



One Who Sees Space

A Conversation with Maya Lin

by Jan Garden Castro

Maya Lin's sculptures, environments, and architectural projects flow out of a vision of a universe in harmony with itself, its different branches and modes of being. Her gift is creating work that rethinks human relationships to earth and time. She is Taoist in spirit, American in ingenuity.

Her 1998 traveling exhibition, "Topologies," contained several small-scale works whose new ideas she has further developed in large-scale projects, including *Ecliptic*, the redesign of a 3.5-acre park in Grand Rapids, Michigan, completed in September 2001. *The character of a hill, under glass* (2002), a curving floor for a winter garden at American Express Financial Advisors in Minneapolis, is her latest finished work. And an as-yet-untitled project for 2003–04, an enormous earth sculpture in Miami, is underway.

Her book *Boundaries* (Simon & Schuster, 2000) navigates her multi-faceted career as an artist/architect and articulates the distinctions—and connections—she has drawn between each field. Site is an important facet of her vision. Her public art projects evolve in response to a particular site and humanist mission. Lin's sculptural projects include *Ten Degrees North* (a water/stone table of the world from the perspective of 10 degrees north that serves as the centerpiece of Lin's granite, wood, bamboo, and cane interior for the Rockefeller Foundation's headquarters) and the Penn Station solar clock *Eclipsed Time*. Of her deservedly famous *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* in Washington, DC, Michael Kimmelman has said, "It is the closest public art has come to an alternative to the heroic public sculptural ambition of Michelangelo or Bernini."

Lin's work often integrates a scientific and/or historic component into a living form, a reminder to treasure earth and stone, time and space. As she says, "I feel I exist on the boundaries, somewhere between science and art, art and architecture, public and private, East and West. I am always trying to find a balance between these opposing forces, finding the place where opposites meet."

Jan Garden Castro: *How do you define your work as a sculptor?*

Maya Lin: I see myself as a sculptor who incorporates spatiality into her work. I am less interested in creating sculptural objects than in exploring sculpture as built environment. In making these works, I think in terms of one's experience walking through them—I see them as spaces in relation to time. It's probably why I rely

so much on writing and making models. Writing can help clarify the ideas within the works, as well as help me see what the experience of a work will be. And as for the models, on any given day, models cover the floors—for everything from a detail of an architectural project to one of the sculptures. It's more labor intensive, incredibly cumbersome, and got me into trouble in my training as an architect. That's how I see.

In my studio works, I often create an ambiguity between the work and the gallery space. For instance,

***Ecliptic*, 2001. Grand Rapids, Michigan. Detail of skating rink.**



Wave Field, 1994. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

I'm working on a series of landscape reliefs built up on sheetrock and then cut and inserted into a regular architectural wall. I see my large-scale works as sculpture, although they exist, at times, in the same place as landscape architecture or architecture.

I prefer to make distinctions between my art and architectural work. Unlike Scott Burden, Siah Armajani, Mary Miss, or even Alice Aycock, I would say my sculptures are not architectonic in form. I consciously pursue ideas that are tied to landscape. My art studies and captures natural phenomena and landscape; in addition, I often use technology to see our environment.

JGC: *You've spoken of growing up in Athens, Ohio, and visiting the Serpent Mounds, a spectacular earthwork that perhaps was one inspiration for Wave Field, which faces the Aerospace Engineering Building at the University of Michigan. I understand you have another earthwork in progress in Miami. Would you talk about that? And the process of engineering earth into a sculpture?*

ML: The General Services Administration commissioned me to create an artwork for a federal courthouse in Miami. I'm very site specific. Arquitectonica designed the building, which is shaped like a boat in plan. At first, they thought that I'd put an artwork down at one corner as an entranceway, but I became interested in the field that surrounds the building. It's about six times the size of *Wave Field*, which is 10,000 square feet. *Wave Field*, due to its size, has the sense of being an object until you walk into it, and then its scale takes over more as a field. I always wanted to explore a site that, due to its scale, already reads as a spatial environment.

Another thing is that *Wave Field* is a water wave formation. The one in Miami is about sand patterns under the waves, so it's a very different pattern from the cupping of waves. Sarah, my assistant, and I have been studying dunes, rippled sand effects, erosion patterns in the earth. I've been experimenting with that in model form.

I like to balance one or two projects at a time and learn what the differences are between them. I'm very interested in how the change of scale is going to affect how one reads this piece.

JGC: *How has Wave Field held up? You distorted the grid of the wave, making it asymmetrical.*

ML: It's holding up fairly well. It's a sandy soil mix that drains well. We've started experimenting with different soil compositions [for Miami]. Our biggest concern is that water will puddle in the low areas. We've formulated, with landscape architecture consultants, a sandy soil mix for the entire field that acts as a wick and distributes the moisture evenly. The indigenous soil in Miami is already very sandy, so we didn't have to experiment much.

In answer to the second question, even though I based *Wave Field* on a symmetrical, naturally occurring phenomena, the Stokes Wave, when I built the first conceptual model, it was uneven. But it had a magic or power that captured the photograph I was working from. When I built the second and third models, I made them symmetrical and they went flat. The model lost its life. You have to balance the forms carefully to make them feel natural. You push it slightly off kilter. It's why, I think, if a person's face were dead-on symmetrical, that person would look frightening and strange. What we see is symmetry, yet nothing in nature is technically symmetrical. So the slight differences between the left side and the right

side are, essentially, what I'm striving for. I'm playing with what *looks* balanced. It's building in the mistakes. If you push it too far, the mistake takes over and begins to look premeditated. As we look around us, our eyes and our minds are interpreting and understanding, but if you try to intellectualize it, you can lose it.

JGC: *That brings us to the winter garden for the American Express Financial Advisors. You've used architecture and scale in two ingenious ways: first, to create the undulating topographic landscape in the exhibition "Topologies" and, currently, in the undulating floor of the winter garden.*

ML: I can't believe American Express has been so supportive in allowing me to realize an idea I have been wanting to see for many years. I have certain visions that sometimes take as long as five to 10 years to realize; I have to wait for the appropriate site. For instance, at Am Ex, the artwork is about a landscape you enter. For a long time I had been wondering if someone would let me curve a floor. It had to be a wood floor, something that you naturally assume is

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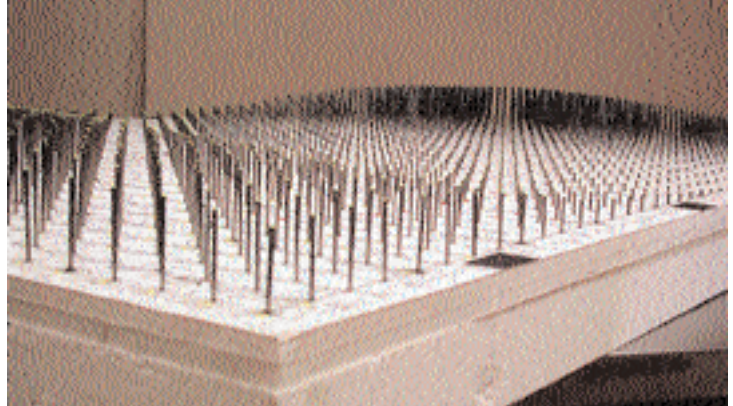
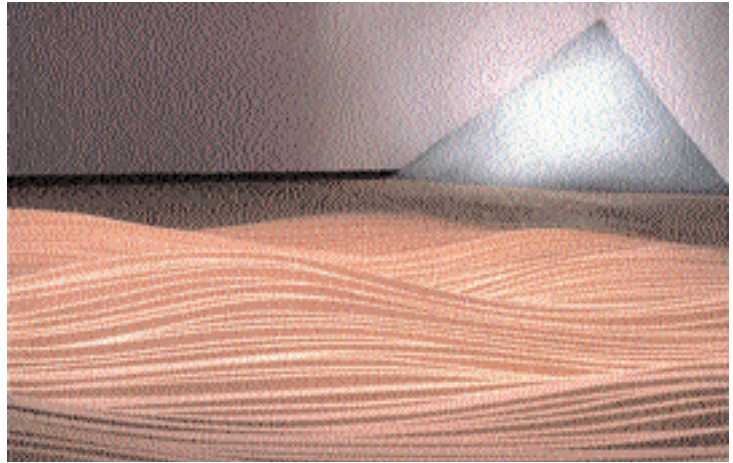
straight. I kept envisioning how easy it would be to do because I built a curved roof for a house—the straight sections were just warped.

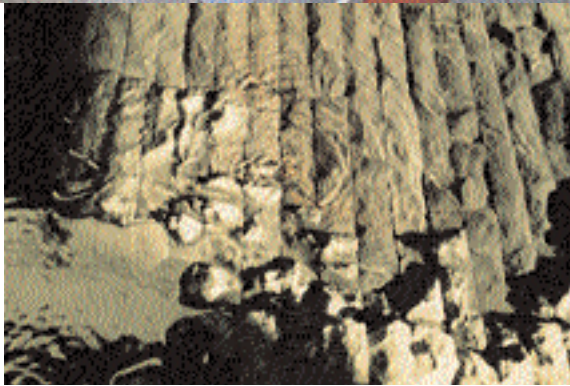
With American Express, I took what I learned from *Untitled (Topographic Landscape)*. The sub-structure of the floor is cut, curved pieces; we made cardboard models, put the dimensions into a computer, and then studied the form point by point by point. The architects and the engineers kept saying, "Oh, no, you're going to have to put nail points down and screen concrete." I said, "We're going to lose the curve. We're going to build a honeycomb structure of particle board." Actually, it turned out to be plywood.

The floor is fabricated with the exact curve we built in model after model. It's actually a very subtle curve in an area just over 2,000 square feet. Some of the models are so big we had to dismantle them to send them out. Once the sub-floor is done, they lay thin sheets of plywood, and then the maple floor goes on. Maple will take the curve.

We take for granted a slight undulation in the ground plane outside. The question was, what happens when you take it indoors? The challenge was

Top to bottom: *Untitled (Topographic Landscape)*(detail with *Avalanche*), 1997. Particle board, 16 x 18 x 2 ft. *The character of a hill, under glass*, 2002. Curved floor and winter garden at American Express Financial Advisors, Minneapolis. Model for the American Express floor.





to take what I was working on with *Wave Field* inside. I did that first in my traveling show “Topologies” [curated by Jeff Fleming]. I wanted to do it again as a permanent part of an architectural work.

JGC: *In a way, you’re using sculpture as a basis for architecture, and in another way, you’re turning the architectural model form into sculpture.*

ML: There’s a dialogue between the way I’m working as a sculptor and as an architect. Another project I’m working on is a series of landscapes—riverscapes or dunes—made from joint compound on sheetrock. To install it, you cut a hole in the existing sheetrock wall, tape it in, and paint it over. I’m introducing a landscape work not as an object but as an intrusion in the space, a cut into the walls of a building.

JGC: *Like A Shift in the Stream. Was that the first? Do you have others planned?*

ML: That was the first. Yes, one client for a house asked me to put in a rippled dune artwork. Technically, it’s still an object and could be removed. It is installed the way you would install a regular sheetrock wall. I am interested in seeing architecture as a site to excavate.

JGC: *Did you use a CAD program for the winter garden floor?*

ML: Yes, but I don’t understand it at all. My assistants coming out of school think in computer language. I make the physical models.

JGC: *How have you handled the practical considerations of doing a curved floor? For example, for handicapped people, and in snow and in rain?*

ML: Since it’s an indoor space, we tried to make the undulations pretty gradual. As a precaution, we will put up a notice for people to watch their step. After all, it is an artwork.

JGC: *Minneapolis is very cold; have you worked with landscape designers on the plantings?*

ML: Absolutely. The trees on the inside are a type of olive tree. We went for something not too exotic that we knew would work. On the outside, I wanted to go with birches because, again, winter to summer, even with the leaves down, the white bark is stunning. I wanted it to be visually interesting as a winter space from inside to outside.

JGC: *Let’s move from your identification with earth-based work to stone and clay works. Your middle name, “Ying,” means “precious stone.”*

ML: You don’t pronounce the Y. Ying is a precious jade. Certain things are—no one ever plans them. It is ironic, in a way, that I work with stone and that is my middle name.

JGC: *Do you want to discuss specific stone installations? Three of my favorites are Sounding Stones at*

Top and center detail: 10 Degrees North, 1997. Interior architecture of the Rockefeller Foundation Headquarters, New York, with water and stone table of the world. Bottom: Civil Rights Memorial, 1989. Stone, installed in Montgomery, Alabama.

Above: *The Peace Chapel*, 1998. Stone, installed at Juniata College, Huntingdon, Pennsylvania. **Below:** *Rock Field* (detail), 1997. Glass, 46 components, dimensions variable.

the Federal Courthouse Plaza in New York, the open-air Peace Chapel at Juniata College in Pennsylvania, and Ten Degrees North.

ML: One of my favorites is *The Civil Rights Memorial*. It works with the notion of the spring, the water, the font, but also the use of stone signifies, to some degree, an agelessness, a timelessness, a coming together of history, linking past to present. Stone is an ageless medium—I'm drawn to that.

I think that my father being a ceramist gave me an affinity for earthworks and earth forms, and, again, the use of time. You can think of a stone or a rock as being as old as the earth itself, so what is its age? No matter what its form, it just survives. It's there. Some mountains are young and some mountains are old, but we're still talking about something that *has* a sense of time that other materials, to me, don't necessarily capture.

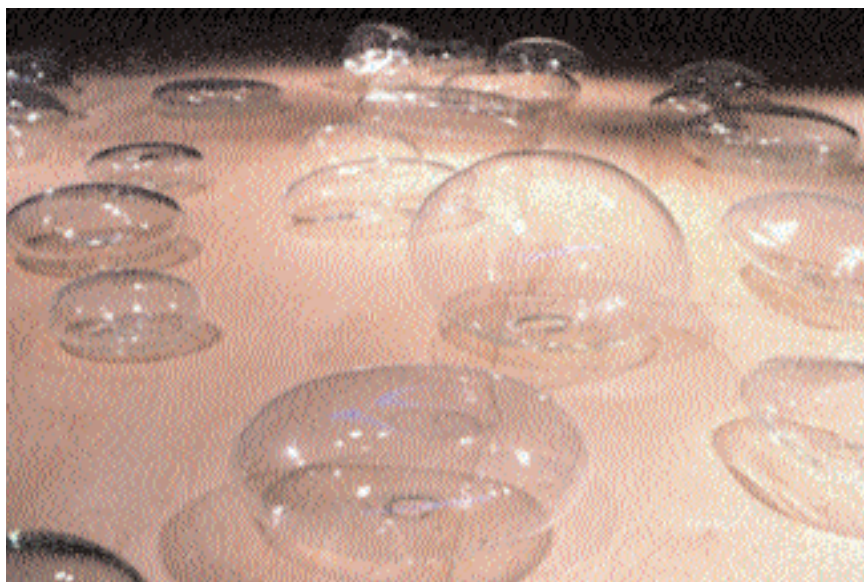
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JGC: You used glass to create your installation *Rock Field* in "Topologies."

ML: Right. That's another of my favorites. Before the Pilchuck residency, I had done work with broken glass but never with blown glass. I'm not about fabricating. It's more an idea. The monoprints that I started pulling at Pilchuck were about the process of cracking a plate, not consciously making an image, so to speak. Pilchuck, the name itself, is taken from the beautiful, river-washed stones around there, and I started collecting them. I didn't know what I was going to do with them. It got to the point where people were leaving gifts of stones at my table. Spontaneously, working with the gaffers (glass blowers), I would bring in these rocks and say, "Can we make a shape like this?" We talked about symmetry and asymmetry—a lot of the art of blowing glass, as in clay, is that perfect centering, the rotation of the blowing rod so it spins out perfectly. It was amazing to say to these expert gaffers, I want it slightly off. They had to retrain to become more sloppy, but, again, it has to be in balance to work at all. That's what I was looking for instead of that perfect, rotated, symmetrical form.

JGC: Have you used stone and clay in your studio work?

ML: In all my models for the earthworks, I use plasticene, which is clay imbued with an oil so it never dries out. I've been using clay since my college days. I know that's my father's influence. I never thought



it was unusual: the plasticity of clay, the fluidity, a medium that has a way of never finding its shape. I haven't exhibited them except as maquettes and studies.

JGC: You completed *Ecliptic* in Grand Rapids in September 2001. Could you discuss the use of science and fiber optics in this public space? And the theme of solid, liquid, vapor?



Timetable, 2000. Granite, steel, and stone, installed at Stanford University, California.

ML: It started when the Frey Foundation, a private foundation, selected me to put a work of art in downtown Grand Rapids. I asked them what the site was, and they had a corner of a much larger park area. I thought it was highly problematic, because the park was in bad shape, and I didn't feel that an artwork in a quiet little corner was going to change much. I pretty much told them that.

It turns out that the city of Grand Rapids was in the process of revamping the entire 3.5-acre park. I made a suggestion to the Frey Foundation that if they brought me in as an artist, I would then work with a team of engineers and landscape architects to redesign the entire park. The Freys donated my design as the artist. Nobody quite knew how that would work out because it was a real private-public interface. We all went into it figuring that it might not work contractually, and it all worked out amazingly well.

Usually, the artist is brought in at the very last minute when the buildings are built, everything's been bid out and, effectively, done. There's very little the artist can do except play catch up. For me to be brought in at the beginning—it turns out that there was a bandstand and a restroom/service facility that needed to be designed...the skating rink is what I was really interested in reworking.

My interest gets piqued by certain things. Grand Rapids is on the Grand River, and I began to think contextually of creating a work that dealt with water.

It evolved into a sculptural piece about the three states of water—solid, liquid, and vapor. There are two fountains, one a water fountain, one a mist fountain, and the third piece is the ice rink.

As it started evolving, there was a grade change of about eight feet from one corner of the skating rink to the other. As you know, I am obsessed by the curvature of the earth. You also know that water has to freeze on a flat surface. But I could play with how the tiered amphitheater moves to create the illusion that you are skating on a slightly titled plane. That became the core of the artwork.

You have to balance the forms carefully to make them feel natural. You push it slightly off kilter—nothing in nature is technically symmetrical.

We started to think about lighting the rink's surface, and Linnaea Tillitt, a designer, suggested fiber optics. I got a constellation chart of the midnight sky above Grand Rapids on January 1, 2000. It caught one moment in the millennial year when we were creating the park. In the end, the idea became larger than the states of water; it also plays with celestial navigation. The piece also deals with time—as well as this slight, subtle change in how one perceives walking on the curvature of the earth. This is the opposite of the Knoll furniture, which was about curvature. This one's about the tilted plane that you walk on.

JGC: Does the rink actually curve?

ML: No. The ellipse is flat, but the way the tiered seating is stepped—on one side it's above the ring and on one side it's below the ring—makes you feel that you're on a slightly tilted plane. The actual edge of the skating rink is a crisp edge—there's no rim. There is a skating handrail, but you can skate right up to the edge. It's a subtle play on perception.

JGC: You dedicated your book *Boundaries to your family*; you also said that your parents didn't discuss their past in China and that you were 21 when you learned that your aunt had helped design Tiananmen Square. Have you learned more about your roots?

ML: I have and I haven't. I have many books. Wilma Fairbanks just wrote a book on my uncle and aunt, Liang Sicheng and Lin Huiyin [*Liang and Lin*, University of Pennsylvania Press]. They are quite well known in China; a soap opera in Hong Kong is based on them. They were the preeminent architectural historians. They studied architecture at the University of Pennsylvania and at Yale and brought Modernism to China. They were architects in love with an ideal. My aunt died young. My uncle at first was for progress and hence the design of Tiananmen Square; later in life, he realized the importance of preserving the old China. Then he was at odds with the regime that wanted to wipe away the old. It's a mixed blessing, I think. They traveled throughout China and documented the old temple styles in an amazing, beautiful book; it was a lost volume. Wilma and John Fairbanks found the volume and published it many, many years later.

JGC: Did you see any inspiring places in China?

ML: The one that was amazing was my father's childhood home in Fukien. I could never figure out why I am so strongly influenced by Japanese architecture. Going back to my father's childhood house, it's a Japanese-style house built on a river. He was influenced by this house, then he shared his aesthetic with us—he made all the furniture, the pottery we ate off of, so that's where the affinity gets connected.

JGC: That explains your houses with moving walls.

ML: Yes. Isn't it amazing?

JGC: Now that you're a wife and mother, does sculpture play a role in your family life?

ML: When I met my husband, Daniel Wolf, there was not a single square foot of floor space free in his apartment. You had to hop to get to the dining room table. He collected pre-Columbian pottery and minerals. There are still objects everywhere. My two little girls are growing up with sculpture, probably much more so than paintings or photographs: sculpture, pre-Columbian works, stone matates, minerals, Neolithic ceramics, and later bronzes. We haven't broken anything yet. I just bought some little puzzle toys that are very freeform. I can't wait to get them introduced to clay. Uptown, I have very little art that I've made; the place is being taken over by books.

There are mineral caves near our place in Colorado. My first summer there, I dug up an incredible red clay.



Ecliptic, 2001. Grand Rapids, Michigan. Overall view of project.

It might be about time to give some of this red clay to the kids and see what happens. I think we're past the "we're going to eat it" stage.

JGC: How is the Extinction Project, which you launched in *Boundaries*, coming along?

ML: I'm officially involved now with the Yellowstone Foundation; I'm doing a work for them that ties into biodiversity and the history of the conservation movement. I started this summer. I've been collecting clippings, notes, talking to many scientists. Yellowstone will help me push it where it needs to be.

We're at a terrible moment right now. This country is going through something we never dreamed would be happening. I hope we don't lose sight of a larger picture about the environment, about global warming. If something good could come out of it, I hope that we as a country can really look at our energy needs and work toward a type of energy efficiency that will not only help us through this incredibly difficult time but also begin to deal with the enormous environmental problems caused by global warming and automobile emissions. We've lost sight of what most scientists say is an enormous threat—climate change is still there unless we quickly move to do something. I hope we become more energy efficient. I think we have to.

September 11th changed us—everyone. My love of creating disappeared; I think a lot of artists felt similarly lost. The one project that helped me through this time was a chapel that I am designing for the Children's Defense Fund. Working on a spiritually based project that focused on helping others was the only thing that could get me to start making things again.

Jan Garden Castro is author of The Last Frontier (Eclectic Press, 2001) and curator of Sonia Delaunay: La Moderne (Japan Museums and Jane V. Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers, 2002).