

MAYA
LIN

SYSTEMATIC LANDSCAPES

March 14–July 12, 2009

The Corcoran Gallery of Art presents the exhibition *Maya Lin: Systematic Landscapes*, a dramatic installation of major new works by this renowned contemporary artist and architect. Lin addresses notions of landscape and geologic phenomena in her art. Organized by the Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, this exhibition explores how people perceive and experience the landscape in a time of heightened technological influence and environmental awareness.

Systematic Landscapes is centered on a trio of large-scale sculptural installations. Each offers a different means for viewers to engage with and comprehend a schematic representation of landscape forms. In this project, Lin examines how people's modern relationships to the land we inhabit are extended, condensed, distorted, and interpreted through new computer technologies. She translates a series of dramatic landscape environments selected for their inspiring beauty and connection to life-supporting habitats into spatial environments. She brings traditionally outdoor landscapes indoors, where viewers can engage them in an art gallery setting.

Traversing Lin's constructed landscapes—moving around, under, and through them—we encounter a world that has been mapped, digitized, analyzed, and then reintroduced by Lin as actual, physical structures. Her work blends a typology of natural forms, from rivers to mountains to seas, with a visual language of scientific analysis represented by grids, models, and maps. In doing so, Lin merges an understanding of the ideal and the real, as well as an encounter with conceptual, sculptural, and architectural modeling.

Maya Lin: Systematic Landscapes is organized by the Henry Art Gallery and curated by former Director Richard Andrews. Major support for this exhibition was provided by the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and The Peter Norton Family Foundation. The presentation at the Corcoran is supported by The Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts and Frederick and Jane Knops.

IMAGE 1

Blue Lake Pass (detail), 2006.
Pine industrial-grade particleboard,
20 blocks, 3' × 3' each;
5' 8" × 17' 6" × 22' 5" overall.
Courtesy of PaceWildenstein.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Maya Ying Lin was born in 1959 in Athens, Ohio, a manufacturing and agricultural town 75 miles southeast of Columbus. Athens is also home to Ohio University. Both Lin's mother, a poet, and her father, a ceramic artist, taught there. The couple fled China just before the Communist Revolution of 1949, leaving behind a prominent family which had included a well-known lawyer and, perhaps significantly, an architect. Lin also has an older brother, Tan, who, like his mother, is a poet. Lin had an American upbringing and her childhood reflects a blend of Eastern and Western aesthetics that can still be seen in her work today.

Lin describes her childhood in *Boundaries*:

Although I grew up almost completely oblivious to my Asian heritage, I have become increasingly conscious of how my work balances and combines aspects of my Eastern and Western heritages.

I preferred to remain at home most of the time, either concentrating on my studies or making things. Or just sitting absolutely still in the yard trying to tame the rabbits, squirrels, chipmunks, and raccoons. The animals ended up in the house and I ended up making anything and everything—the entire gamut of crafts...

Lin's nearly 30-year career is a prominent and prolific one. She often crosses the border between artist and architect. While still an undergraduate at Yale University (BA 1981, MA 1986), she notably designed the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (1981), celebrated for its union of simplicity and strength, landscape and human emotion. Lin's design, although originally controversial for its abstract form, has since received wide acclaim. Located less than a mile from the Corcoran, it is visited by hundreds of thousands of people every year.

Since the early 1980s, whether in public monuments, private commissions, or works of art for gallery and museum spaces, Lin continues to investigate the power of the landscape to evoke meaning and the processes that connect us back to the land. These include works dealing with sometimes controversial subjects such as civil rights and women's rights. Her *Civil Rights Memorial* (1989) in Montgomery, Alabama, honored those who died in American civil rights struggles. *The Women's Table* (1993) at Yale University in New Haven charted the number of students who were women since the University's founding. *The Confluence Project* is an ongoing series of seven art installations along the Columbia River Basin created to evoke the history of the Lewis and Clark Expedition and the tremendous changes it brought to the Pacific Northwest.

Lin has also received high profile architectural commissions, including the interior for the Museum for African Art in New York in 1993 and the Langston Hughes Library for the Children's Defense Fund at the Haley Farm in Clinton, Tennessee in 1999. Recently, she was a finalist for the design of the Olympic torch for the 2008 summer games in Beijing. She is the recipient of numerous awards and honors, including her induction into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 2005. She was named one of *Time* magazine's "50 for the Future" in 1994. She is the subject of the 1995 Academy Award winning film for Best Documentary, *Maya Lin: A Strong, Clear Vision*.

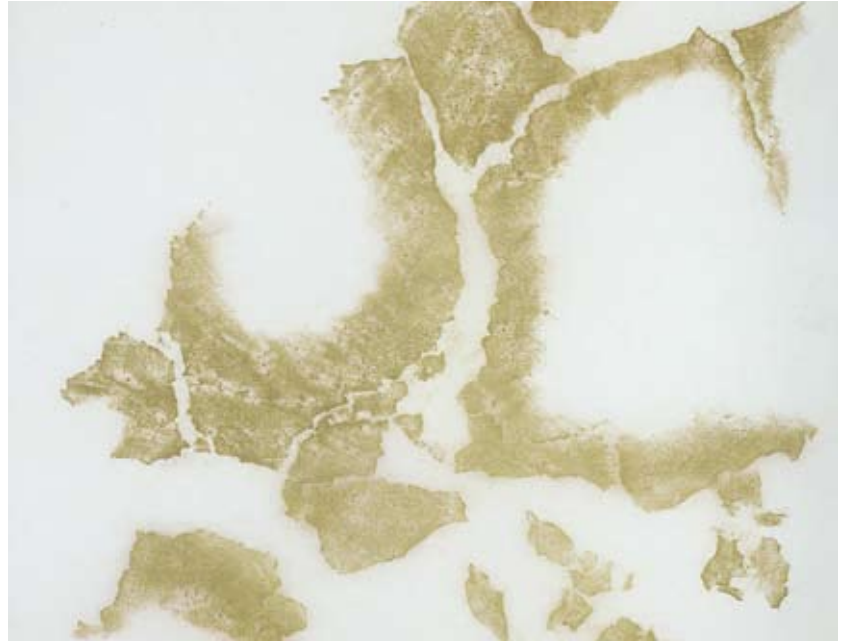
Lin is deeply committed to focusing attention back to the environment and to asking us to pay closer attention to the natural world. She is currently working on what she says will be her last memorial, entitled *What is Missing?*, intended to help people understand the current crisis surrounding biodiversity, habitat loss, and global warming. Once again reinventing what a monument can be, *What is Missing?* will be a multi-sited work existing in scientific institutions, online as a website, and as a book. It will debut at the California Academy of Sciences on Earth Day 2009 with a sound and media installation located at the Academy's East Terrace.



IMAGE 2

Maya Lin, January 2009.
Photo by G.R. Christmas.
Courtesy of PaceWildenstein.

FRACTURED LANDSCAPE SERIES



Fractured Landscapes are rubbings on paper made from the surface of a shattered sheet of plate glass. The cracks and splinters of the broken glass are recorded on the paper when the pastel passes over its surface. There are seven works in the series, all of which were done using the same fractured sheet of glass, called *Plate #1*.

These works follow an earlier series of monoprints called *Flatlands*, that was “...made by breaking an inked plate of tempered glass, then running it through a press, forming a set of unique impressions that are reminiscent of a map or an ice floe pattern,” says Lin. This new series of images, created with pastel on paper, hovers between pure abstraction and an evocation of estuaries, mudflats, islands, or river systems.

IMAGES 3 AND 4

Fractured Landscape Series (Details), 2006.
Pastel rubbings. Individual works untitled.
Courtesy of PaceWildenstein.

DISCUSSION

Maya Lin spends a lot of time in Colorado near the Rocky Mountains. She is inspired by the natural world around her, including the mountains and rivers. Look closely at the lines, textures, and patterns of the rubbing. Does the rubbing look to you like anything in a landscape you have seen? Compare patterns and textures that are visible in *Niagara* and *The Last of the Buffalo* with the works in the *Fractured Landscape Series*.

By looking at the rubbing, can you tell that Lin used shattered glass to create it? What would you use to create your own rubbing? Would you want it to look exactly like a specific object or would you want it to be more abstract? Objects you might use to create a rubbing include leaves, twigs, shells, pebbles, dried grass, flowers, or anything else that has an interesting texture. Also, try moving the objects around to create patterns or abstract forms that remind you of something else.

2 × 4 LANDSCAPE



2 × 4 Landscape is composed of more than fifty thousand vertical two-by-four boards placed in a configuration that was planned carefully in models and drawings. Its shape suggests a natural form such as an earthen mound or an ocean swell. From afar, the truncated and irregular pattern of the two-by-fours suggests a pixilated, digital rendering of an actual form, as if *2 × 4 Landscape* were again a scale model in the artist's studio. The shape is both an imagined landscape and an actual wooden hill at the same time. Depending on one's viewpoint in the gallery, its appearance changes.

2 × 4 Landscape is ten feet tall at its highest point, making it seem monumental in the interior space of a gallery. However, it is a fraction of the size of an actual landscape in the natural world. In planning this work, Maya Lin was inspired by real places, such as the Palouse Hills of eastern Washington and the American Indian burial mounds near her childhood home in Ohio. The work began with the idea of walking up a hill indoors and approaching the ceiling.

IMAGE 5

2 × 4 Landscape, 2006. Wood,
(installed dimensions variable)
Courtesy of PaceWildenstein

DISCUSSION

What does this sculpture look like to you? You might see a hill, a wave, a sleeping bear, or another object. The form of *2 × 4 Landscape* is organic (free-flowing, found in nature). Look at Albert Bierstadt's *The Last of the Buffalo*. Can you find any organic shapes in the painting?

What do you think that the inside of this sculpture looks like? Could it be hollow? How would the sculpture change if Lin had used something other than two-by-four boards?

Think about creating your own work of art that suggests a natural form. What material would you use? Lin chose to create this sculpture with two-by-four boards, a material that can be found in large quantities. However, she first ensured that the wood used was obtained from well-managed forests so that she would not deplete natural resources with her art. How would you display your work of art? *2 × 4 Landscape* has been shown in several locations. It must be taken apart and reassembled each time it is moved. Will your abstract landscape need to be reassembled every time as well? What is the title of your sculpture? What natural form inspired you to make it?

CASPIAN SEA (BODIES OF WATER SERIES)



Both seen and unseen parts of the landscape are explored in the three *Bodies of Water* sculptures. Maya Lin created “portraits” of specific inland seas whose expanses of salt water are partially or wholly landlocked. Lin depicts these immense volumes of water by creating their shapes from layers of plywood. The top surface of each sculpture duplicates to scale the exact contour of the sea represented. The vertical dimension, representing its depth, is exaggerated to create a more emphatic sculptural form. The resulting sculpture is balanced on its lowest—and deepest—point. The three bodies of water represented in this exhibition, the Caspian, Black, and Red Seas, are among the most endangered in the world.

The *Bodies of Water* series depicts places that many people, plants, and animals depend on for life. These locations are in danger of becoming hazardous environments because of increased water pollution. While many people viewing the exhibition might not have actually seen these particular seas, they may be reminded by the sculptures of connections to bodies of water with which they are familiar. The works are especially poignant because they reveal landscapes that are unseen. As Lin said, “What we don’t see, we pollute.” After viewing and thinking about the ramifications of our actions on bodies of water such as these, maybe our attitudes about the life-giving water around us will change.

IMAGE 6

Caspian Sea (Bodies of Water Series), 2006,
Baltic birch plywood,
10 1/2" × 58 1/2" × 32 7/8".
Courtesy of PaceWildenstein.

DISCUSSION

Our ecosystem relies on balance; an equal give and take among all things. How did Lin give the work a sense of balance? Do you notice that it is supported by just the tip of the deepest point? How would our perception of the sculpture change if we could not see the part that is underneath the surface?

What bodies of water are near your home or school? What can you do to help prevent water pollution? Currently, the District of Columbia is considering a five-cent charge to store customers who want grocery bags, which are thrown away and pollute nearby rivers and streams. Do you think this is a good idea? Why or why not?

BLUE LAKE PASS



Maya Lin seeks to create works that offer a point of entry into our experiential relationship with the natural world. Her work is based on the belief that a connection to nature is an essential part of our humanity.

Lin describes *Blue Lake Pass* as:

...using a terrain chosen from the Rocky Mountain back range, creating a topographical sectioned landscape made from cut particle board. The choice of terrain is something familiar and personal; our summer home is in Southwestern Colorado. By creating a sculpture that details that topography, applying a 3' x 3' grid to that terrain, and then pulling the terrain apart so that one can walk through the landscape, I wanted to shift one's perspective about the land, allowing a viewpoint that is more geologic in character.

This work takes its name from one of the landmarks near Lin's home. The segments that form the sculpture are made from vertical sheets of particleboard with the top edges cut to match a topographic line. Pulled apart into a grid, the topographic image is disjointed and the spaces between the cubes become narrow paths, or cuts, through the geography of the sculpture, exposing strata much like a highway carved through a mountain pass.

IMAGE 7

Blue Lake Pass, 2006.
Pine industrial-grade particleboard,
20 blocks, 3' x 3' each;
5' 8" x 17' 6" x 22' 5" overall.
Courtesy of PaceWildenstein.

DISCUSSION

What information does *Blue Lake Pass* give you about the landscape in that area of Colorado? What do you see that makes you say that? Imagine that Lin had created *Blue Lake Pass* as one large piece instead of twenty smaller ones. Gallery visitors could no longer walk through the work; only around it. How would that change the feeling of the work of art? How would it change one's perception of the Blue Lake area?

A topographic map is designed to describe—in two dimensions—the three-dimensional terrain, such as hills and valleys, of a selected area. Lines on the map that are close together indicate land with a steeply

sloped surface. Have you used a topographic map? What can you learn about a place by looking at this type of drawing?

Think about creating a topographical sculpture like *Blue Lake Pass*. If you could choose a location near your home or school to map, what place would you select and why? What material would you use to create the work? Possible choices include pieces of cardboard cut and then glued together to reproduce the shape of the landscape, papier mache, or air-drying clay.

WATER LINE



Seeing and recording the landscape has interested many artists and scientists for centuries. Nature might be overwhelming in its immensity and complexity, but framed views in the form of landscape depictions and descriptions are achievable. Scientific exploration has developed methods for extended seeing—satellite photos, radar, sonar—to illuminate topography too large or inaccessible to be observed by the eye. For Maya Lin, such technologies offer new ways of seeing landscape. She believes that our relationship with landscape has been altered by our ability to view the earth from new vantage points; a shift in perspective.

This large wire sculpture floating above the gallery floor is called *Water Line*. It represents an actual underwater location on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. This spot rises a few miles (more than 10,000 feet) from the ocean floor and is visible on the surface as Bouvet Island, one of the most remote islands in the world. The nearest land is Antarctica, roughly one thousand miles to the south. Glaciers form a thick ice layer falling from high cliffs into the sea or onto the black beaches of volcanic sand. Working with scientists at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute, Lin and members of her studio developed digitally a topographic rendering of the seascape. She constructed a form based on the pattern of the computer diagram and then subtly altered it to create a looser, less rigid grid. The artist wanted this work, created with quarter-inch diameter aluminum tubing, to look like a line drawing in space.

Bouvet Island can be visualized as a small area at the highest point of *Water Line*. Looking at the work in the gallery, one can picture the actual underwater land form and the transition from earth to water to air. It challenges our ability to imagine a largely invisible underwater geography. This complex work, a three-dimensional recreation of a topographical map, is created in a scale that affords viewers the opportunity to walk under, around, and within its contours.

IMAGE 8

Water Line, 2006,
Aluminum tubing and paint,
(installed dimensions variable).
Courtesy of PaceWildenstein.

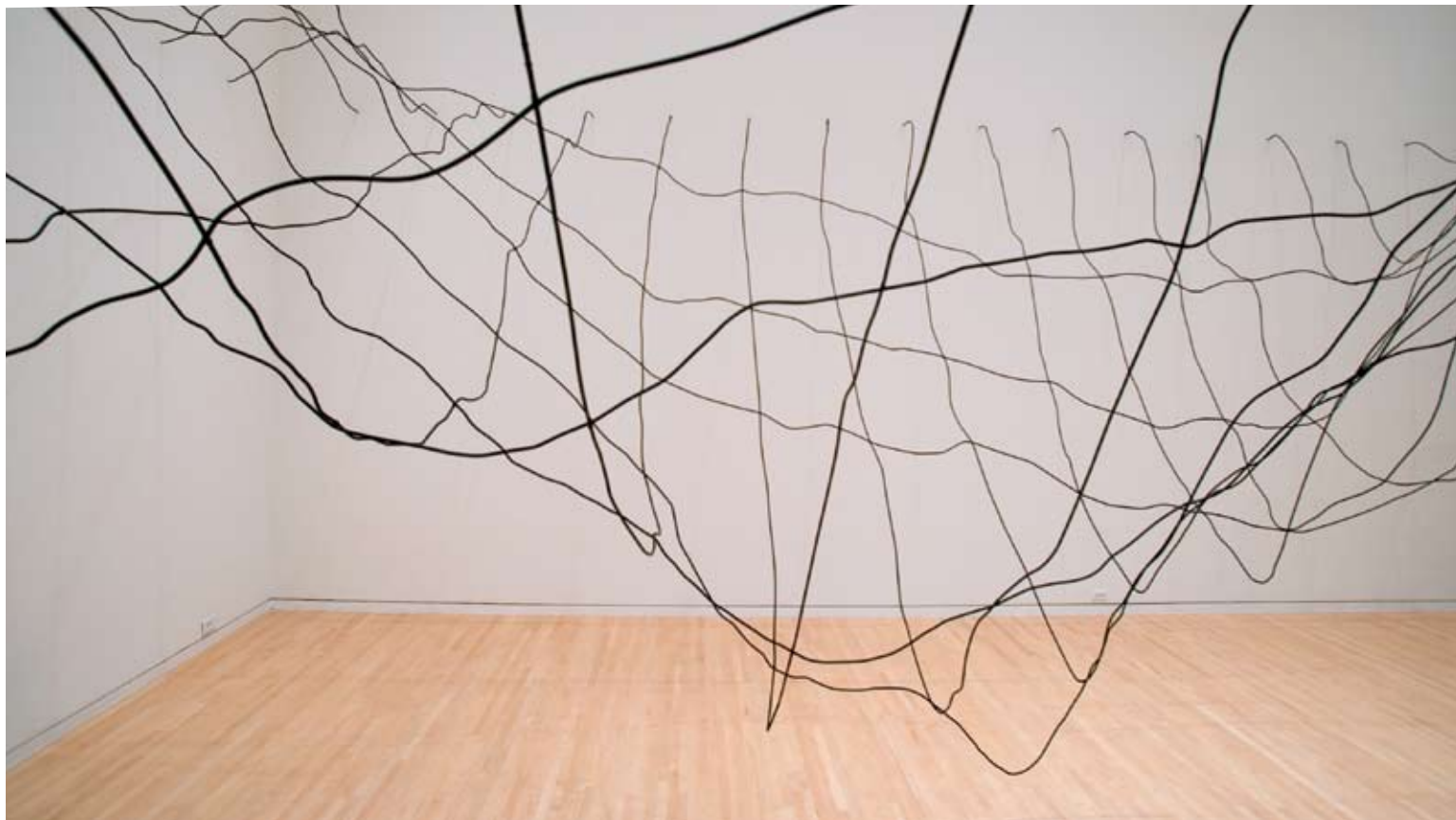


IMAGE 9

Water Line (detail), 2006,
Aluminum tubing and paint,
(installed dimensions variable).
Courtesy of PaceWildenstein.

DISCUSSION

Bouvet Island is located at 54°26'S 3°24'E / 54.433°S 3.4°E. Can you find it on a map or globe?

Have you ever been on an island? Did you think about the underwater landforms that extended far beneath you? Lin's *Water Line* inspires us to think about parts of the earth and land that we cannot see.

Create your own grid with flexible materials such as wire or pipe cleaners. You can make it any size you want. When your grid is complete, you can form or shape it by bending the wires or pipe cleaners or by wrapping the grid around a form that you have created or found. You may want to make your grid into an island on top of a large underwater seascape, as Maya Lin did in *Water Line*.

PIN RIVER—POTOMAC, SILVER CHESAPEAKE



The Corcoran Gallery of Art is the fifth and final venue for the special exhibition, *Maya Lin: Systematic Landscapes*. The artist made a work of art that focuses on the particular landscape of each specific location where the exhibition has been shown. For our area, Lin chose two bodies of water; the Potomac River and the Chesapeake Bay.

The Chesapeake Bay lies off the Atlantic Ocean, surrounded by Maryland and Virginia. It is about 200 miles (300 km) long, from the Susquehanna River in the north to the Atlantic Ocean in the south. At its narrowest point between Kent County's Plum Point (near Newtown) and the Harford County shore near Romney Creek, the Chesapeake Bay is 2.8 miles (4.5 km) wide; at its widest point, just south

IMAGE 10 (TOP)

Pin River—Potomac, 2009,
Straight pins..
Courtesy of PaceWildenstein.

IMAGE 11 (BOTTOM)

Silver Chesapeake, 2009,
Recycled silver.
Courtesy of PaceWildenstein.

of the mouth of the Potomac River, it is 30 miles (50 km) wide. More than 150 rivers and streams drain into the Chesapeake Bay, which is spanned in two places. The Chesapeake Bay Bridge crosses the bay in Maryland from Sandy Point (near Annapolis) to Kent Island; the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel in Virginia connects Virginia Beach to Cape Charles. The word Chesepiooc is an Algonquian word referring to a village “at a big river.”

The Potomac River runs 383 miles (616 km) from the Fairfax Stone in West Virginia to Point Lookout, Maryland. The river forms a section of the border between Maryland and Washington, D.C. on its left bank, and between West Virginia and Virginia on its right bank. The river has two sources. The source of the North Branch is at the Fairfax Stone located at the junction of Grant, Tucker, and Preston counties in West Virginia. The source of the South Branch is located near Hightown in northern Highland County, Virginia. The river's two branches converge just east of Green Spring in Hampshire County, West Virginia. “Potomac” is a European spelling of an Algonquian name for those who inhabited the upper reaches of the Northern Neck in the vicinity of Fredericksburg. Some accounts say the name means “place where people trade.”

DISCUSSION

The Chesapeake Bay is the largest estuary in the United States. An estuary is a semi-enclosed coastal body of water with one or more rivers or streams flowing into it, and a connection to the open sea. Estuaries are affected by tides, waves, and the influx of saline water; as well as flows of fresh water and sediment. As a result, they may contain high biological diversity within a small area. Environmentalists are concerned about pollution from fertilizer and other materials that run into the Bay from farms and residences in the region. Some species once found in the Bay are now gone because of this pollution. What kinds of plants and animals live near bodies of water?

How do you think *Silver Chesapeake* was made? Maya Lin used recycled silver from photographic engraving processes and x-rays. The artist worked with a foundry to create this work. Technicians at the foundry poured molten (hot liquid) silver into a mold that the artist had fashioned from a wax model in the shape of the Chesapeake Bay. The sculpture shows the many rivers and streams that flow into the larger body of water.

Pin River—Potomac was made with thousands of straight pins. Following a design created by Maya Lin, students from the Corcoran College of Art + Design—working with Corcoran staff—drilled holes and hammered the pins into the wall. The river's shape is based on an image from a map. Why do you think the artist chose straight pins as the medium for this work of art? How would it change the look of the work had it been painted instead? Have you seen a body of water that looked silvery and shiny like this one?

How are *Silver Chesapeake* and *Pin River—Potomac* alike? How are they different? Frederic Church's painting of Niagara Falls is another image of a famous body of water. If you were selected to make a work of art about the Anacostia River, what medium would you choose?

ALBERT BIERSTADT



In the 1870s, when American entrepreneurs found a commercial market for buffalo hide, hunters responded eagerly. By the time Bierstadt completed this canvas, the buffalo was on the brink of extinction. The Plains Indian peoples, who relied on it for their survival, were also being moved from their homelands to open these territories for settlement. The seemingly infinite number of buffalo seen here suggests that *The Last of the Buffalo* is a statement of memory and myth rather than an accurate depiction of life on the frontier. Placing two of the most potent symbols of the West—the buffalo and the Native American—at the center of his painting, Bierstadt offered a carefully composed fiction celebrating what the incursion of white civilization had helped to destroy.

In the nineteenth century, most Americans living in the East were not able to travel across the country to see the grand vistas on the other side of the continent. Paintings such as this one helped educate people about the West and promote conservation of the land and animals. In 1872, the first national park, Yellowstone, was established. William Hornaday, founder of the Smithsonian National Zoological Park, brought several buffalo to D.C. to graze behind the Smithsonian Castle. By making people aware of the plight of the buffalo, Hornaday saved the animals from possible extinction.

IMAGE 12

The Last of the Buffalo, 1888,
Albert Bierstadt
(American, b. Germany, 1830–1902)
Oil on canvas.

Gift of Mary (Mrs. Albert) Bierstadt 09.12
Frame restoration generously funded by the
Henry Luce Foundation and the Women's
Committee of the Corcoran Gallery of Art,
2008

DISCUSSION

What is happening here? What do you see that makes you say that? Does Bierstadt's image convey that the buffalo are near extinction? How does the artist express the idea that there is a vast number of buffalo roaming the plains in the western United States?

In her book, *Boundaries*, Maya Lin discusses her concern with making people aware of the ongoing extinction of many species on earth:

I would like to make one last memorial focusing on the extinction of species. Experts have called it the sixth-largest extinction since the beginning of this planet and the only extinction caused by the acts of one species. I envision a memorial not as a singular, static monument but one that would exist in many places at once, as well as one non-physical place, existing as a site on the Internet. I imagine a series of markers that would monitor the health of the planet—from climate indicators and pollution levels to the loss of habitat and the status of endangered species and plant life...they would give us a better picture of the earth as a whole.

Here are the sites Lin chose for her memorial:

- Site 1 Yellowstone, the first National Park
- Site 2 Antarctica, the first international park
- Site 3 Tibet, gateway to the sky
- Site 4 Africa, the last great plains
- Site 5 The Amazon, forest of the world
- Site 6 The ocean floor
- Site 7 Satellite link—connecting all sites, monitoring the planet.

What do you think that Maya Lin envisions these works would look like? What would you create if you made one memorial for extinct species? Would it be on the land, in the sky, or in the sea? Write about your memorial: What would it commemorate? How long would it be there? Who would see it? What materials would you use to build it? Would it be a physical object or something that exists in another way, like a website? Draw your memorial.

THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL



When Maya Lin was a student at Yale University in 1981, she won a national competition to design *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial* in Washington, D.C. She created the design for a class she was taking on funerary architecture. The requirements for the memorial's design were that all the names of the 57,000 missing and killed American soldiers must be part of the memorial, and it must be apolitical, harmonious with the site, and conciliatory.

Lin said of her design for the memorial:

I envisioned it not as an object inserted into the earth but as part of the earth, a work formed from the act of cutting open the earth and polishing the earth's surface, dematerializing the stone to pure surface, creating an interface between the world of the light and the quieter world beyond the names.

Lin's proposal was chosen over more than 1,400 entries. She was forced to defend her elegant design—two black granite walls cut into the sloping ground—against charges that it was unpatriotic and antiwar. She also had to withstand more subtle suspicions that an Asian American woman had no business designing a war memorial, much less a memorial to those who died in an Asian war.

IMAGE 13

The Vietnam War Memorial.
Photo courtesy William Lecky.

DISCUSSION

Have you visited *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*? Have you seen other memorials in D.C.? How are they different from this one? Must memorials have images of heroes on them to be successful? How did you feel walking along the black granite wall? Did you notice your reflection in the polished surface?

Imagine the memorial in a different color of stone. How would the overall mood change? Did you touch the names carved into the stone? How did that make you feel?

FREDERIC EDWIN CHURCH



Over the centuries, artists in many countries have painted images of the land and nature. The vast forests, fertile plains, and great mountains of America inspired artists to create the country's first national painting style. In the second quarter of the 19th century, this group of painters, collectively known as the Hudson River School, began creating majestic images of natural wonders, sometimes depicting the northeastern United States.

IMAGE 14

Niagara, 1857
Frederic Edwin Church
(American, 1826–1900)
Oil on canvas
Museum Purchase, Gallery Fund 76.15

Many American artists have been inspired to portray Niagara Falls, considered the nation's greatest natural wonder during the nineteenth century. The site was acclaimed in Church's majestic 1857 canvas. Critics and the public marveled at the picture's grand scale, fine detail, and especially its illusion of reality; unlike his predecessors, Church eliminated any suggestion of a foreground, allowing the viewer to experience the scene as if precariously positioned on the brink of the falls. As one writer enthusiastically noted, "this is Niagara, with the roar left out!" *Niagara's* tremendous success secured Church's reputation as the most famous painter in America and brought him international recognition.

DISCUSSION

How does Church convey to us the enormous size and power of the Niagara Falls? Have you ever experienced being close to a waterfall? Where? What sounds did you hear? How did it feel to be near the rushing water? How would it feel to be in this painting? Where could you stand? Why do you say that?

When Church painted *Niagara* in 1857, the site was already an extremely popular tourist destination. The area around the falls was becoming crowded with souvenir stands and other structures related to the tourist trade. Can you see any buildings or other

evidence of tourists in this painting? (There are a few very small structures in the distance.) Why do you think Church chose to leave these out of his picture?

Think about the works in the Maya Lin exhibition that focus on bodies of water. How are they like *Niagara*? How are they different? Which one is your favorite? Why? What materials did Lin use for these works? (Wood, aluminum tubing, pins, and silver.) If you were to make a sculpture representing Niagara Falls, what material would you choose to use? Would the viewer be able to recognize the subject of your sculpture as Niagara Falls? Would that be important to you?