

MAKING OF PATHS TO PIER 42: AN INTERVIEW WITH JENNIFER WEN MA

[Jennifer Wen Ma](#) was one of five commissioned artists in 2013 who, in collaboration with the project team, advisory committee, volunteers and most importantly, local feedback and support, transformed Pier 42 into a vibrant and accessible waterfront park for the community.

[Hester Street Collaborative](#) (HSC) had the opportunity to ask Jennifer Wen Ma, resident artist, about her experience working on the *Paths to Pier 42* project. Jennifer Wen Ma's project "Inked Garden" was an elongated garden painted black with charcoal-based Chinese ink, planted and cared for with community members. The garden returned to green over time, serving as a testament to the perseverance and resilience of life. In the last phase of the project, community members adopted all the plants and planters.



Jennifer Wen Ma and team at the end of a productive community build day.

HSC: What was your approach to the *Paths to Pier 42* project? How is the project connected to the values that motivate your work?

Because I live in the neighborhood, I really wanted to develop something with the community. I've worked on inked gardens before in other parts of the world, but

this was the first time I had worked in New York with this particular series. Instead of coming to the community with a very set plan, I left the form quite open and tried engage people to see what would emerge from the process. The needs of the site are also very particular, and so it was important to really work with the site to come up with a form that would make the most sense.

HSC: How do you see this project as a metaphor for our everyday experiences in the neighborhood and city?

It's interesting because each project reveals itself in different ways that I cannot fully anticipate at the beginning. With this series of work, it's all about the perseverance of life. When I apply the ink onto the plants they stay alive but they are under a lot of stress because the ink stops the photosynthesis process. Every plant has a decision to make – to either thrive or succumb to the stress. Throughout the process we water them, they have access to sun and they can get nourishment they need, so it's about seeing how each life form reacts under stress – which is really very much how life is in contemporary society.



Inked daisies

When I first spoke with the community, of course everyone was asking “Why? We finally get a garden, we finally get a park, and you’re going to do *what* with it?” There were a lot of reactions like that, and there were some very heated community meeting discussions, but in the process of talking things through a lot of things became clear to me. It’s not always through a single trauma that a life is terminated;

often it's through neglect or how one is treated after trauma. An accident doesn't define a life, but often a life is destroyed through long-term neglect.

HSC: In what ways did advisory committee meetings, planning meetings with artists and community build days contribute to the final installation?

It's a balance because initially I left the project very open. I thought we would all just design it together, but at some point I realized I needed to come to the meetings with something more specific too. So then it really became "I would like to do this, what do you think?" instead of just, "What would you like to do?" because that's just too broad of a question. I learned a lot through this process. At first I went to the meetings with a lot of room for different possibilities, which wasn't as productive as when I came with something more specific, and rather than be defensive be of what I'm presenting, really worked to incorporate people's thoughts into the project. The community build days were also very helpful because they weren't just in an office space talking arbitrarily. It was much more site specific and the reactions I got were really helpful.



Jennifer Wen Ma speaking with residents during Waterfront Community Day

HSC: What strategies did you use to maximize time, space, materials and community participation?

One thing I did not want to do was just come in and plop something down that was already preconceived and could go anywhere. It's my neighborhood too, and there are so many needs in this area. Especially since Hurricane Sandy had just happened, my question as an artist was "What could art bring that would be meaningful to the people here?" I think sometimes it's a reality that we need to check because otherwise we live in a bubble. I tried to be very open about what I was thinking with the community members. I wanted to make something that could have meaning – a beautiful park with plants would bring joy, but I also wanted it to be more than just learning about planting the garden, so people could get something additional out of it.

Luckily we did work with three different school groups, and a lot of people from the larger community of New York City, from as young as 5 or 6 to much older across the board. It was really interesting to see how different age groups and backgrounds reacted to the piece, so that the time we spent building and planting was really a part of the work. It wasn't just about viewing it, but it was very process oriented and experiential all the way from June through November. We did a plant adoption where all the plants and planters were adopted all around the city, from Queens to midtown and in this neighborhood as well. So now the seeds have been sown and now they've gone to other parts of New York City.

HSC: What issues on the site most interested you, and how do you think your installation might contribute to the long term plans for the park?

The fact that the site was not accessible and that whole strip had been kind of forgotten by the city for so long really interested me. I actually walk down there all the time when the weather is nice. I used to turn right towards pier 17 once I got to the water, because if I turned left – in the direction of Pier 42 – there was nothing there, it was an industrial wasteland. I always found it kind of crazy how everything else was so nice. Our site is hard to get to, people don't know it exists, it's cut off by the highway, and the underpass junction is really kind of chaotic.



From the beginning, I felt that something that offered change or different experiences over time would benefit the site. There needed to be something that was repeated, that someone could tell others about, not just something that could be easily consumed in one visit. The way I was thinking was that if there is a work that sparks people's curiosity, then that would encourage repeated visits. Even people who are just jogging by would see the black plants, and it might make them curious to see how they change over time. This project is not a one-time experience, and it's really through the circulation of people's energy that the site could be activated. Otherwise it just remains dead.

The site is also quite difficult because of the lack of water access. For various reasons we couldn't always get proper water to the plants which I actually thought was just a reflection of reality, because this neighborhood is very neglected. Everybody had the right intentions, all the partners had been wonderful, my team is wonderful, and I had great volunteers, I had great students that helped me throughout the summer, but sometimes things still fall through the cracks and that's just how life is. My high school volunteer was very discouraged. She felt terrible that the plants weren't watered, and she felt terrible herself because she was volunteering for community service hours. She said she didn't want to put down the hours, and I told her she had to put them down because she was learning that not everything in life is "Do A and get B." Sometimes projects don't turn out the way you want them to and it's not smooth sailing, but that's a really important life lesson a high school kid needs to learn. I try not to think of it as negative things that happen along the way, but as a situation that reflects the larger context that we're living in.

HSC: Community participation is important to your project, did you work with community members or groups you had worked with over the summer to care for the plants as the project was wrapping up?

Yes, we worked with several community groups including summer campers at Two Bridges Neighborhood Council, summer campers from Cornerstone Program at Two Bridges, Chinatown YMCA, individual volunteers from local high schools, Zoom Dojo, and the New York City Area among other groups. For the plant adoption, we worked with Sustainable Queens and individuals from various Manhattan community parks. At the beginning of the community meetings we had with the stakeholders, I asked everyone to think about plants they would want to adopt and let me know. So there were a lot of people interested from the very beginning that actually took home plants in the end. Someone said he wanted bamboo, so I left bamboo specifically for him later on. The majority of the plants I chose were perennials so that when people adopted them they would have something with a prolonged life. We also put up posters at either end of the park in September, saying that we were going to find good homes for the plants when the park closes, and asking people to get in touch if they were interested. We got responses from that and we got responses from various community partners.



Green bamboo leaves beginning to shoot through the ink

HSC: Is there anything specific about this project that changed the way you think about or approach your work?

I think the project affirmed a lot of things I had been thinking about, but it also made it very clear to me that when I'm asking for community involvement, I need to be very aware of the responsibilities that come with it. If I know that later I'm going to have problems with watering, or access, or a lack of involvement, then maybe an inked garden is not the best work to be selected for the site. Because I am working with living beings, and I don't like them not being taken care of. So I think being realistic and not overly idealistic is important. It's not as if it would just be nice if someone participated, participation is actually essential, otherwise the plants will die. And I don't want to play with lives, so I think it makes me a little bit more cautious in the way I would approach a project like this in the future.



HSC: How do you think the experience of this collaboration with the residents and other artists might inform your work moving forward?

I really loved us all working on the site at the same time. We were all so stressed out and it was super hot, but it was a really nice bonding experience. I think the pieces played off each other well, particularly Mary's, Chat's and my piece. The way Mary approached plants, and the way Chat's piece echoed on the other side of the site were all about needing people to really utilize them. I think if anything, if the works were even more symbiotically planned it would make the park stronger.

The collaboration did generate a lot of energy, and a lot of residents came around while we were working every day. If we had built things elsewhere and brought them, it would be very different. The fact that we were there, weekend after weekend, for 2-3 weeks, with someone there all the time brought in a lot of people who were just asking, "What the hell are you doing?" We actually got a volunteer that way. Someone vacationing checked us out and he goes, "Well I'm not doing that much, I'll come back tomorrow," and he came back and worked several days! Art is very non-utilitarian, and that in and of itself has a very moving power. If you're just doing landscaping, it makes sense. It's almost easier for people to dismiss it. But because what we were all doing was so strange – a vertical park, or planting a black garden – it's harder for people to say "Oh ok that's it." And then that curiosity can become engagement or even some kind of empowerment of the individual, which is something I've been thinking a lot about. You need to build infrastructure and all of that to make people's lives better, but you also need to make people think.

I just did this big project in Brazil where I built this island in the middle of a lake. The island took a month to build leading up to me going there, and then I inked the plants as they continued to landscape it. It took two months to build and I really got very attached to the local community. It was at the foot of this big favela, and I don't speak Portuguese at all, but I got to know a lot of kids that came around, and by the last day they were just bawling! We were all just crying and I thought, what did I actually do to help them? There were days I just felt like they should be going to school, someone should be setting up scholarships with the money it took to make the artwork. And while that's all very vital and important, there was a moment I had to step back and say that what we did was also very important to them, because it did get their attention. This project was so crazy, and it showed them that if you're crazy enough to dream of it, you can do it. That is why they connected with us. If we were doing something that wasn't so crazy, it would not have sparked their interest and curiosity – it would just be another matter of a course. We need things out of the ordinary in our ordinary lives to fix our focal point on.



Inking the plants during a community build day

HSC: Is there a favorite moment or anecdote from the project that you'd like to share?

I don't know about favorite, maybe the most memorable – was that I spent my 40th birthday on site. It was one of the build days, June 29th. At first I was very bummed out, but then I just wrote this mass email out to my friends saying this is how I want to spend my birthday: you're all going come out on the hottest day of the year to build planters. And if I hadn't done that I don't think I could have made the piece! I didn't have a budget to hire anyone, the budget all went towards the purchase of

materials, so that was the only way I could have got it built. There were a lot of sunburnt faces. But at the end, I also had a lot of friends that came to me and said "You know, this was really great, we loved doing this." It was a different way of approaching being 40, giving back and a considering the broader context of being a part of the community.



"Making of Paths to Pier 42" is a series of interviews with the artists and designers behind the creation of the Pier 42 park.