Gray and Green: Maya Lin at Madison Square Park

By Louis Bury
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Maya Lin, *Ghost Forest*, 2021, forty-nine Atlantic white cedars.
Collection The Artist, Courtesy Pace Gallery. ©2020 Maya Lin. Photo: Rashmi Gill / Madison Square Park Conservancy.

The most haunting thing about **Maya Lin (https://www.artnews.com/t/maya-lin/)**'s *Ghost Forest* is how ordinary it appears. On the central "Oval Lawn" in New York City's well-trafficked **Madison Square Park (https://www.artnews.com/t/madison-square-park/)**, the celebrated architect and sculptor has installed a stand of forty-nine bare cedar trees, resembling a

dying woodland. The tall, toothpick-like conifers, pruned of branches at human height and entirely devoid of leaves, are meant to serve as portents of environmental devastation. But the quotidian park-going activities—sunbathing, picnicking, dog walking—taking place within and around these symbols of apocalypse suggest how easily people can adjust their baseline sense of normalcy.

The bare trees were relocated from private land in the New Jersey Pine Barrens that was set to be cleared owing to saltwater inundation; their pocked and stripped bark is encrusted with pale gray lichen, which thrives in moist areas. These details might foster despair. Yet the chosen transplants' careful arrangement (close enough together to form a recognizable grove but far enough apart to encourage sitting on the manicured lawn) and uniform scale (each is roughly forty feet tall) creates a sense of choreographed grandeur; like an evenly spaced choir, the trees reach their arms toward the heavens.

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I visited *Ghost Forest* on a sunny spring afternoon and found the installation so discordantly upbeat that I returned again that evening to see how different conditions might alter the experience. On a clear, pleasant day, the sunlight streams through the leafless limbs, while the adjacent elms provide extensive shade. The contrast entices visitors to linger in Lin's circle of light. In the evening, the installation's exposure to the darkening sky fosters a quiet, inviting mood.

While other seasons, weather conditions, and times of day may well produce other, less uplifting effects, on balance the park environment detracts from the work's intentions.

Indeed, while many of *Ghost Forest*'s aesthetic choices were influenced by logistics—leaving the soil grassless would have discouraged visitors from sitting, for example—cumulatively, they create a disjuncture between the installation's elegiac conceit and its more buoyant realization. Lin's temporary forest is intended as a prick to the public's conscience akin to Danish artist **Olafur Eliasson (https://www.artnews.com/t/olafur-eliasson/)**'s over-obvious melting *Ice Watch* installations of the past decade, in which glacial ice hunks were installed in public plazas as doomsday climate reminders. But *Ghost Forest*'s spectral symbolism works best as an unwitting reminder that some forms of life persist even as others morph or disappear.

In this way, the installation accidentally echoes recent work that normalizes climate change—with irony or sincerity—to psychologically prepare audiences for its disruptions. The Dear Climate collective (currently composed of Marina Zurkow, Una Chaudhuri, and Oliver Kellhammer), for example, uses dark, knowing humor to suggest a paradoxical embrace of climate change, in works such as an illustrated poster enjoining viewers to "FLOW WITH THE FLOODS." Artist Kelly Jazvac, together with scientists Patricia Corcoran and Charles J. Moore, coined the term "plastiglomerate" to refer to the amalgams of rock, debris, and hardened plastic that we might consider "unnatural" but that are being deposited in earth's sedimentary record. Lin's *Ghost Forest* derives from different premises but nonetheless presents a similar vision of our species' process of climate acceptance: by turns oblivious and wise—and already well underway.