

HYBRID FIELD

Maya Lin's latest group of rolling knolls, a permanent installation at Storm King Art Center, draws on the rich legacy of Land art and culminates her own previous research.

BY SUZAAN BOETTGER

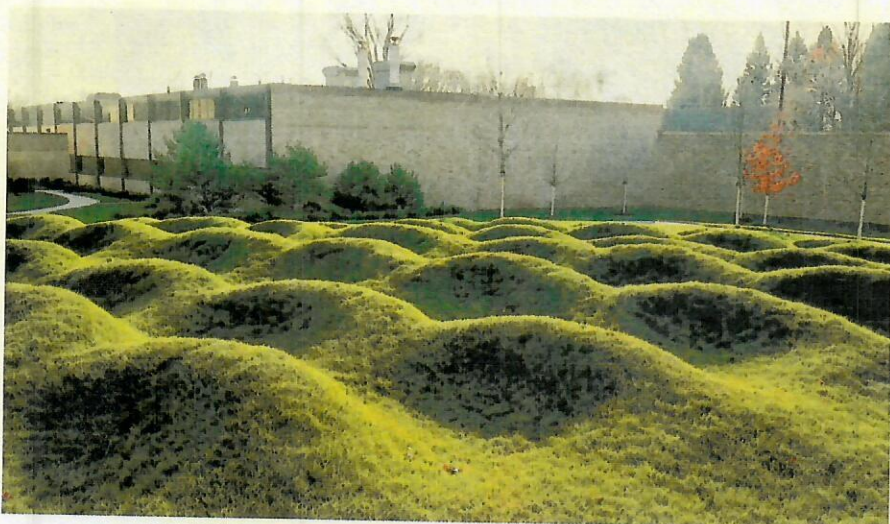
STORM KING WAVEFIELD, Maya Lin's new earthen environment at Storm King Art Center in the Hudson Highlands of New York, features a clever synthesis of forms—wavelike swells meeting verdant expanse—that just begins to suggest all the other conjunctions called up by her design. At first viewing, the work appears to be pure nature. Its seven undulating rows take up roughly one third of Lin's 11-acre site at the southwest border of the sprawling grounds, which encompass lawns, woodlands, hills and fields. Lin has fashioned knolls that rise between 10 to 15 feet, alternating with uniformly spaced troughs to create berms from 305 to 368 feet in length. Unlike some other sculptures dotting the park, several of them made of steel and vertical in orientation, *Wavefield* has a lateral breadth—uninterrupted by any metal, stone or wood object—that recalls rolling grassland terrain.

A separate berm along one edge of the work provides an overlook. From that vantage point, *Wavefield's* sweeping, sensual curves and lush grasses evoke the bucolic landscape in *Luxe, calme et volupté* (1904-05), Henri Matisse's hedonistic fantasy of the pastoral union between nudes and nature. Yet, as with any environmental sculpture, *Wavefield* is best experienced by moving within it, where the mounds, well over twice human height, resemble ocean swells. One might think of the famous *Great Wave* (1831) by Katsushika Hokusai. The dual references to water and hill also echo the historical Chinese *shanshui* (mountain water) motif, which presents a plausible but imagined landscape centered on some looming geological formation and falling, pooling, foaming water. The contemplation of *shanshui* offers Daoist-style refreshment by allowing the viewer to stroll through rustic nature vicariously. In such images, the stalwart mountains and fluid currents allude to spiritual complements. Tiny, barely perceptible human figures seen walking about or fishing emphasize that the world is large and we are not. Lin's dual heritage—her Chinese-born parents are Ohio University professors, one teaching ceramics and the other American and Chinese literature—may have stimulated this metaphorical treatment of landscape.

Maya Lin: *The Wave Field*, 1995, earth and grass, 10,000 square feet; at the FXB Aerospace Building, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. © Maya Lin Studio, Inc. Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

Maya Lin's solo show of three large-scale installations at PaceWildenstein, New York, through Oct. 24.





Partial view of *Storm King Wavefield*, 2007-08, earth and grass, 240,000 square feet; at Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, New York. Photo Jerry L. Thompson.

Ohio, where Lin was raised, contains many ancient Hopewell burial mounds—meandering shapes of earth and grass that, like *Storm King Wavefield*, have been termed “earthworks.” Materially, it is accurate to say that these ritual structures (from about 2,000 years ago) are also made primarily of soil. But there the similarity ends, since the builders’ purposes are entirely different. Lin first earned renown as an artist with the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (1982), her entry into the dialogue of large-scale outdoor artworks created since the late 1960s. *Storm King Wavefield* does not share the expressionistic roughness of Michael Heizer’s cuts in western deserts, Dennis Oppenheim’s bravura hacking of ice sheets above a waterfall or Robert Smithson’s rocky spiral in a life-inhibiting saline lake—all exemplars of the historical genre Earthworks. Rather, Lin’s new work has the key characteristics of Land art. Reinforced by material external to the site, it is a stable form intended to be permanent, and is institutionally funded, located in the countryside close to the urban art world and physically user-friendly.

WHILE CONCEPTUALLY RELATED to Western pastoral and Eastern *shanshui* landscape painting, *Storm King Wavefield* is an intensely constructed work physically akin to Land art projects such as James Turrell’s *Roden Crater* (1974–ongoing); Mary Miss’s 1994 Jyvaskyla University project, which comprises a grove of Finnish pine trees, each reflected in a trough of water; and Patricia Johanson’s *Nairobi River Park* (1995), with its public areas furnished with local flora and wetlands plants to ensure safe drinking water. For her site Lin chose a disused gravel pit, the last remnant of the local gravel mining industry that thrived in the 1950s. By covering this inert rubble with fecund earth, Lin inserted the Storm King project into the ecologically responsive genre of environmentalist art. (She worked with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and landscape architects

Edwina von Gal and Darrel Morrison.) A year of earth-moving and -shaping, along with the devising of a natural drainage system, was followed by a year of soil settling and plant growth before *Storm King Wavefield* opened to the public in May. The forms were made of gravel and soil available at the site, supplemented by rocky overburden soil, topsoil and horse manure. These elements were covered with mulch and planted with a mixture of five hardy, low-lying grasses chosen to help sustain the work’s shape and uniform verdancy.

For the design, Lin looked back to her smaller-scale *Wave Field* (1995), commissioned by the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, for the 100-foot-square courtyard in front of its Aerospace Engineering Building. While researching aerodynamics and fluid mechanics, Lin discovered an image of the Stokes wave, a type of repetitive, curled wave that occurs naturally on the open sea. Her 50 grassy waves in eight rows range from 3 to 6 feet in height, with their peaks at an even level, as if to support a horizontal plane. Another source was satellite photography of the ocean, and a bird’s-eye perspective of *Wave Field* heightens awareness of its tight repetition of rolling swells, turning the design into an abstract pattern. Up close, the waves’ modest height, curled form and covering of grass, evoking a kind of outdoor cubicle, invite one to nestle inside and read. Ten years after the Ann Arbor project, Lin created *Flutter* (2005) for the rectangular lawns at the Wilkie D. Ferguson, Jr., Federal Courthouse in Miami, using grass-covered mounds, 2 to 4 feet high, to suggest the wavelike formations that the surf sometimes imprints on a sandy beach.

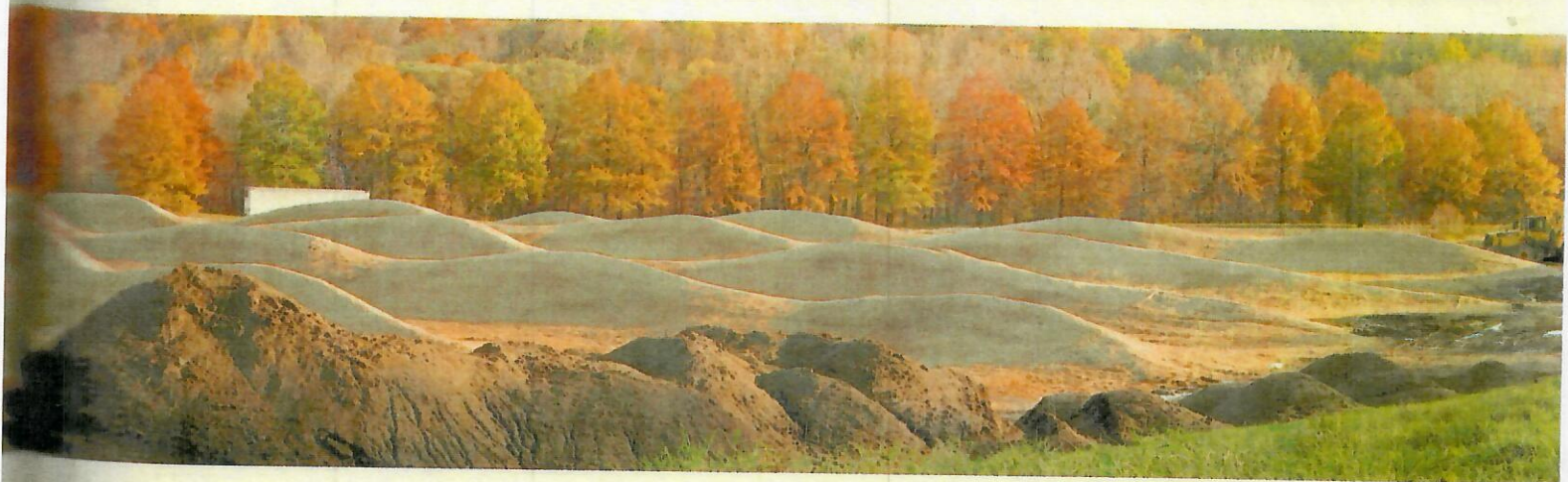
In contrast to *Wave Field* and *Flutter*, whose implicit references (to aerodynamics, Miami shores) anchor them to



Panoramas of *Storm King Wavefield* in its completed state (top) and while under construction (bottom).
Photos Jerry L. Thompson.

specific places and communities, the larger *Storm King Wavefield* generically alludes to hilly terrain but does not suggest any particular connection to the environs of Storm King Mountain. The absolute symmetry and regularized harmony of the berms are not characteristics of unruly nature but of classical gardens and manicured golf courses, making the work one more beauti-

ful object in the collection of this sculpture sanctuary. Moreover, *Storm King Wavefield's* idealist manipulation of nature appears to channel an outdated practice of human domination, contrary not only to current land-management thinking but to the ethos of contemporary environmental art. The serial abstraction in Lin's "Wave" installations—"one thing after another," in Donald Judd's famous phrase—extends her "field" reference from environmental and agrarian spaciousness to the measured realm of Frank Stella's minimalist stripes.



At the same time, *Storm King Wavefield's* systematic surf-as-surf perfection evokes yet another organic association. Its graceful rising and falling presents a visual correlate to the regular oscillation of smooth inhale and exhale during deep meditation, when the body's autonomic rhythms—heartbeat, blood pressure, respiration—reach optimally beneficial convergence. That Lin's artwork can allude to all these yins and yangs while being so lushly gorgeous indicates both its thematic ambiguities and its emotional density. ○

Maya Lin's "biodiversity memorial" *What Is Missing?* debuted at its permanent site, the California Academy of Sciences, San Francisco, Sept. 17. The Museum of Chinese in America, designed by the artist, opened in New York on Sept. 22.

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