



Jennifer Wen Ma's 'Paradise Interrupted' to Open Lincoln Center Festival July 13

An installation opera from artist Jennifer Wen Ma will feature voice-activated projections from Guillermo Acevedo and costumes from Eko-Lab's Xing-Zhen Chung-Hilyard.

By [Rosemary Feitelberg](#) on June 28, 2016

ON A HIGH NOTE: Opera avoiders may consider giving the medium another chance with this month's opening of "Paradise Interrupted" at the Lincoln Center Festival.

It's not just the 80-minute run time that could make the outing more appealing. Jennifer Wen Ma, an interdisciplinary artist, is directing and designing her first opera, and an installation one at that. She has created a 65-foot paper sculpture that will unfold and envelope the stage like a giant pop-up book, when Qian Yi performs. (The concept is a reference to Chinese scroll paintings.) In another unconventional twist, the artist envisioned the set before the opera was commissioned and set to music composed by Huang Ruo.

While working on Rotterdam's Witte de With Contemporary [Art](#) Center and the paper garden design developed at PERFORMA 13, she said she had "a crazy idea" to suspend 60-foot living plants painted black with Chinese ink in mid-air including some that were upside down. As much as she wanted to see that idea expounded, the artist said nothing became of it after a few months. So she said she reached the point where she knew, "If you want to do something, you have to do it yourself."

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After meeting Yi and showing her a sample of her work, Ma said the opera star wanted to collaborate. “Paradise Interrupted” may seem like a warm-up for Yi, who performed the epic 19-hour “Peony Pavilion” at Lincoln Center in 1999 and again at the Spoleto Festival in 2004. Ma, meanwhile, who divides her time between Beijing and New York. Eko-Lab’s Melissa Kirgan and Xing-Zhen Chung-Hilyard has created a 3-D-printed headdress and other costumes for the opera, which will be staged July 13 to 15 in New York. Blending visual and sonic elements, Ma incorporated Guillermo Acevedo voice-activated live multimedia projections such as one of fireflies that is illuminated by Yi’s voice.



Voice-activated multimedia projections will be featured in "Paradise Interrupted."

Ma divides her time between Beijing and New York. Some may know her work from the opening and closing ceremonies at the Beijing Olympics in 2008. With her help, the Water Cube building that was used for all the Olympic swimming events now uses interactive technology to light up every night in different colors, reflecting the daily mood of the people in Beijing. Her work includes painted living gardens in all sorts of locales including an island in Brazil that visitors must take paddle boats to get to. The artist also orchestrated a colorful smoke performance with a halftime marching band at Michigan State University.

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In addition to designing store windows for Mikimoto, the artist also created the multicolored beams of light for “Rainbow” at the Opening Ceremony for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation. Ma is in the U.K. for the July 3 opening of “A Beautiful Disorder” at the Cass Sculpture Foundation in West Sussex through Nov. 6. Her work was also featured in “What About the Art?” at Qatar Museums.

Research for the installation opera prompted Ma to look up the meaning of the word “paradise.” “It is an Old Iranian [language] word that means walled enclosure. I was interested from the very beginning of the very idea of paradise is to keep something in and something out. As human beings, we could live in or outside of a utopian world. It could be a matter of the China literati being very disillusioned by politicized lives, or in every generation, every child rebels against their parental home at some point.” Ma said. “I wanted to rebuild a small utopian world with a very universal story with new music and new visual aspects that would appeal to all different generations and cultural backgrounds.