Triple player: Maya Lin makes art, architecture, monuments

by Robert L. Pincus

Maya Lin is an architect by training, but don't expect to find any evidence of the buildings or interiors she has designed inside the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. She has created monuments too, one of which brought her early fame, but there is no sign of that work, either. The exhibition, "Systematic Landscapes," showcases Lin, the artist.

TRIPLE PLAYER - Artist Maya Lin makes art, architecture and monuments. Her exhibit 'Systematic landscapes' is on display at the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego, her first major museum show in a decade. CNS Photo by Bruce K. Huff. "I think of what I do as a kind of tripod - monuments, art and architecture," says the slender, dynamic Lin, now 48.

"I love the differences," she says. "The making of art is like writing a poem, while creating architecture is like writing a novel. Art is extremely personal and pure, because you can do whatever you want to do."

She's clearly delighted with the way her biggest piece, "2 x 4 Landscape," looks in the museum and invites me to walk with her on its uneven surface for a moment. She has reluctantly made it off-limits to the public.

"The hill is lot steeper than I thought it would be," she says.

The artist, who grew up in Ohio, was only 21 - and still an undergraduate - when her design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., was chosen in 1981. It was a blind competition, meaning the jury had no idea which entrant proposed what. She has often said, with good reason, that if this hadn't been the case, she never would have won.

Lin revitalized the monument for the late 20th century, though the piece stirred a lot of controversy initially. She found a way to make minimalism carry collective meaning - this understated site became a powerful place

for grieving and healing.

It was completed in 1982 and she went on to create other successful monuments - among them, the "Civil Rights Memorial" (1989) for the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Ala., in homage to the movement's pioneers and achievements, and "The Women's Table" (1993) for her alma mater, dedicated to women students at Yale University.

Monuments are a middle ground for her, combining Lin's skills as architect and artist. She didn't train formally as an artist. Both her undergraduate and graduate degrees from Yale are in architecture. But art is something she has always done.

In recent years, she has divided her time between New York, where she has her architectural office, and Colorado, where she and her family have a summer home. Her husband, Daniel Wolf, is a well-known photography dealer; they have two daughters.

Art and architecture are Lin family traditions; writing is, too.

Her father, who emigrated from China, was a ceramic artist and eventually became the dean of the Ohio State University School of Fine Arts. He had a strong interest in Japanese aesthetics, which Lin acknowledges as an influence in her work, along with such post-minimalist precedents as Richard Serra's.

Her aunt, Lin Huiyin (1904-1955) is often cited as the first female architect in China; she was also a published writer and translator.

Lin's mother was a poet and professor of literature at Ohio State University, while her brother, Tan Lin, is a

poet as well.

BRINGING OUTDOORS INSIDE

"Systematic Landscapes" is Lin's first major museum show in a decade. In between, she has done a good number of outdoor works, many monumental, such as the newly completed "wave field" at the Storm King Art Center in Mountainville, N.Y., which consists of long rows of 11-to 15-foot-tall mounds, encompassing about 230,000 square feet.

"I wanted the work in the show to relate to the landscape. I was thinking: How could I do this within the confines of a museum?"

In one sense, the answer was simple: Create forms of landscape for interior spaces. But in another way, given her far-reaching ambitions in terms of media and themes, the works in this show have taken on a complex life.

Her love of concept or system is evident in "2 x 4 Landscape," which consists of upright two-by-fours that form the landscape with a dramatic rise. She used a computer program to calculate how to make the components fit the contour of the constructed terrain.

Lin has become increasingly enmeshed in environmental issues, a passion embedded in many of these works.

"I don't think I'm loud about it," says Lin. "I don't preach about issues. But I do want to be quietly subversive."

She does admit she'll become a little louder with "Missing," which she is calling her last monument. It's one of two works she's creating for the soon-to-be-completed quarters of the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco. The other is a sculpture, "Above and Below," a grand-scale wire landscape of the floor of San Francisco Bay.

"Missing" will look at species that disappeared long ago and those that are doing so now. It will take multiple forms: a video installation, a book and a Web site. It will have its premiere on Earth Day next year.

No one should think that the completion of this monument will mean the end of publicly placed art by Lin. She has projects on tap from Las Vegas to China.

Most ambitious of all is the "Confluence Project." Since 2006, she's been overseeing (as lead artist) this $27 million effort at seven sites in Oregon and Washington. It was set in motion to mark the bicentennial of Lewis and Clark's expedition to the Northwest in 1803 to 1806. True to her aesthetics and politics, it involves changes to chosen places, most subtle and most done in cooperation with a host of others - from artist to architects to Indian tribal leaders. Completion is years away. But Lin, with her many years of working in public settings, knows that these kinds of undertakings require clear vision and unwavering patience.

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