

# Maya Lin Keeps Breaking New Ground

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*By Sarah Medford / Photography by Ethan James Green for WSJ. Magazine*

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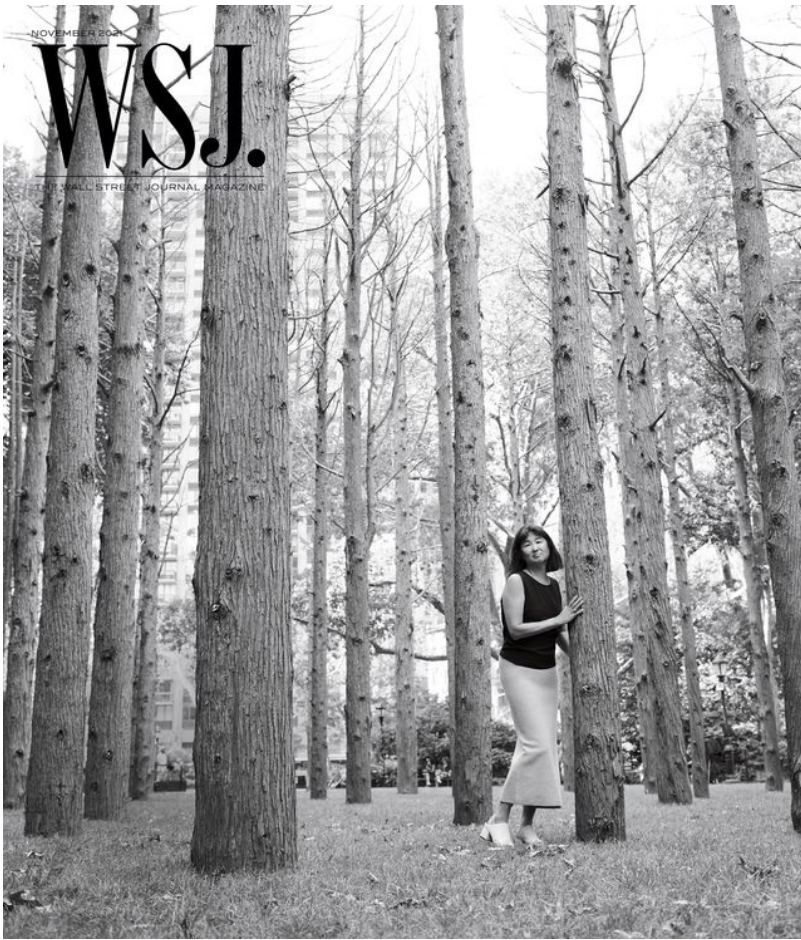


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**T**his is the squirrel condo,” Maya Lin says, pointing to an English elm tree pocked with holes, a ring of almond shells tossed like so many used takeout containers around its base. She’s standing in Madison Square Park, seven acres in Manhattan’s Flatiron District that encompass an oval lawn, a dog run, a Shake Shack and a reflecting pool lined with benches. Lin has a soft spot for squirrels, and she got to know this crew last spring while installing *Ghost Forest*, an art installation that ends its six-month run in mid-November.



Maya Lin at her “Ghost Forest” installation in New York City’s Madison Square Park.

Like many of Lin’s large outdoor sculptures, *Ghost Forest* is made in and of nature—in this case 49 Atlantic white cedars between 40 and 45 feet tall. Victims of extreme weather, including saltwater incursion, in the New Jersey Pine Barrens, the trees are slowly dying, and she’s arranged them in a skeletal copse at the park’s center, a hollowed-out reminder of the disastrous effects of climate change.

*Ghost Forest* was meant to debut in June 2020. Its 11-month postponement due to the pandemic introduced a layer of poignancy that not even the artist could have predicted: Amid so much human loss, nature’s sacrifice seems hauntingly apropos.

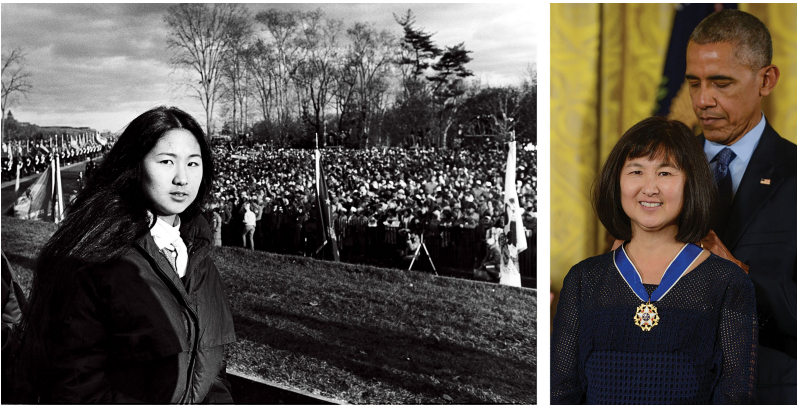
“It is beautiful, and it is all the more resonant because not only does it talk about climate change quite directly and quite visibly, but it has been here during the pandemic,” says architect Deborah Berke, whose Fifth Avenue office has a bird’s-eye view of the park. Berke is dean of the Yale School of Architecture and a friend of Lin’s. “It is a magnetic piece—you want to go check it out,” Berke says, “but it is also profoundly melancholy.”

Layered responses like this are routine with Lin’s work. Best known as a memorialist, the 62-year-old artist and designer has created the conditions for mourning across America,

from her 1982 Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., designed when she was still a Yale senior, to the 1989 Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama; the 2000–2017 Confluence Project in Oregon and Washington state, a series of markers to westward expansion and its costs to native populations; and others. But Lin’s spaces also bring people together. While she was grouping *Ghost Forest*’s 49 cedars, she says, “I was thinking, This one’s good for two people, this one’s good for five people....” Months later, here they are, picnicking and taking selfies beneath the spectral trees. A few squirrels have climbed into the bare branches to sun themselves.

Lin watches from a park bench, dressed in spotless athleticwear and white sneakers. Though she’s been a public figure for four decades, the subject of two monographs, 15 children’s books and an Oscar-winning documentary (*Maya Lin: A Strong, Clear Vision, 1994*) and the recipient of both a National Medal of Arts and the Presidential Medal of Freedom, she usually goes unrecognized, even in her home city. Her daughters, Rachel Wolf, 22, and India Wolf, 24, sometimes have to remind her to dress up before going out, brush her hair or spend a minute with the rare stranger who might pick her out in a crowd. Observing is more Lin’s thing. (This might explain her fraught relationship with driving: “I’m probably the worst driver in the world,” she says. “My husband once said, ‘You drive like you’re 1,000 years old.’ ”)

As a way of processing her observations, Lin writes before she draws. Her first book, *Boundaries* (2000), made it onto the reading list of John McPhee’s undergraduate writing seminar at Princeton in 2013. He invited her in to speak to the class, and she invited him to walk her through the New Jersey Pine Barrens, one of his favorite natural landscapes and a subject of his own writing. They were joined by the executive director of the Pinelands Preservation Alliance, a conservation scientist and two Drexel University students, and the memorable day eventually found its way into *Ghost Forest*.



Lin, in 1982, at the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.; Lin receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama in 2016.

PHOTO: HARRY NALTCHAYAN/THE WASHINGTON POST VIA GETTY IMAGES; LEIGH VOGEL/WIREIMAGE.

“Not only was she making notes; she had notes with her on arrival,” McPhee recalls of their outing, via email. “And, incidentally, she is the most prepared and organized guest who has ever visited my course. Three hours? Two hours and 50 minutes halved by a 10-minute break? She had it structured and timed all the way.”

Like McPhee, Lin is a habitual measurer. For projects big and small, she’s recorded such things as the height of Atlantic cod in the 19th century (taller than the average man); the depth of the Caspian Sea (980 meters); and the number of seconds it takes to walk the spine of one of her sculptures (660, to travel across her 2004 work *Eleven Minute Line* in Knislinge, Sweden). “If you think of mapping nature, systematizing nature, not trying to mimic it, but to understand it....” She stops to edit her thought, making sure you’re still with her. “Maybe I’m a little bit of a science nerd,” she finally says. “I don’t know why I’m really drawn to understanding nature through pure data facts at times. But the facts aren’t cold—they’re kind of fascinating to me.”

Lin describes the sculptures that have been her main focus over the past few decades as land art seen through the lens of technology. Massive earthworks like *Storm King Wavefield* (2009), a four-acre expanse of parkland in Orange County, New York, that she ruffled into grassy hills and valleys, or *A Fold in the Field* (2013), a series of loaf-shaped mounds rising up to 40 feet high at the Gibbs Farm sculpture park in New Zealand, are informed by aerial wave photography and fluid dynamics. Her smaller river sculptures—flat pours or casts of recycled silver, or wall-mounted arrangements of pins—rely on satellite images and other devices to map the shifting boundaries between land and water brought on by climate change. Lin’s choice of subject matter, on the other hand, can be wildly subjective. She mapped the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries in 2015 because they reminded her of a gingerroot.

Most of these projects come together over two to three years, and some stretch on for a decade. But Lin's slow, cumulative methods don't prevent her from making changes at the last minute, even when bulldozers and dump trucks are involved. "If the work doesn't change while I'm on-site, I've probably lost it," she says.

**“Maya’s not afraid to put something out there that is absolutely so normal and so simple that you’ve been looking at it all the time, and she makes it special. It’s really brave.**

— Edwina von Gal

“People have a funny habit,” she observed in a 2016 talk at Washington, D.C.’s Renwick Gallery, where a show of her sculpture was on view. “If they can’t see it, they tend not to think about it. I tend to focus on things right under your feet that you might not be thinking about, might not be seeing.”

All of these instincts collide in *What Is Missing?*, a work the artist calls her last memorial. It’s also her most ambitious project to date. A website documenting species loss, an irreversible by-product of global warming, *What Is Missing?* is both a conceptual art piece and a call to action—and part of Lin’s public coming-out as an environmental activist. It can “jump form,” as she likes to say, from a digital to a physical presence; *Ghost Forest* is one of its iterations.

*What Is Missing?*, which launched online in 2016, flows out of Lin’s belief in making space for everyone in the climate conversation. A big part of the website is a crowdsourced memory bank that collects nature experiences lost to time, like cradling a young box turtle in your backyard or catching a jarful of fireflies. Amid the collective outrage around global warming, Lin’s restraint may be the most decisive—and powerful—aspect of her work.

“Partly it’s my nature,” she says of her non-hectoring approach. “I don’t want to preach.” And partly it’s hard-won experience: “The moment people think they know where you’re coming from, they stop listening.” Instead, Lin explains, “I’m trying to get you to finish the sentence.” McPhee thinks this view ends up benefiting her work “in the same way that a writer respects a reader,” he says. “I have a long screed somewhere about the creative writer and the creative reader, and how the creative reader is the alpha figure, how the creative reader can make whole scenes from just a few words a writer sets up.”



“A Fold in the Field,” 2013, at Gibbs Farm in New Zealand; Lin’s “Eleven Minute Line,” a 2004 work in Knislinge, Sweden; her 2009 work “Storm King Wavefield” at Storm King Art Center in New Windsor, New York; “Bird Blind,” a 2008 installation in Oregon’s Sandy River Delta, part of the “Confluence Project.”

PHOTO: DAVID HARTLEY-MITCHELL; ANDERS NORSELL, COURTESY WANÅS FOUNDATION; JERRY THOMPSON, COURTESY OF STORM KING ART CENTER; BOB MEADOR.

Lin’s route toward justice—environmental, social, political—has always pointed to the strength of collective experience to repair our sense of wonder at the world. If this sounds old-fashioned in 2021, it may be because the commemorative stance she took early in her career has become more common, and so much more raw, over the past few years. Lisa Phillips, director of New York’s New Museum, says that Lin’s early memorial work foreshadowed what has become one of the most important directions in 21st-century art making.

“I have so much admiration for Maya, for her vision and her tenacity,” Phillips says. “Memorials, since the Vietnam Memorial, are most effective when they embody loss or trauma as they evoke memory. As an Asian-American and a woman, she’s experienced her share of exclusion and trauma, which I do believe is part of why she is capable of great empathy.”

In her choice of subtlety, Lin unlocks opportunities for herself. “Maya’s not afraid to put something out there that is absolutely so normal and so simple that you’ve been looking at it all the time, and she makes it special. It’s really brave,” says the landscape designer Edwina von Gal, who has collaborated on Lin’s projects for decades, including *Storm King Wavefield*, *Ghost Forest* and the 2021 redesign of Neilson Library at Smith College. Even now, von Gal admits, she’s often brought up short by her friend’s drive to turn the familiar inside-out.



“Maya doesn’t feel like she has to do something new—but it’s inherently new because of the thought she brings to it,” says von Gal. “She’ll come to me and say, ‘I’m going to do this.’ And I’ll say, ‘Well, that sounds really boring. I don’t see anything. Really?’ ”

The readability of Lin’s sculptural forms—a book, a box, a table, a wave—serve as an invitation. They are intentionally anti-edgy. “It’s very personal how I want you to relate, and how I need to relate, to these works,” she says.

**A**s a child in rural Athens, Ohio, Lin read Tolkien and sci-fi and fantasy novels and gravitated to the outdoors. Her parents allowed Maya and her brother, Tan, who is two years older, “to grow up completely free-rein,” she says. “They never said, ‘What are you doing?’ or told us what to think. Never.” Her father, a ceramicist, was dean of the college of fine arts at Ohio University, and her mother was a professor of English and Asian literature there. Both émigrés from China who had narrowly escaped the worst years of the Cultural Revolution, they didn’t say much about their pasts, and Lin didn’t question them—until a dam broke around her sophomore year in college, and she questioned them voraciously. By this time she was at Yale, and the unwinding of her family history eventually led her to research (“hack,” she says) Chinese spirituality and

thought. In Taoism, Lin found clues to her parents' nonprescriptive outlook and a window into her own.

Lin went to Yale to study animal behavior but switched to architecture when she learned that vivisection would be required. She also gravitated to fine art, which felt deliciously left-field to the budding architect in 1979, but she stopped short of changing course a second time. In one of her graduate seminars, the architect Frank Gehry, a visiting professor, assured her that the difference between being an artist who does architecture and an architect who does art wasn't worth worrying about. (She ended up pursuing a master's in architecture, though she didn't earn a license.) Lin keeps the two disciplines distinct in her professional life if not in her brain. There is no question that the success of her earthworks owes partly to her spatial and material sophistication, or that the buildings she's designed benefit from a certain intuitive freedom. The memorials are a distillation of both—and reflect back on all her work. When hate crimes against Asian-Americans surged last winter in New York and across the country, a kind of memorial was already in place: Lin's Museum of Chinese in America (2009), an education center and repository of immigrant stories and memorabilia with deep ties to the New York-area diaspora. Her design has two glass-walled entrances: one facing Chinatown, the other facing a rapidly gentrifying Lafayette Street.

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— Maya Lin

After seeing Lin's Langston Hughes Library (1999) for the Children's Defense Fund in Tennessee, a glass-and-steel building slipped inside the shell of an 1860s barn, Dallas couple Charles and Jessie Price reached out to her about designing a house for them in southwest Colorado. Experienced clients—they'd already worked with architect Steven Holl on their Dallas home—the Prices also had a family history of patronage; Charles's father and grandfather had between them commissioned three projects from Frank Lloyd Wright, including the Oklahoma house where Charles grew up. The Prices are happy with the pair of smooth-skinned wood boxes that Lin came up with, joined by a bridge with the visual heft of a tongue depressor. They appreciate its eucalyptus-wood paneling, buffed-plaster walls, pietra cardosa sandstone counters and the high-functioning galley kitchen.



Occasionally, though, they wonder what’s happening in the tall-grass meadow just beyond their living room wall.

“Maya didn’t fetishize the view,” says Charles Price diplomatically. “We have a spectacular view from our living room, but she just left it.” Instead of going the picture-window route, she positioned a single, quite large window in a corner that frames the fin-shaped Mount Wilson. The prospect to the southeast would have been great too, Price explains, “but you can also just go outside.”



The 1989 Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama; the Chief Timothy amphitheater in Clarkston, Washington, part of Lin’s larger “Confluence Project” examining the Lewis and Clark expedition.

PHOTO: TOM ENGLAND, COURTESY SPLC; MEAGHAN STETZIK, COURTESY OF CONFLUENCE PROJECT.

Lin laughs at this story. Before starting to design, she’d assiduously staked out a few potential sites for the house and studied them from a vantage point along the main road into town. Tucking the house into a corner would offer the Prices more privacy, she’d suggested—and that went for her choice of window placement, too. “I’m not very good at ‘Ta-da!’ ” she says.

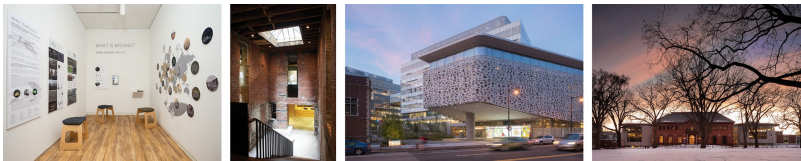
Lin and her family own a house nearby, with a view that frames the deeply ridged Mount Sneffels. As it happens, “Ta-da!” pretty accurately describes it. A kind of all-in-one Tuscan hill town of colored boxes, pointy rooflines and picture windows, it was designed between 1986 and 1989 for Lin’s future husband, the photography collector and dealer Daniel Wolf, by the Italian architect Ettore Sottsass, mastermind of the postmodern Memphis movement.

“I know it’s a work of art, and it is sort of ironic that...,” Lin says, then cuts to the chase: “It’s about as far from what I do as you can get.”

Though it’s not to her taste, Lin has come to regard the house as a part of the family, the place where she and Wolf shared their love of nature and the wild landscape with their two daughters. In January 2021, after they’d spent almost a year of enforced solitude there, everything abruptly changed: Wolf suffered a sudden heart attack and died two months shy of his 66th birthday.

For almost a month, Lin stayed put with her daughters in Colorado. When work began to look like a useful way forward, she immersed herself in two projects that were mercifully close to completion. “Both the library at Smith and *Ghost Forest* had passed that arc of challenge and were coming into a moment of triumph,” says von Gal, who was involved in each. “They’re both an upward step for Maya.”

After traveling a bit over the summer, Lin has been busy finalizing two new works: a glass sculpture that rises 40 feet inside a new research hospital at the University of Pennsylvania, and a river sculpture for a building the architect Norman Foster has designed on Martha’s Vineyard for his foundation. Both have ties to *What Is Missing?* “At this moment in my life, I want to give absolutely everything more purpose,” Lin says.



Lin’s “Map of Memory: Hudson River Timeline” show, part of her “What Is Missing?” project, at the Hudson River Museum, 2018-2019; the Museum of Chinese in America, opened in 2009 in New York City; Novartis Institutes for BioMedical Research, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which Lin helped design; Smith College’s newly renovated Neilson Library.

PHOTO: KRIS GRAVES, COURTESY PACE GALLERY; NIC LEHOUX ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAPHY; IWAN BAAN; NIC LEHOUX ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAPHY.

She’s also been finishing up a key section of the website. Called “Greenprint” and launching this fall, it will track climate victories and forecast a route to a more sustainable future, adopting a tighter format than some earlier parts of the platform. “*What Is Missing?* has been an amazing arc of discovery,” says von Gal, who sits on its board. If not always the smoothest one: “What Maya put up originally was incredibly beautiful, but incredibly overcomplicated. It was just overwhelming,” she says. How did the board intervene? “We didn’t have to. Because that’s Maya—she knew.”

Though Lin recoils at the messy way *What Is Missing?* has come together in public view, she feels a renewed sense of urgency around it. “I just need to throw what I’m working on out there,” she says. “Get it out, get it out, get it out.” McPhee has called her effort “an artwork without tradition.”



Maya Lin's "Decoding the Tree of Life" installation at Penn Medicine's Pavilion.

PHOTO: PENN MEDICINE

When she was younger, Lin says, her early success with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial haunted her. She would fantasize about flipping her career around to culminate with her first public work, and the avalanche of feeling it generated on the Washington Mall. "I wanted to play with time that way," she says. "It really shouldn't matter whether I did it first or last."

Now there is a good chance that her last commemorative work could prove as indelible as her first. Like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, *What Is Missing?* is an outpouring of information and a stirring visual experience. And like that effort, it takes on not just what we've lost, but how to move forward—together, with eyes open.

"I've been focused on climate change in my work for the past 15 years," Lin says. "At first people were like, 'Well, she's kind of gone off the deep end. What's she doing?'" She

pauses. “But you know it when the zeitgeist catches up. And we’ve got to move.”

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