

EXHIBITION REVIEW

“Maya Lin’s Confluence Project”

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Maya Lin: Systematic Landscapes

Henry Art Gallery, Faye G. Allen Center for the Visual Arts

Seattle, Washington

April 22- September 3, 2006



The Confluence Project: Cape Disappointment Dedication Spring 2006
Seven Sites on the Columbia River, State of Washington and State of Oregon
Begun in 2001, Completion projected for 2009 (?)

Maya Lin and the Northwest are having an exciting conversation. Lin is half way through a decade of work on the *Confluence Project*, seven widely separated sites along the Columbia River in Oregon and Washington that mark intersections of rivers, cultures, histories, and ecologies. Simultaneously, but only for this summer, *Maya Lin Systematic*

Landscapes at the Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, presents dramatic new artworks. While her work has always reverberated with conceptual frameworks both visible and invisible, her new endeavor is to bring the scale and presence of her land art inside an art gallery. Consequently, Lin has created three installations that fill entire galleries: a ten foot hill/wave, a three dimensional wire drawing of ocean trenches that form an island, and a mountain range. The three installations are in different scales, and they constantly change as we move up, down, around, under, and through them. Also at the Henry is documentation of the *Confluence Project*. Three of the outdoor sites have been dedicated, but only one is near completion. At that site, Cape Disappointment, texts embedded in minimal shapes lead us to directly engage the subtleties of the natural landscape as well as the layered history of the place. Partly because of her training as an architect, rather than a sculptor, Lin conceives of her art work as part of the continuum of physical space, scientific principles and historical events, not as discrete self-sufficient objects. Instead, she creates a dialog with us, her installations, and the environment. Not content to simply reiterate her work of the past, each project begins with a startling idea realized through intense research. Lin listens to other people, expands her thinking, and changes her mind. That process is particularly evident in her current projects in the Northwest. Because of the duration and nature of the *Confluence Project* Lin is even revealing her process long before the work is completed.¹

The *Confluence Project* began as part of the 200th anniversary commemoration of the Meriwether Lewis and William Clark 1804-5 “Corps of Discovery,” a topic in which Lin was completely uninterested. Antone Minthorn of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation was one person who was instrumental in Maya Lin’s change of heart. He had seen a documentary in which she discusses the commemorations of the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement. In her sensitivity to those two charged events, he suddenly saw a solution to the problem of the Lewis and Clark anniversary. His own perspective on Lewis and Clark was, like most Native Americans, that they brought conquest, greed, illness, and destruction. He and another elder, Chief Cliff Snider, retired member of the Tribal Council of the Chinook Indian Nation, went to New York City to tell Maya Lin about the ecological changes to the Columbia River since the “Corps of Discovery”, the huge loss of species, and the current efforts at restoration.²

Dramatic ecological changes coincided with Lin’s long term interests in creating a monument to extinction. As she stated in 1996, “We are the one species that has rapidly caused the extinction of so many other species... We have to stop. We have to begin to understand that we cannot continue to overuse. I don’t know how it will manifest itself, but this is my dream.”³ So in the *Confluence Project* she is combining contemporary ecological restoration, native voices and Lewis and Clark’s detailed observations of flora and fauna. Lin refers to those texts as an ecological “lens” that provide one marker of the changes in the environment between then and now.

¹ “Normally we don’t talk about the work until it is one hundred percent finished.” Quotes from Maya Lin based on interview with the artist April 5, 2006, Seattle, Wa.

² Paula Brock, A Meeting of Minds,” *Pacific Northwest Magazine, Seattle Times*, June 12, 2005.

³ Tom Finkelpearl, “The Anti Monumental Work of Maya Lin,” *Public Art Review*, Fall Winter 1996, 9.

Lin spends as long as necessary thinking about what form the work will take, then leaps into concepts intuitively, with a drawing or an idea. Those ideas are translated into models, systemized through computers, and then embodied in art. She is never quite sure if it is all going to work. The element of uncertainty, that willingness to explore the edges of the possible gives her work a compelling edge. That tension of idea and execution, aesthetics and science, the rational and irrational, the possible and the impossible permeates all her work. At the same time, her goal is quite simple, to enable us to experience nature in a more complex way, to see beneath the surface appearance, to see through the obvious to larger concepts.

The dazzling installations at the Henry Art Gallery are just such an experiment with the edges of the possible. Lin manipulates our perceptions in real space and with real experiences. As we approach *Water Line* from a walkway with a half wall that marks the “waterline”, the outline of a small peak rises up seemingly floating in space. Lin had the idea of presenting a “singular point island.” She finally found a volcanic island formed by the intersection of three deep mid ocean trenches (a so-called triple-juncture) near Antarctica. The first impact of *Water Line* is that the “visible” part of the island barely rises above water level. As we look down into the gallery from above, we see that it emerges from a wavy grid. Using black quarter inch aluminum tubing, *Water Line* is an aesthetic re-presentation of a computer model of the trenches and the island. An actual, but distant landform, understood through a computer model, has been retranslated into a seductively beautiful drawing suspended in real space, defying gravity. Once we stand under it, we are literally inside the structure of the deep sea. Obviously, the real depth of the sea is much greater than this, but we can experience some of that depth physically. Lin’s desire to help us experience the deeper systems of nature works here on both literal and metaphorical levels.

Lin and her family frequently climb the mountain range in Colorado designated here as *Blue Lake Pass*. Built of thin layers of industrial grade particleboard glued together, the contour model is sliced into twenty blocks each 3 foot square separated just enough for us to walk between them. The blocks of the mountain impinge on our body, forcing us to contain our extensions, bags, arms, legs, and to feel the mountain almost pressing against us. Again the scale is particular; the blocks are just a little shorter than we are, so we look at them as equals or superiors, as we walk through. Lin compares her work to that of traditional nineteenth century Western landscape painters, in their pursuit of both the scientific and the sublime, but her work has no imperialist intention, but rather the reverse. She increases awareness of our relationship to the land, and that can lead us to withdraw from destruction, consumption, or even alteration. This mountain is not sublime at all, it is domesticated, as well traveled mountains in the West in the summer often are, and yet, it is also self sufficient, not in need of our eyes or our presence, to exist. By slicing through the mountain, she simulates the “attack mode” of the human/land interaction, but by allowing us to pass through without affecting the land; she brings us back to partnership, and even passivity as a relationship. *Blue Lake Pass* withdraws from us, parting, like the Biblical Red Sea, without resistance, until we have left it behind.

The installation in *Systematic Landscapes* that most obviously succeeds in creating a real presence of landscape in the gallery is *2 x 4 Landscape*. Constructed of over 50,000 fir and hemlock 2x4s cut to various lengths, and standing upright, the uneven surface purposefully simulates a pixilated landscape. As you walk around it, it ambiguously metamorphoses from wave to hill and almost seems to be animated by a life force. The artist commented that she was inspired, in part, by seeing the Palouse hills of Eastern Washington, an undulating landscape formed by lava flows. Like those highly anthropomorphic hills, *2x4 landscape* is both alluring and alienating. Both are steeper than they seem, walking up it is difficult, not casual (and only infrequently permitted in the gallery). There is an immediate sense of moving into a real life experience as you climb.

Lin first sketched the hill, and then created a series of models. A laser scan translated into a computer model charted the position of every single piece of wood. A construction team in Seattle then built the landscape in a warehouse piece by piece. The interior of the hill has some empty space and the entire construction comes apart in segments that allow it to be disassembled and rebuilt in another location. Yet, the hill is exactly proportioned to this particular gallery space in its height and its horizontal base (36 x 53 feet - it had to be squared off to accommodate walking around the work.) The transition from hill to horizontal was the most difficult zone to make plausibly organic, not too abrupt, but also not flaccid. The piece succeeds in exactly what the artist hoped for, an experience both visual and kinesthetic of a landscape inside an art gallery.

Surrounding these three primary installations are a variety of smaller works. A linear representation constructed entirely of straight pins traces the Columbia River from its origins (in Canada, but international boundaries are deliberately omitted) to its confluence with the Pacific Ocean. Nearby three sculptures reference inland seas, the Caspian, the Red, and the Black, perceived as both surface shapes with which we are familiar, and as deep landforms beneath a surface, exaggerated 200 times in order to dramatize the contours that create the seas' two dimensional shape. The *Atlas Drawings* reverse the concept, instead of creating a solid form for a body of water; they make gaps in the land. Lin cut the drawings page by page from old atlases, creating giant rifts and craters in Germany, Brazil, Chile, and China. Other formats for drawing include square bronze "sketch tablets" of Lin's lines in the land, each a different scale, although here seemingly all the same. One is completed in Wanas, Sweden), and two are in progress (in Kentucky and Colorado). The lines provide different experiences with the land, above, inside, up and down. Another type of sketch is the small plaster waves and river beds that seem to erupt directly from the gallery wall. Finally, pastel rubbings taken from a fractured plate of glass suggest rivers formed by the same principles as large scale tectonics in the land. Every work in the exhibition has its own scale, but collectively they give us a sense of the range of possibilities for the experience of natural phenomenon.

At either side of these installations and drawings are documentations of Lin's public art. At one end, videos document her earlier work. At the other end are models and other presentation materials for the *Confluence Project*. The *Project* as a whole includes both physical sites and intersections among many different people, politicians both local and

national, government officials ranging from the Park Service to Historical Societies, donors from individuals to corporations, and, of course, many Indian tribes and ordinary people. The executive director, Jane Jacobsen, is orchestrating all aspects of the project including the huge fund raising necessary for its realization, projected to be 22.8 million.

The seven sites of the Confluence Project are (going from East to West), Chief Timothy Park, near the confluence of the Clearwater and the Snake, Sacajawea State Park at the confluence of the Columbia and the Snake Rivers, Celilo Falls State Park, a site of contested cultural confluence, Sandy River Delta at the confluence of the Columbia and the Sandy Rivers, Vancouver National Historic Reserve, the Confluence of the Columbia River and the Klickitat Trail, Frenchman's Bar Park, the confluence of the Columbia and the Willamette, and Cape Disappointment State Park at the mouth of the Columbia River and the Pacific Ocean. Lin sees all the sites as a single "fluid ever changing environment".

Cape Disappointment⁴ in the Southwest corner of Washington State is represented in the Henry exhibition by slides, photographs of the site before Lin altered it, hand drawings or proposals on digital prints, and foam core models that remind us again that Lin trained as an architect.

A spectacular 1800 acre state park, Cape Disappointment sits at the rugged edge of the broadest point of the Columbia River as it flows into the Pacific. From these headlands you can see for miles both north and south along the edge of the continent. These are the same headlands that Lewis and Clark climbed as they finally reached their destination (although they had not found the Northwest water passage that they sought). In those same headwaters, for years before Lewis and Clark arrived, the Chinook Indian Nation and its many related tribes grew wealthy as traders between the inland tribes and boats from all parts of the world.

The State Park now has four different installations by Maya Lin (in addition to several other commemorations of Lewis and Clark.) A viewing platform at the edge of the water facing a salt water estuary commemorates the Corps arrival at the Pacific Ocean., with a short text quoted from an Expedition journal. Lin worked with State Park administrators and landscape designers to open up the view and restore natural water drainage, dunes and native grasses. A walkway through the restored landscape (as well as a new parking lot) leads to a fish cleaning station. Lin removed the previous metal sink and installed a functional basalt sink, complete with water supply. The sink is inscribed with the Chinook creation myth that tells the story of cutting fish down the back instead of crossways, leading to the birth of the first humans. Lin's openness to tribal perspectives in her high profile project is motivated by more than a desire for a token reversal of centuries of colonialism.⁵ Tribal elders profoundly impressed her with their deep understanding of the environment.

⁴ Named in 1788 by an English Captain who failed to find the Columbia River. Its Indian name is Cape Kais.

⁵ The five tribes of the Chinook took a dim view of the Corps: "In the year of 1805, a group of worn, macerated men stumbled and paddled into one of the world's richest lands; they had arrived in lower

An ecological trail leads from the fresh water estuary to the ocean, explaining the changing ecosystem. A path marks the water's edge 200 years ago, with concrete planks incised with the text of the Chinook blessing ceremony used on November 18, 2005, exactly 200 years after Lewis and Clark reached the same spot. Lin was so affected by the beauty of the dedication, that she spontaneously asked permission to include it. The oyster filled walkway leads to a circle that is irregularly marked by driftwood cedars anchored upright (by steel posts that go six feet into the ground). They mark the Native American cardinal directions, inside, outside, up down and through, directions that also permeate the Henry Art Gallery exhibition.

The final walkway of the site leads to the ocean beach and is incised with the mile by mile account of the journey from the Lewis and Clark journals. Lin underscores the different ways of perceiving the natural world by juxtaposing the Chinook dedication and the Lewis and Clark entries, one poetic and reverential, the other factual.

The other sites of the *Confluence Project* are just getting underway. At the Sandy River Delta in Troutdale, Oregon, the Corps of Engineers have already planned to remove a dam. Lin is working with the Forest Service in their ongoing reforestation efforts. She is constructing a "Bird Blind" for this site, a simple oval structure of wooden slats spaced so that birds can see us as easily as we can see them. It will be raised on pilings so that the water can pass under it during flooding. The almost twelve foot high fir slats will be engraved with entries from the Lewis and Clark journal that site species of fauna, when sighted, where, and whether they are currently endangered. A full size mock up of one section is included in *Systematic Landscapes*.

At Sacajawea State Park a major confluence of the Columbia and the Snake Rivers, Lin will primarily collaborate with the Park Service to restore native plants, dunes and habitat for salmon on the shorelines. Lin chose this site because it was noted in a single sentence as a one day visit for Lewis and Clark, while for many Indians it was an annual seasonal gathering place for thousands of years. This disparity of perspectives of time and of values is a theme of the entire *Confluence*. An "outdoor museum" walk on compacted earth will lead around the shore with texts on the seasonal round of native rituals, how far they traveled changes in homelands, what they are today.

Chief Timothy Park along the Columbia River is the site that has been least altered in 200 years. It is a natural amphitheater or sky bowl, chosen in collaboration with the Nez Perce, the famous tribe led by Chief Joseph who were pursued by the US military right

Chinook Country. . . If they had expected a tribe that was impressed by their advanced ways, they were unpleasantly surprised." The essay also comments on the Corps exclusive focus on eating scarce big game instead of the plentiful salmon all around them. Greg Robertson, "The Chinook Perspective," *Destination: The Pacific, Bicentennial Guide*, Pelican Productions, 2004, p. 7. Although they were recognized under Clinton, Bush reversed that recognition shortly after the Confluence Project began. They are still hoping to reverse that. Their participation in the Project and at the dedication ceremony was an aspect of that hope, although one member of the tribe vigorously protested with signs like "Maya Lin Why Do You Immortalize US Theft?"

through the just created Yellowstone National Park all the way to Canada and then imprisoned at Fort Vancouver. But they survived and the project will celebrate their continued cultural presence. Based on her moving experience of the songs, prayers and music at the dedication ceremony, Lin is creating an earthwork listening circle connected to the orientation of the dedication. In addition to the earth circle, Lin plans to embed a text that documents all the plants that Lewis and Clark noted and to plant a sea of blue Camas lilies that will invoke the journals comment when they saw the blue flowers.

The other three sites of the Confluence are not yet started. In Vancouver Washington, the confluence is cultural. An interpretive trail in Vancouver National Historic Reserve will unite the Klickitat Trail with the bank of the Columbia River, a tribal connection for thousands of years that was broken in the early nineteenth century when Fort Vancouver was taken over by the US military from the Hudson's Bay Company. A forty foot wide earth covered bridge, designed by native American architect Johnpaul Jones will "pull the prairie up, over the highway, and back to the river." At Frenchman's Bar, the confluence of the Willamette and the Columbia, the main project is to increase the wetlands. Finally, Celilo Falls was a major fishing site for thousands of years for native American tribes. It was submerged by a dam built in 1957 and it is still a site of painful loss and conflict. Elizabeth Woody has described it as "a forty-two year absence and silence."⁶ The dialog is ongoing as to an appropriate commemoration.

The *Confluence Project* engages with restoration of balance, and a return to harmony between humans and the land. Lin embraces the natural world and the scientific world, then transforms it into a highly refined aesthetic. In that sense her work is fundamentally utopian and modernist. Yet, in Lin's willingness to learn from native Americans and to reframe the Lewis and Clark expedition as an ecological record, she is engaging with uncertainties and complexities that move beyond modernism. Her subject is the dialog between the environment and humanity framed through history and texts. In commemorating the Lewis and Clark mission by embedding their texts in the very land that they helped to damage and in dialog with the cultures that were almost destroyed, Maya Lin has once again managed to enable us to connect to a painful history in a constructive way. This is not really a commemoration, it is a conversation. Maya Lin invites us to step from certainties to "thresholds," of the past and present, of natives and whites, of nature and people, of water and land.

⁶ Elizabeth Woody, *Salmon Nation, People Fish and Our Common Home*, Ecotrust, 2003.