being banned in 1999. In 2019, it will be 20 years. If we could make it possible for her to perform in China again, it would be wonderful. Her artistry is amazing, and she deserves to be heard. I'm working hard on that, but it's very difficult.

LW: Do you like doing all this?

JWM: I don't—it's like being the producer and a job in itself. But it is necessary, and this is my baby. I've been talking to people for the last two years, and I finally realized that for this to happen I had to step up. There needs to be a central person in charge. The Chinese art world is a game in itself. It took me three months to meet various people and figure out what had to be done, what chess pieces had to be put in place for it to happen. I don't want to always do this, but it has to be done and so I'm doing it.

LW: In what ways do you see your work as timely now?

JWM: I deal with dystopias and utopias and the problems of a black and white world that has so much gray in it, so many contradictions. The garden opens up and is black, yet the black is rich and full

of life, while the white looks so clean, so pure, but it can also be sterile. I want to play with that dichotomy. In another show, I am playing with the dichotomy of high- and low-income people. Did you read about how Beijing started shipping out low-income people last October?

The government wanted to investigate sources of pollution, so they just flipped a switch and shut down small businesses and their sources of power. The government doesn't care how these people live or make a living; it also wanted to reduce the residents in Beijing by millions, so these people were sent back to their home provinces. But they service much of Beijing, and now no one is doing this. Still, I have to admit that you could see the sky in Beijing this winter, and it was blue. China is full of contradictions. These are the kind of subjects I'm dealing with, and it's tricky because censorship is increasing in China right now. It is very disheartening. At least in the visual arts, there is slightly more leeway because you can be more abstract; it is not as pointed as literature or the performing arts.

LW: Should art be activist, especially now?

JWM: It depends on the artist. Being an artist is to be political, but it varies, as does how an artist expresses that. I saw the Agnes Martin retrospective at the Guggenheim right after the presidential election, and I got it for the first time—the Minimalism, the inter-irity, the quiet power that was her way of looking at landscape. It is very subversive and, to me, speaks to individuality and defiance. It was very political to me because of the moment I was in at the time. I found that it reaffirmed the power of art. You can do the quietest thing, but it can be sensed outwardly and have an enduring resonance.

Lilly Wei is an art critic, journalist, and independent curator based in New York.

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