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***MAY 2021 - "THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"***

## **The Missing First Person: The Housatonic Sculpture by Jongil Ma**





*Jongil Ma, Housatonic Museum of Art, Burt Chernow Galleries.*

Jongil Ma: *Be There When You Return*

Housatonic Museum of Art (<https://museum.housatonic.edu/>)

**By ROBERT C. MORGAN**, May 2021

The sculptor Ma Jong-il, originally from Gwangju in the southwest region of the Republic of Korea, began living and working as an independent sculptor in New York City in 1996. Coincidentally, on the occasion of becoming an American citizen this year (2021), his most recent large-scale sculpture, titled *Be There When You Return*, was commissioned by the Housatonic Museum of Art in Bridgeport, Connecticut, under the auspices of the Director, Robbin Zella.

In previous years, Ma Jong-il has produced several large-scale sculptures that focus on the deconstruction of his medium. Many of these works reveal an exemplary complex, and often overwhelming, appearance. The construction involves working with a multitude of diverse elements in relation to a singular site-specific form. In *Be There When You Return*, the form is designed in relation to an interior platform on the second level of a large interior space inside the Museum. The measurements of this space – which cannot be easily separated from the work itself – are as follows: breadth 22'11" x 23'3" and height is 24'7".

This sculpture is primarily constructed with partially painted cut wood beams in which the constructive elements are fastened together using a variety of fixtures. These include metal rods, nuts and bolts, colored screws in different sizes, cable rip ties, and stained ropes. This particular sculpture involved eight weeks of preparation beginning in early October through the end of November 2020.

Another seven weeks was required to complete the installation, beginning in early

December through most of January 2021. In each case, the artist does more than ninety per cent of the work himself accompanied by an occasional assistant.

Seventy per cent of the wood used in this sculpture was purchased from local lumber yards in the vicinity of the Museum. The artist cuts most of the wood himself, which satisfies the often problematic requirements that bind these unruly linear parts together in relation to one another. In addition to the cutting, Ma also paints the surfaces of the wood using a spray-gun that includes Mixol Color Tint (imported from Germany), acrylic paint, and a clear coating applied after the staining. Finally, the wood is treated with a fire retardant to meet the requirement given that the sculpture resides inside the Museum.

To give the reader some idea as the complexity of his work, Ma Jong-il has chosen eleven different kinds of wood by which to construct *Be There When You Return*. They include pine, douglas fir, hard and soft maple, poplar, purple heart, mahogany, white oak and three different varieties imported from Africa, including *bubinga*, *padauk*, and *sapele*.







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Often the question arises as to whether Ma Jong-il's work is a sculpture or an installation. The appearance of his seemingly free-form placement of the wooden elements, both painted and unpainted, may suggest his work is an installation; but on a less superficial level, the argument that Ma's work has emerged as a highly developed, if not carefully rehearsed residual form of sculpture is deeply possible. Having spent serious time with this work, it would appear that the artist has come upon a new form of sculpture that exceeds both expressionism and pragmatism.

The title of the work alone is enough to convince serious viewers that something exists within this work that adds another dimension to postmodernism. While some artists may choose to play with this work, to transform material into idea

and make it their own, there is always something missing, something out of step with the energy (*Qi*) that exists at the core of Ma's sculpture.

This core also extends to the absence given in the work's title and to the blatantly material indeterminacy that contributes a profound conceptual aspect to the artist's work.

The title *Be There When You Return* originates in a fragment from a popular American slogan the artist overheard. In fact, the fragment becomes complete when the viewer of this construction understands that the first person is missing. For example, if the viewer denotes the missing first person in the title, it will read as follows "I'll be there when you return."

This being the case, one might argue that there is a romantic aspect to this sculpture. The title deliberately misses the first person. Could this be the lover? One is obliged to examine Ma's sculpture on another level. The work suddenly carries meaning. Does it become a message to someone at a time when travel is problematic, because the world is suffering from the consequences of a pandemic. The sculpture reveals a state of mind, a transformed feeling, a place in time where the answer is not clear, where the bond between one and another feels empty. It is a work of art. **WM**



### ROBERT C. MORGAN

**Robert C. Morgan** is an educator, art historian, critic, poet, and artist.

Knowledgeable in the history and aesthetics of both Western and Asian art, Morgan has lectured widely, written hundreds of critical essays (translated into twenty languages), published monographs and books, and curated numerous exhibitions. He has written reviews for *Art in America*, *Arts*, *Art News*, *Art Press*(Paris), *Sculpture Magazine*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, and *Hyperallergic*. His catalog essays have been published by Gagosian, Pace, Sperone Westwater, Van Doren Waxter, White Cube (London), Kukje (Seoul), Malingue (Hong Kong), and Ink Studio (Beijing). Since 2010, he has been New York Editor for *Asian Art News* and *World Sculpture News*, both published in Hong Kong. He teaches in the Graduate Fine Arts Program at Pratt Institute as an Adjunct Professor and at the School of Visual Arts.