

In the Land of Glitter and Gambling, Plans for an Oasis of Art



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

Maya Lin in her SoHo studio, working on her Las Vegas commission, a cast-silver depiction of the Colorado River. [More Photos >](#)

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LAS VEGAS — In a boisterous town legendary for shining the spotlight on Elvis, Sinatra and Celine, it's a safe bet that few could have envisioned these names as Strip attractions:

Maya Lin. Henry Moore. Frank Stella. Jenny Holzer. Nancy Rubins.

And more. In Las Vegas. Really.

As unlikely as it may have seemed even to them, those celebrated artists are the headliners of an ambitious \$40 million public arts program initiated by MGM Mirage, the city's biggest resort corporation, with the goal of promoting Las Vegas as a destination for the art world.

Works by those and other artists, variously commissioned and acquired, are destined to dot an \$8 billion, 76-acre development called CityCenter that MGM Mirage is constructing on the Las Vegas Strip. The site is expected to open late next year with a 4,500-room hotel-casino, five nongaming boutique hotels and residential towers, and a 500,000-square-foot retail district.

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MGM Mirage recruited an all-star architectural lineup to design the buildings, including [Daniel Libeskind](#), [Rafael Viñoly](#), [Norman Foster](#) and Fred W. Clarke of Pelli Clarke Pelli.

Jim Murren, president of MGM Mirage, said the company decided to assemble an art collection too, to signal that CityCenter was a departure from the themed megaresorts that surround it on all sides.

“We’re going to create an art program that will be important on a global scale, that will have some meaning to Nevada, that will have some meaning to the environmental sensitivities we’re trying to accomplish here,” Mr. Murren said. He said that each CityCenter structure was expected to be certified by the Green Building Council’s Leadership in Energy and Environment Design program.

“This will not be a collection of precious pieces from some bygone era but a collection that is approachable, of big scale,” Mr. Murren said of the art. “We need to make a big statement.”

Among the works commissioned for CityCenter are a 133-foot-wide cast-silver representation of the Colorado River that will hang over the central resort’s registration desk. It was designed by Ms. Lin, best known as the creator of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington.

Ms. Holzer has created a 245-foot-long L.E.D. installation with her trademark axioms that will snake through the porte-cochere of a condominium-hotel called the Harmon. [Richard Long](#), a British artist, is furnishing a pair of 80- by 50-foot mud drawings that will loom in the lobbies of a pair of angular residential towers called Veer.

And Ms. Rubins has fashioned an outdoor 85- by 65-foot sculpture from a variety of seafaring vessels that might be viewed as a steroidal version of a boat assemblage she did that was suspended over the plaza at [Lincoln Center](#) in New York in the summer of 2006.

MGM Mirage has also purchased older contemporary pieces, like a marble version of Moore’s sculpture “Reclining Connected Forms” (1969-74), which Mr. Murren said cost at least \$7 million.

Another big acquisition is “Typewriter Eraser Scale X,” one of three Pop sculptures of that title by Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen. MGM Mirage officials declined to name the price tag for that work or identify the seller of either piece. Both will be positioned in park areas on the CityCenter campus.

Smaller works for the hotel lobbies include paintings by Mr. Stella and Jack Goldstein.

Robert Lynch, the chief executive of the nonprofit group Americans for the Arts, said the program was impressive even though the cost paled in comparison with vast public-art programs like the one in

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Millennium Park in Chicago, where one piece, “Cloud Gate,” cost \$23 million on its own. As a corporate effort on what is essentially private property, he said, this is “quite an investment.”

In an interview, Ms. Lin acknowledged being a bit amused that she was working on a piece for Las Vegas, a city she had never visited until she traveled there in 2006 to show MGM Mirage officials some proposals. For her, she said, the selling points were the opportunity to be presented with so many other vaunted names and the company’s support for environmental concerns.

She said her piece for CityCenter was part of a series of works she has created on a river theme. Among them is one made from stainless steel pins that represents the length of the Yangtze River and is to be installed this summer at the United States Embassy in Beijing.

Ms. Lin said she hoped her CityCenter installation would prompt Las Vegas residents and visitors to ponder their reliance on a river that experts say is in jeopardy. “It’s definitely getting you to think about the life and flow of the river,” she said by telephone from New York.

“Am I going to be co-opted by Sin City?” she added playfully. “Probably.”

“My attitude is, where does art belong?” she added. “I think we shouldn’t be segregating art out from the public view. It’s kind of nice to come across art where you least expect it sometimes.”

For many people, the debate over whether fine art belongs in Las Vegas seems to be tired or over. It began in 1998 when [Stephen A. Wynn](#), then the chairman of Mirage Resorts, opened a gallery at his Bellagio hotel-casino complex that included masterworks by Monet, [Picasso](#) and Renoir.

After Mr. Wynn sold the company to MGM Mirage, taking some of his personal pieces with him, the Bellagio’s new owners hired Marc and Andrea Glimcher of the PaceWildenstein Gallery in New York to operate the gallery. They mounted exhibitions featuring Fabergé objects and works by Monet, among others.

Still, Michele Quinn, who directs MGM Mirage’s new art program, said the lingering Vegas stigma presented a bit of a challenge when she first started shopping for pieces.

“There may have been a few dealers who were approached in the beginning before the project was really well known who maybe had a little tinge of, ‘Oh, I don’t know if I want to put my artist in Las Vegas,’ ” she said.

“But they probably regret that decision now, because we just went on to the next dealers.”