

New York

Ma Jong-Il
at the Charles B. Wang
Center, Stony Brook
University, New York

My first meeting with the Korean sculptor Ma Jong-Il was on the occasion of a talk I was giving at the Gwangju City Art Museum in 2006. Gwangju is the fifth largest city in the Republic of Korea and is primarily known by foreigners for its *International Art Biennial*. Ma had been appointed as my interpreter for the evening, a task I am not sure he really wanted to do. But somehow, between the two of us, we made it work. Later that evening, during conversation at dinner, I discovered that he was a sculptor—specifically an architectural sculptor—and that he had worked in New York City and was returning there more or less permanently in order to develop his career. Over the years we have managed to stay in touch as I have followed the permutable evolutions in his work

The large-scale installation work that Ma Jong-Il conceived, constructed, and installed on the grounds of the Charles B. Wang Center in Stony Brook, considered by its founder as “the foremost world-class center of Asian and Asian American arts and culture.” Titled *Simplicity over Complexity* (2017), the artist’s site-specific extravaganza occupies an extraordinary, yet intimate outdoor garden. In various aspects, it is consistent with many of the visual and conceptual themes that Ma has employed over the past 15 years. He refers to his installation as “woven sculpture” as the linear slats, or stalks of cut-wood, are painted in primary and secondary colors, including black, and are tied and nailed together in sections or bundles that intermittently extend throughout the space of the garden in three separate plant-beds as a series of intertwined forms. These plant-beds are in relatively close



Ma Jong-Il, *Simplicity over Complexity*, 2017, wood, metal, metal fasteners, and colored ropes on the colored concrete base, center 15 x 10 x 25 feet; right 12 x 10 x 21 feet; and left 11 x 21 x 20 feet. Images: Courtesy of the Artist.

proximity to a water-pond. According to the artist, they take on the appearance of “three-dimensional drawings in space” or forms that read as “mind maps,” suggesting a formal/conceptual set of notations that structurally relate to one another, though aesthetically differ according to the angle in which they are viewed.

I have often been struck as to how Ma Jung-Il gives verbal accuracy to the forms he makes. For example, in his *Project Description*, he refers to this mega-work in a highly energetic, poetic manner: “Physically, my work is about building and weaving installations, using varying lengths and types of thin

wooden strips, used both in their raw, natural state and also rendered in color. These are flexed, twisted, bundled, and arched into forms that reference bridges, airport structures, sports complexes, and factory buildings, and recall the raw beauty of modern industrial engineering.” The reference to engineering is, of course, important as it gives a rationale to the term “architectonic sculpture” that he uses to clarify his position as an artist.

As for viewing *Simplicity over Complexity*, the unique experience one might have is crucial to how it is received as sculpture and as a presence ineluctably situated in space and time. Of course, that ex-

perience will shift and change from one viewer to the next. There is no formula by which to view Ma’s work. However, according to the artist, there is a manifest influence that emerges from physics, which he derives from the scientist, Murray Gell Mann, in his book *Quark and the Jaguar: Adventures in The Simple and the Complex*. Needless to say, the subtitle of the book was appropriated in the title of Ma Jong-Il’s sculpture.

According to Ma, the connections between the manner in which he conceives and makes sculpture are related to the physical tensions that presumably exist throughout our galaxy. One might say that they are omnipresent. These micro and the macro tensions belong to astrophysics as much as they belong to the *Tao Te Ching*. Whether we read them in the physical or material sense or whether we appreciate them as abstract entities that allude to a greater spiritual understanding of who we are, they accomplish their purpose either way. The gravitational connections between these linear forms are at the core of what Ma Jung-Il understands his sculpture to be.

Robert C. Morgan

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Ma Jong-Il, *Simplicity over Complexity*, 2017,