

Sculpture at CityCenter's Aria designed to provoke thought about water



Kristen Peterson October 13, 2009

Artist Maya Lin watches as her 87-foot rendition of the Colorado River is installed behind the registration desk at CityCenter's Aria.

The sculpture, "Silver River," weighs 3,700 pounds, hangs from steel cables, slants horizontally and swells at two points of its winding journey — at Lake Powell and Lake Mead. Topographic steps provide a sense of volume to the body of water cast in reclaimed silver.

Elegant, graceful and floating before a panoramic window, it is a tricky piece.

The Colorado River is the lifeline of the Las Vegas area, and the region has water issues. Rapacious growth changed the valley's landscape and depleted its resources.

The \$8.5 billion [CityCenter](#) project is emblematic of that growth and the centerpiece of the Strip's demand for more spectacle, more over-the-top thinking, more ambitious projects and design. And here within the lobby of a Cesar Pelli-designed hotel is a subtle, contemplative reminder of the problem we've created.

“Water is going to become more and more of a debate,” says Lin, who sits on the board of Natural Resources Defense Council. “I’m asking people to take a look at the natural world around them. You want to get people to think of rivers as an entire ecosystem. You want to talk about a river as a volume of water, as an object rather than a ‘flow.’”

When contacted to be a part of CityCenter’s \$40 million private art collection, Lin, who became famous for her design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., was well known for her contemporary land sculptures and interior art installations that encouraged environmental consciousness.

She had never been to Las Vegas but the opportunity piqued her interest. The buildings were being designed for LEEDS certification and Pelli, Aria’s architect, was the dean of the Yale School of Architecture while Lin was a student there.

Michele Quinn, who manages CityCenter’s art project, refers to Lin as one of the most important sculptors working today, whose connection to the environment and landscape fit in with the “ultimate goals” of CityCenter. “She not only creates work that is challenging and beautiful, but it has this substructure of content. She is able to transfer her interest in the environment in such an elegant way.”

The idea of the Colorado River sculpture was Lin’s. Like much of her art, it combines science and environmentalism. Growing up in Athens, Ohio, during the 1970s, Lin saw the passage of the Clean Air and Clean Water acts. By then the Cuyahoga River had caught on fire and Lin was a young activist, urging a boycott against Japan for its whaling and companies that benefitted from use of steel traps. Her 4-H club was a bird-watching group. She planned to study field zoology at Yale so she could become an animal behaviorist. The plans were scrapped when she realized the college’s animal program was neurologically based. Lin switched her major to architecture because it combined her love of math and creativity.

Art already was a part of her world. Her father was a ceramics teacher and dean of the College of Fine Arts at Ohio University: “I was casting bronzes by the time I was in high school,” she says.

By the time Lin received her master’s in architecture, she was well known for her winning submission for the Vietnam Memorial, which launched a maelstrom by critics riled by Lin’s ancestry (her parents are Chinese) and the minimalist design of the memorial.

The Vietnam wall is now revered and Lin went on to a successful career in art and architecture. Her earth sculptures mimic waves and sand dunes. Large-scale indoor installations include a river system, created by tens of thousands of straight pins pushed into a wall and topographical sculptures of water bodies made of particle board or wires. Her “Storm King Wavefield” is an environmental reclamation project at the site of a former gravel pit in Mountainville, N.Y.

“What Is Missing?” is a multisite international project that focuses on habitats and species that are extinct or disappearing and provides information for consumers on ways to help protect the environment.

The day after the “Silver River” installation at CityCenter, Lin was headed to Mexico with her husband and two daughters to document the migration of raptors.

“What is Missing?” is advocacy, she says, but the rest of her work is the voice of an artist who focuses on the natural world.

Lin is interested to see how the Las Vegas piece will play out:

“Las Vegas is not a place to go for quietness and solitude. My works tend to be more contemplative.”

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