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Maya Lin's earthly concerns

The artist known for her memorials wants her final one to call attention to the environment.

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SAN DIEGO -- MAYA LIN has always had a deep feeling for the land. As a child, she roamed the leafy woods of the Appalachian foothills in southern Ohio, listening to the mating calls of the songbirds that filled the forest. Now Lin perceives a growing stillness, as the number of songbirds across America are decimated by habitat destruction.

The growing degradation of the natural world haunts Lin -- celebrated as the creator of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the reinventor of the American memorial genre -- as she pulls together the plans for what she says will be her "last memorial."

The title of this work-in-progress, like many of the details, is evolving: Perhaps "What is Missing," perhaps simply "Missing." But the theme is clear: Lin's finale will grieve for the animals, birds and plants driven into extinction -- and warn of the urgency of acting now to halt the devastation.

Lin envisions it as a multisite chronicle, including photography and video, at places around the world and with a commemorative list of names -- this time the names of extinct species. It is to be launched with a memorial table on Earth Day in April 2009 commissioned by the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, which chose her design to include its new building in Golden Gate Park, an academy spokeswoman said.

"Do the math, guys. Where do we want to be in 50 years? That's the question," she said at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego as she installed her latest exhibit in a cathedral-like gallery lit by the afternoon sun.

"We're in the sixth-largest extinction in the Earth's history, and it's the only one caused by a single species," Lin said. "The top 10 songbirds we grew up with are in a 40% to 70% decline. Our oceans are being devastated by overfishing. The landscape we grew up with has been significantly diminished. I just want to bring attention to it and give people the idea that you can do something about it."

At 48, Lin might seem young to hold the status of *éminence grise* of memorials, a position of gravitas that began when her design for the Veterans Memorial was chosen while she was 21 and a student at Yale. She has become so associated with monuments that when terrorists attacked on 9/11, a flood of faxes cascaded into her Soho studio asking her to prepare a memorial sketch.

"'What is Missing,' " Lin said, "will close the series for me. It's so near and dear to my heart. This is the only one I've instigated," she said. "I want the last one to be so personal, something I care so deeply about."

She holds out a long rectangular black book that is a working prototype of the project. " 'Missing,' the last memorial, will focus attention on species and places that have gone extinct or will most likely disappear, within our lifetime," an opening page reads. Funding, she hopes, will come from environmentally concerned donors.

As Lin spoke, she crouched on the floor of the museum's Jacobs building, using a little hammer to delicately chisel a small, winding crack she spotted in the concrete floor. When the show opened last weekend, this accidental crack was transformed into a shimmering silver river running through her "Systematic Landscapes," an exhibit that brings indoors her environmental sculptures -- and the spiritual meditations that fuel them.

Dressed in jeans and a sleeveless brown T-shirt, her brown eyes direct and focused, she was unpretentious, friendly and open. But she spoke intensely of the existential forces driving her "last memorial."

"I digress from the art show," she half-apologized, gesturing to the monumental landscapes being meticulously assembled around her. "But for me it's all the same. I've always used nature and the environment as my inspiration."

She spends much of her time creating outdoor environmental sculptures, like a winding serpent mound in Sweden modeled on a famous ancient snake mound in Ohio.

But she has attained international recognition -- and at times, fierce opposition -- for spare, elegant monuments whose emotional punch uncoils as viewers follow the march of history. There are the names of the American dead at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., which was initially opposed by critics who wanted the work to personify fallen veterans with statues. At her Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Ala., water flows over the names of murdered civil rights activists. The Yale Women's Table chronicles the days when female students audited as "silent listeners."

Shift to activism

Lin would like her new memorial to have global reach. She wants to use the Internet, interactive media and a book to tell people specific steps they can take to spare the environment, like avoiding plastic bags, insisting on shade-grown coffee or joining a program to "adopt" an endangered species and help protect it. She wants to unveil donated corporate billboards in locations such as Times Square, with 20-minute videos with images of endangered species and places.

Does this mean she is crossing the line from artist to advocate?

Lin paused for a thoughtful moment. As a child, the burning of toxic contaminants on Lake Erie did spur her to environmental activism. She petitioned the Kroger Co., owner of Ralphs and Food4Less, to ban animal traps and advocated for Greenpeace.

"I've always said I present history. I don't dictate what people think," she began carefully. "I don't try to preach. This one, like the others, makes you aware of it: 'Did you know the sound of the songbirds, as we knew it when we were little, are gone?' But yeah," she added with a shrug, "Definitely, I will be giving groups and people things they can do in their everyday lives."

Lin would like to use donated electronic billboards in urban meccas, flashing messages when a plant or animal becomes extinct -- a loss that occurs every 20 minutes. She envisions interactive table monitors where people can educate themselves.

She put down her hammer and chisel and rose from the floor, heading for her prototype book. She flipped through pages with harshly vivid photographs: lifeless reefs, tree stumps of clear-cut forest, melting glaciers. She pointed to a photo of a turtle -- painfully deformed as he grew around a plastic ring that squeezed a grotesque waistband into his shell -- and grimaced.

"I grew up surrounded by land, and it had a huge impact on me," she said. "We forget to look out and see how incredibly beautiful the world is. We forget that."

Focus on land and sea

Land, and the shape of the world, is the theme of her San Diego show, which moved on from St. Louis' Contemporary Art Museum. The exhibit is an indoor installation of the kind of environmental sculptures that reveal the curves of the Earth and the kinetic waves of the sea.

As Lin toured it, she walked gingerly in brown suede clogs, across the uneven cobble of her sensual 10-foot hill, "2 x 4 Landscape," composed of thousands of wood blocks that seem to move with the shifting light. Alongside a wall and in crates outside sat pieces of her "Blue Lake Pass," modeled after a range where she hikes with her husband, Daniel Wolf, near the Colorado summer home they share with their two young daughters.

"I don't consider myself any different than 19th century landscape painters," she said earnestly. "It's just that now we can perceive the shape of the world scientifically. These are like pixilated landscapes."

She walked into another room and looked up at a delicate lacework of wires suspended in the air, representing an underground mountain range that juts out of the churning Atlantic sea and peaks at Bouvet Island, a remote spit of rock near Antarctica.

"We view the sea as a surface. I want people to be aware of the immense world under the sea. One of the biggest mountains in the world is Hawaii," she said, a cooler sense of wonder passing over her.

"Our eye tends to stop where the surface of the water is. I'm trying to get you to go below it," she said, her tone of existential urgency returning. "Everyone thought the ocean was so vast, there would always be abundant fish. It takes no time at all for industrial fleets to go in and fish until we're at 90% collapse of the fisheries in a lot of areas."

After all, Lin said, legendary animals have vanished before.

She flipped through her book and pointed to a black-and-white photograph of a majestic 5,000-pound, 20-foot-wide stingray caught in 1933 but unheard of today. "It's all about what Jared Diamond calls 'landscape amnesia.' We accept it. I'm trying to say, 'It's not OK.'"

Lin is interviewing biologists for the memorial and asking them to contribute testimonials of paradises lost that they have seen vanish. She wants to travel to environmental hot spots with her family and blog from around the world.

She wants to let people know they can play an active role in the Earth's future. After learning from the memorial about the destructive algae nurtured by fertilizers and the mercury in the disappearing tuna, they can choose to buy organic produce, she said. Lin thinks people might feel differently about shrimp if they were aware of the destructive shrimp fishing practices that kill dolphins and turtles.

"Can we envision a model for sustainable growth?" Lin said. "I want to allow people to make choices. Better choices. The good news is that nature is incredibly resilient, and it will come back if we give it room. The question is, are we willing to share the planet?"

