MAYA LIN INTERVIEW
MAKERS: WOMEN WHO MAKE AMERICA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Maya Lin
Designer
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Total Running Time: 49 minutes and 41 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

Maya Lin

Designer

INTERVIEWER:

So I'm going to start out asking you a little bit about your family and your childhood.

MAYA LIN:

Okay.

INTERVIEWER:

I'm going to go in chronological order here. And if you could tell me a little bit about your upbringing and your parents and what your family life was like.

00:00:22:00

MAYA LIN:

I mean, I grew up in Athens, Ohio, I was actually born and raised in a small college town. My parents immigrated from China, my mother from Shanghai, my father from Beijing, and they met at University of Washington. So I am your quintessential academic brat, faculty brat. I grew up on a college campus. My dad was Dean of fine arts.

ON SCREEN TEXT:
The Lin Family
Athens, OH 1961

MAYA LIN:
My mother was an English and Asian Lit professor. So that's how I grew up. I grew up doing everything from making weavings or casting bronzes, but at the same time, my mother was very academic. So I spent as much time in academic pursuits.

INTERVIEWER:
How did growing up amid all that creativity influence you in your work?

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MAYA LIN:
Well, I don't think I really understood how much it would influence my work. My dad, again, being a ceramicist after school, when we were in grade school, my brother and I would spend hours in his ceramic studio. So I was playing with clay. I still play with clay. And I would say most of my artworks are formed in plasticine, which is an oil based clay, it never hardens. And so I think growing up that way, there was an incredible support for anything

academic, anything that was about intellectual pursuits. My mother was much more on the bookish side than my dad, and wanted us … my brother is a poet, and wanted us to just, as long as we could pursue something that intellectually challenged us, she was happy. So I think it might be a little anti tiger mom, because it wasn't just about, it was never about success in the normal terms, but it was definitely about an internalized ideal that we would pursue something that was intellectually challenging to us.

INTERVIEWER:
You've attributed your work sensibilities to, partly, of growing up and … can you explain that?

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MAYA LIN:
Well, I mean, I think twofold. One, we were surrounded by woods and I was out there hand feeding raccoons, taming the rabbits. So part of me was, I was growing up in the sixties. It was sort of the beginnings of the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act. So I had a real affinity to environmental issues. Add that my mother was exceedingly academic, my father was exceedingly artistic. Some were in the two, it melded. I mean, I would say that my math teacher thought I was going to be in math. My English teacher thought I was going into English. So you had your typical nerd student growing up in Athens, Ohio, but in the end I was my father's child and I've always made art. Yet, there was that side that my mother instilled, which is, well, you got to push yourself academically. So maybe art was not quite … and little by little, even though I've academically been all through college was very, very interested in science, math. Little by little by little I discovered that my voice is really

anchored in the arts. Even though I make architecture, I would say in the memorials, it's all about … I mean, I love the fact that everything's coalesced into environmental issues, and in concerns about the environment, but there's been a real, I don't know, I just sort of followed a path that blended the academic side and the artistic side.

INTERVIEWER:

Were there any expectations from your parents about your future?

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MAYA LIN:

Just to be happy, which is, I would say again, atypical. I saw what tiger mom said, and I almost wanted to write the refute. My parents were rebels. They were … one loved poetry, my mother, and my father loved ceramics. Neither of them, like in China, my dad ended up in academic administration because he was actually forbidden to study the arts. So he gets out mid-career because they flee when the communists are taking over. And he studies ceramics, because his father had this amazing collection of Chinese ceramic ware. And so I think both my mom and my dad wanted my brother and I to pursue what we loved, and to pursue something that was, again, intellectually affirming rather than … and I've talked to a lot of friends who are Chinese Americans where success, success, success is measured in terms of business success or monetary success.

00:05:04:00

MAYA LIN:

We were almost brought up in a different realm, which is intellectual success, which is, can you push yourself? Can you challenge yourself? Can you do

something that will ultimately make you happy, and what you're doing help others. And that's kind of how I was raised up, raised. And I think it might be a little unusual or it goes against stereotype, but it's very much. I've talked to other Chinese Americans and that is very much, there's this sort of academic side that went against what some stereotypes might be out there about, it's all about, kind of, monetary success.

INTERVIEWER:
What was your sense of your ability to accomplish what you wanted to do or your expectations as woman?

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MAYA LIN:
I was in a funny position where my father adored his sister, his half sister, Lin Huiyin who … in all he wanted a daughter. And that again is atypical. Everyone usually favors the son, and he empowered me from the get go. I could do anything. And there was a lot of love in our household, but I think having that, in a way I've thought about it, having that sort of affirmation of what you can do from your father, which I think unfortunately, a lot of girls don't get, gives you a power that is infinite. And I'm sure that the way in which he saw me, and say equal light to my brother, or even sometimes he was more biased. I realized I was extremely lucky because a lot of girls don't get that. They don't get that belief from the father that they can do anything. And I think it probably has buffered me and helped me in all that I've done.

INTERVIEWER:
What made you decide to go into architecture, a very traditional, –

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Maya Lin

Washington, D.C., 1981

INTERVIEWER:

– not a traditional female field?

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MAYA LIN:

The choice for architecture was more that I went to Yale thinking I was going to become a field zoologist. I loved animals. I loved science. I loved math. I always made art my entire childhood, but oh, I think my mother was always saying, oh, art, that's what your dad does. It's like, she was a little snobby there. I was expected, probably, to get a doctorate in something. And I get to Yale. I'm actually given a science advisor my freshman year, and I'll never forget Dr. Robert [?]. He sits down with me and he goes, "Well, Yale's animal behavior program is neurologically based." And I'm like, okay, what does that mean? He said, "Well, it might involve vivisection." I said, "What's that?" And he said, "Well, dissecting animals when they're still alive." And I went, don't think I'm cut out for that. And he knew it.

00:08:08:00

MAYA LIN:

And so I'm sitting there, and I'm someone who, again, maybe this is the Asian side of me. Oh, I had … my whole life. I'm going to be a field zoologist. And now I'm like, what am I going to do? So I'll never forget. It was the introductory welcoming for freshmen at Yale. I'm in Wolsey Hall. I'm looking up at the ceiling and I'm like, what am I going to do with the rest of my life?

And I figured, oh, what about architecture? It's a mix of math and art. Which is sort of what I am, it's like the left side and the right side of the brain. And so I went over to the architecture department at Yale, and the director of architecture undergrad says, “Come back in two years. We don't take people into the major until you've gotten a well grounded approach.” And I said, okay. So I came back at the end of my sophomore year and said, I'm ready now. And I applied and I entered the major. But no, I'm a little unusual in that I would say that I'm probably an equal balance between the left side and right side. So throughout my life, art and science, architecture and art, there's just this, what normally people pursue one or the other I've tended to blend.

INTERVIEWER:
So it was kind of a whim?

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MAYA LIN:
Not a whim, a need to know my direction. And then the architecture ends up merging over between undergrad, studying it, and then winning the Memorial, being labeled as an architect, even though I'm an undergrad going back to architecture school and realizing I'm spending more time in the art department. And figuring out over the next 10 years that, yes, I love architecture, but I'll never give up the art. And I probably am much more of my father's daughter. And I think like an artist, and even though I'm absolutely committed to building architecture, I probably think much more like an artist.

INTERVIEWER:

You said, well, you've described yourself as a kind of very good student. Can you describe what kind of student you were?

00:10:12:00

MAYA LIN:

Straight A, teacher's pet. What else? I don't know. I was just really bookish. I would rewrite my notes two or three or four times just because I love doing it. I'm sure my brother was like— I would count the days when summer vacation was over, when I was in junior high or high to get back to school, because I loved it so much. I was teaching myself FORTRAN and COBOL when I was in high school because I was bored and I loved it. I don't know. I mean, I just loved anything I could get my hands on as far as self-taught learning, as well as I loved learning in school. I was very nerdy in my own way, but I was also casting bronzes by the time I was 17, 16.

INTERVIEWER:

So did that not necessarily fitting in with other teens, how did it impact you?

00:11:06:00

MAYA LIN:

I was so oddly naive that I didn't even realize I didn't fit in, and they all— I looked much younger than my classmates, and I think they all adopted me as their baby sister, and I didn't take the social cues of what normal teenagers might be going through. I was a little naive or a little protected, so I didn't really realize I wasn't quite fitting in. I think years and years later I realized I was kind of an odd duck, but at the time I just was counting the days to kind of get onto college because I was bored and I wanted to go to college.

INTERVIEWER:

The famous question, how did you come to enter the Vietnam Memorial competition?

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MAYA LIN:

Senior year at Yale, you can take a thesis, you can set up your own thesis. So about seven of us decided we wanted to study the architecture of mortality or funerial architecture. And the culmination of that project was someone saw a poster for a competition for the Vietnam Memorial. Granted we had designed our project before that was a Memorial to World War III, and we thought that was a great way to— In the project— I designed this idea for my class, and that was in December class ended, and I decided to enter it into the real competition. So that's in a nutshell how it happened. My professor, I would say, didn't quite like what I did because if you look at what I did for the World War III Memorial, it was sort of a hopeless futile journey that left you at the end with frustration. You went down this dark area and you ended up with absolutely no hope.

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MAYA LIN:

And I'll never forget, he came out of this crit and he goes, “Oh, if I had an uncle who died in this war, I would be so angry. Or I would be miserable.” And I said, “Andy it's World War III, we're not going to be around.” So he didn't quite unders— for him, funerary architecture was much more, I mean I would say a postmodernist. It was all about cherubs and cenotaphs, and funerial architecture. I was beginning to explore how architecture has an impact on us from a psychological point of view, from a political point of view.

So when I designed the Vietnam Memorial, which was about sort of looking at those that have been killed in a way that deals with the honesty of accepting their deaths, accepting the sacrifices, not trying to override a political statement on it, but allowing the names to become the object. I mean he had issues with it, but I felt like it would be a great idea to present just as an idea. No idea, no chance of it winning, but it was more like, I felt— I felt slightly compelled that I needed to enter it because it was a bit of a statement.

INTERVIEWER:
Let me just go back a little to the process if you don't mind. First of all, like funerial architecture. Why were you…?

MAYA LIN:
Oh yeah. What is the kid doing interested in this?

INTERVIEWER:
And I'll also going to ask you to take the steps back a little bit. But why were you interested in funerial architecture?

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MAYA LIN:
It's not so much … because again, it sounds a little morbid. I think the psychology of spaces was something I was very interested in. Secondly, I studied abroad in my junior year, which was literally right before I started at Yale with my senior year. And I went to Denmark, which was very unusual at the time. You actually had to prove … to leave Yale at that point in time, you had to prove that what was taught at Yale, where you were going, it wasn't

taught at Yale. So well, danishly I was very interested in Scandinavian architecture. I was given, when I was in Denmark, because it was an architectural program, a part of Denmark that included one of their largest cemeteries. And again, I am not morbid, but I began to realize that the way in which European cemeteries are designed, they're actually more a part of everyday life. Space is of a premium.

00:15:34:00

MAYA LIN:

So sometimes cemeteries end up seconding as great parks, which is sort of what Nørrebro was. And I don't know, I just started getting interested into the psychology of the built environment. And in a way, one could say, how we deal with our mortality in the built form, played into that. It wasn't that I was particularly morbid, or that any of the other six kids were. But again, in architecture, there's something called the study of the sublime, which is trying to get to an understanding of architecture at almost an artistic point where it's not functional. The function is very much a conceptual psychological space. So that's where I was probably coming from. And then a group of us decided, well, rather than take a senior seminar, let's form our own. And we all seemed to be interested in it.

INTERVIEWER:

And then you saw, so tell me again, you saw an ad and what happened?

00:16:38:00

MAYA LIN:

Someone saw an ad and we said, well, what a great way to end the class. We'll end it with … we'll all design Vietnam memorials for the class, which is what

I did. So I fully designed that project during the class. And the class was over by December, the competition wasn't due till April. So then I decided to enter it. I don't think anyone else from the class did. I just felt like I should do it. Maybe it's practice. It was certainly not thinking I'd win it, because there's no way a college kid is going to win this. But I just felt like I should say it.

INTERVIEWER:
And so can you tell me, I've read that you went down with the class to the site. Can you tell me about the process?

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MAYA LIN:
Yeah, this was at Thanksgiving time. We had free time. So we all went down to the site and it was flat and I just had a reaction. I tend to study something. So in order to design the World War III Memorial, I had studied World War I memorials, I had studied [trans con?]. We had gone back into history, and for me, and it's probably been with me since the start, I tend to analyze something for as long as I can for … okay, for this semester, we studied memorials for about six weeks and I just decided that, well, oftentimes with memorials, it has nothing to do with the individuals lives that are lost. This is about the victor claiming victory, and we never talk about the sacrifices made. So deep down under I'm thinking modernity modern day wars. How do we deal with that? How do we really begin to address that?

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MAYA LIN:
And so that's how it all started. And I knew that the World War III Memorial was in a way a precursor where I needed ... I had an inclination that we

needed to be honest about the loss. We also, because Vietnam was a very highly charged event, we needed to not politicize what had become a very political war. If we could stay semi objective, not that any history is not subjective, but if I could stay almost pure technology and the lives lost as individuals. Now it turns out as we're reading the brief, all the names are required to be on it. And what you look at is you look at all the entries, most people came up with a form and then tried to apply 57,000 names. I let the names be the form and that's all it is.

INTERVIEWER:
But when you got there and you saw the site, can you tell me about the process of how you decided-

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MAYA LIN:
It's so long ago, I just thought I'd cut open the earth, and open it up. So for me, and I followed this through to the present day, which is probably what makes me an artist more than an architect. You do a lot of research. You put all that research aside, and you wake up with a moment's inspiration. And that's what happened. I literally saw the site, having researched for about six weeks to eight weeks. And the next morning I thought, let's cut open the earth and open it up. That's all it was. So again, like the civil rights memorial, like confluence project, like what is missing? Two to three years of research and then the form, you allow the form to follow, but you almost … you've done the intellectual research. You put that aside, it's there, but then you allow the form to come up to the surface. The last thing you want to do is find a form and then apply, oh, this is what I want to say through that form. It's a very

different process. So you're trying to understand it and intellectually decipher, what are the issues?

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Vietnam Veterans Memorial Design
Washington, D.C., May 6th, 1981

MAYA LIN:
What are the ideas? And then you allow the form to find itself.

INTERVIEWER:
At the hearings, you were amazingly composed and strong, and when you look at them, what strikes me is how could someone your age and experience have the courage to withstand that firestorm of controversy? And stay and not doubt your own beliefs. It's amazing. How did that ...

00:21:00:00

MAYA LIN:
I think it's twofold. I think when you're young you're right and they're wrong. It's that simple. So part of it is if I had been a little bit older, it might have actually been harder to do that. I knew I was right, and I knew they were wrong, and fundamentally, it wasn't just about the aesthetics. It was about I knew that if that project was built, it would help people. So I was extremely interested in the psychology of how people would react to it. That I cannot answer, why I knew that. I had never known anyone who died. All I knew is if we could face death, face it honestly, only then can we get over it. Only then can we overcome it. As far as facing the firestorm, again, I would say that

having that confidence from my mom and my dad gave me a strength that was … I didn't worry about prejudice, I didn't worry about what a woman can do or can't do, or what a girl can or can't do.

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MAYA LIN:

Because from day one, there was no prejudice in my family about what my brother could do versus what I could do. And I've got to say, my mother was a professor her whole life. She always said, in your generation, you should do whatever you feel like doing. There was no gender biases about what a girl could do. And I know that had a real major effect. I don't think people really understand how much, if we differentiate as girls are growing up versus boys, how subtle it is, but are we sending signals where we're supposed to be pretty? We're supposed to be almost a foil for men, versus being our own creatures. And I was not brought up that way. I was brought up to be kind of my own voice, my own person.

00:23:12:00

MAYA LIN:

And I've got to say, I'm sure it made a difference, in the same way that academia means, in a funny way, it's all about what is up here. Nothing else matters. So it's what you're thinking that matters. So there's no other prejudice, and I'm sure that helped.

INTERVIEWER:

So when you was just sitting there, were you just thinking that you're right? You had that ...

MAYA LIN:

Yeah, absolutely.

INTERVIEWER:

Wow.

00:23:42:00

MAYA LIN:

But I think that's youth, too. I think we're much surer of who we are and what we believe in when we're young, which is great. And then with experience, we have doubts. I mean, I think it's almost natural. Would I be reacting and would I be so sure of myself 20 years later? Probably not. And that's universal. I think youth is kind of a special protective guard we all have, and it gets us through a lot. I think the other side, which is this empowerment issue, which I think is a real issue. I think I'm amazed at how, after all that we've gone through, the signals, if you watch TV today, it doesn't give girls the same belief system in themselves and what they're capable of. And I think it's a real problem.

INTERVIEWER:

What do you think that you're being able to accomplish what you did and have, what impact has it had on other women?

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MAYA LIN:

I don't know. I would assume that it shows that you can be an 18 year old girl or a 20 year old girl coming out of college. And you could build … I think maybe I'm the first woman who's designed a monument in the mall, certainly,

but it's kind of an unusual realm to have stepped into at a very early age. I remember one of the contractors who was vying for the job, they didn't quite know what to make of me. And so they baked me cookies and gave me milk. They weren't selected because I was sitting there going, oh well that's not really what I really wanted to hear from you guys. They didn't quite know how to deal with it. Right? This was 1981. So I was a real anomaly at the time.

INTERVIEWER:

How much of a role do you think sexism played in the controversy?

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MAYA LIN:

I will never know how much my age, my gender, my race played into the controversy. Obviously, it was a surprise to everyone. It was an anonymous competition, and I'll always ask, and this is something I've said at different venues, if my name had been out there, would I have been selected? And we'll never know if, well, Maya's a girl, Lin is obviously my race, they never would've known the age situation, but I would say those three issues, things have changed a little bit, but I'm really wondering about race and gender, how much a lot has been gained, and yet at the same time you still wonder, where do we still have to go in terms of equality? And truly giving girls a fair chance at being all that they can be. If that's what they want.

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MAYA LIN:

I mean, I think we're in a place where I think sometimes you could say, well, women have a greater choice because they can have their careers and have kids. Whereas I think still, men kind of it's like, you still have to have your

career. Yes, you can be a house husband, but it's not … so I think optimally, we have a greater opportunity to balance, and to have both, but I think we got a long way to go, still.

INTERVIEWER:
How did that time affect you and your work to come after?

00:27:15:00

MAYA LIN:
Hard to say. I mean, I would say that in my work I went right back into grad school, and I discovered, after three years of architecture school, that I'm probably more balanced between art and architecture. It's an interesting place to be. I think it's hard for me to gauge because it's not like I pursued one profession. By pursuing both the art and the architecture and still balancing with memorials, five in the series, I am what you would call extremely interdisciplinary. And again, we live in an age of specialization. So it's a lot easier if you pursue one rather than, what is she doing? And so I think that also is hard for people to understand.

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MAYA LIN:
So maybe when my life's work is over, give me another 20, 30 years, you'll see a body of work, but it's going to take me a longer time. I think industrialization led us to a belief in specialization. It's more efficient that way. I just can't do it. I can't live my life that way. So I've kind of balanced between … I see it as a tripod between the art, the architecture and the memorials, but it also probably leaves me a little bit like, wow, I don't quite get what she's up to.

INTERVIEWER:

Let me ask you something, you said you talk about the monument, your other monuments as well, and you want to help people. Can you talk to me about what you saw is helping? And I know you talk about acceptance, and personal statements and can you just address that?

00:28:53:00

MAYA LIN:

I think for me, my parents were academics and so I think ingrained in me is a sense that we should give back to society. So whether I'm volunteering, well, for me, it's the environment. I deeply am concerned about where we are in terms of our relationship to nature. So whether it was on the board of the energy foundation or NRDC, what I've realized in my work that whether it's sustainable buildings or artworks that try to reveal what the world looks like, the natural world, that I'm trying to wake you up to something as far as-

INTERVIEWER:

Terms of a memorial.

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MAYA LIN:

In terms of the memorials, for some strange, lucky reason after the Vietnam memorial, I've been asked and accepted certain key historical cultural events. So civil rights, the women's table at Yale, the Confluence Project, which involves all the Native American tribes along the Columbia river. And my final memorial about raising awareness about species loss and habitat loss. So part of me, and I think this is because I grew up in the sixties, these are the strong historical cultural events of my childhood. And I have been drawn to address

them through these five works. So one for war, one for civil rights, one for women's rights, one for Native American issues. And the final one will be about environmental issues. So for whatever reason, and I'm sure my parents had a huge, huge influence on me, I wanted to do something that might share and ask us to look at our history, in terms of how we can move forward from what we've learned about our past.

INTERVIEWER:
And how do you do that? You've talked about acceptance.

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MAYA LIN:
Each one is very different. Like the civil rights memorial, even though … let's say the civil rights memorial captures a specific point in time, it's sponsored by the Southern Poverty Law center. Their whole focus and dedication is to build tolerance, to build an understanding, what causes racism, where the issues … So part of me is to highlight what I see as issues going on from the past, and also even in the present. And again, I'm not didactic. If I can put forward facts about what is going on, if we can look at these facts, maybe we'll come to a different place.

INTERVIEWER:
But I guess when I see people going to the Civil Rights Memorial, and you see people viscerally being … dealing with something, and that's what I'm asking you, how do you ...

MAYA LIN:

How do I do that?

INTERVIEWER:
Yeah. And you've talked about acceptance to get to heal. That's what I'm getting at. If you could address that.

00:32:02:00

MAYA LIN:
I think it's pretty psychological. I think one could say that in any of the pieces I do, there's a personal one-on-one relationship. So imagine not so much reading a billboard, which is how public monuments are dealt with. Imagine putting a book out into a public space, –

ON SCREEN TEXT:
The Vietnam Veterans Memorial
Washington, D.C.

MAYA LIN:
–we all know how to read a book. It's one on one. If you shout out to the masses what you want to say, you'll never connect one on one to create a dialogue. And I think, if I can put forward the facts of history, and respect you enough that you are going to learn that history, read it and react to it. If I tell you what you're supposed to think, I will guarantee you, a lot of people will turn off and go, I'm not listening. Because someone's telling me what to think.

00:33:02:00

MAYA LIN:

If I can say— peak you to read about history and learn and go, I had no idea. Maybe I can draw you in so that you will come away with your own personal reaction and conclusion. And that's where I believe honesty about if we can assume there's an objective truth to history and that then we can learn from our past. That's probably what I'm trying to get to.

INTERVIEWER:
Which of your work, if you can, do you think, are you the proudest of?

MAYA LIN:
You can't say.

INTERVIEWER:
You can't say.

00:33:42:00

MAYA LIN:
You can't say, it's like choosing which child is your favorite. There are certain projects of mine that have been life changing for me, as far as moving you into a different learning experience where you want to go next. So the Wave Field is one piece that from an artist's point of view, the first one in Michigan pushed me into a realm that I knew when I did it, was going to be something that I really … was exciting and challenging.

INTERVIEWER:
What about the Civil Rights Memorial?

00:34:20:00

MAYA LIN:

The memorials are … do you know, in a funny way, I think missing, what is missing is that for the memorials, and I think people misunderstand it isn't that I don't value the civil rights or the Vietnam. I think the Vietnam is, again, extremely important, but by that point you're picking things apart and I'm not going to pick away at my children. I don't have favorites, but there are certain times when you come across something that, wow, what do I do next? And I think there— maybe more artworks have then done that for me than the memorials. I don't know why. I think maybe because the memorials are so studied. They're so, in a way, based on a literal comprehension of history, and part of me is very attracted to the spontaneity of the making of the artworks that I never know where I'm going to go next with it. That leaves me a little bit more challenged at times by that.

INTERVIEWER:

Why did you make a table up for the women's? May I ask you that?

00:35:28:00

MAYA LIN:

Well it's— the Civil Rights Memorial is the first of the tables. I have no idea. I think it's about, there's the spiral of time, time is something that's played out in every single one of the memorials. And I think to make a shape that to me was a little bit like a Modigliani face that you could sit around on one side, walk around. It was site specific, but at the same time, this is one thing where I studied about women enrolled at Yale for oh two years. I think they kept calling, going, "got an idea?" I said, no, not yet. And then one morning I woke up, made that model and knew that was it. So that's where I think for all the

intellectual studying you do, the difference is you have to put it all away, and in the end make a work of art that at some point in the form— there's not one linear, I did this because of this.

00:36:21:00

MAYA LIN:
And that's the beauty of art, that you can't explain it all away. That there's a balance there. And you know when you've hit maybe a perfect pitch or a pitch that sounds right to you, and you cannot explain, you can't mathematically tell you it isn't like one plus one equals two. There's no way of actually telling anyone, oh, it's right, because this theorem has proved it's right. And that's maybe the difference between math and art. But I know when there's a pitch that's been hit, for me at least. Someone might absolutely disagree and say that piece stinks and you're wrong there. But for me, I kind of know when I've gotten to that point.

INTERVIEWER:
I know you've kind of moved on, has anything about your past work given you pleasure?

MAYA LIN:
All of it does.

INTERVIEWER:
All of it. In what way? When you look at it, when you see the enjoyment, what it does.

00:37:21:00

MAYA LIN:

I think for every project it's very different. I think part of it … there's twofold, I think as an artist you're fairly self involved. So part of the pleasure is you solving something, and figuring out something and you know it's right. The other part of me is, I'm very much attracted to the psychology of how people react. For the memorials, they are like art in that, even though there's a function, the function is symbolic. So what are they about? They're helping people, they're teaching tools. So whether it's the Vietnam Memorial and you get a letter from a veteran who suppressed the war because it was so painful. Suppressed the war to the fact that they're in therapy 20 years later, and that you get a letter from a psychiatrist and in it are 20 letters from vets who could never talk about the war, could never face it.

00:38:22:00

MAYA LIN:

They're still in a lot of anguish. And the culmination of the class, the … not a class, it's like a therapy program, was to get them the courage to visit the wall. You're in tears. You know that maybe you helped someone, which is pretty great. I mean, how often does someone get to do that for someone? The second thing is I did a piece, part of a show called Topologies, where I made a sculpture that sort of had undulations in the land, and it traveled to six places. And I got a letter one day from a woman who was in cancer therapy in Texas. And every day she had to go in. So she was staying at a hotel, going for chemo, and my show was on her way.

00:39:15:00

MAYA LIN:

And she just wrote me a thank you letter once saying, I don't know how to tell you this, but I'd really like to thank you, because in the hardest time of my life, I would actually go into the museum, sit down with your work and feel at peace. And what do you do with that? You just feel like really good. And in the end, as an artist, you are ego. You're making these works for you, trying to figure out what your voice is, but at the same time, knowing that you might have had an impact on so many people at times, you're fortunate. You're very, very fortunate to have been able to help people.

INTERVIEWER:
What do you want your legacy to be? I know you don't want to talk about your past a lot, but these are for people who don't know anything about-

00:40:03:00

MAYA LIN:
I think the important thing for me is, I've just done what I've wanted to do. Art and architecture and the memorials. And I've been told throughout my life, oh, you can choose one. You can choose the other. Don't listen to anyone else, follow your heart. But again, as you follow your heart, I would hope that each one of us can give back to society in some way. I think it is extremely important. It is not something you do when you're older, it's something we can each do from the get go, that we're not just here to serve ourselves, that we are here as much to try to make the world a better place. And that's something my parents instilled in me.

INTERVIEWER:
First of all, do you consider yourself a feminist?

MAYA LIN:

No.

INTERVIEWER:

And why not?

00:40:56:00

MAYA LIN:

Because I think to me, the feminist movement came out at a certain point in time in the sixties and seventies, and I was about 10 years old, and I just never felt … I feel like we owe that group a huge amount, but I think I came on in after that. So for me, feminism, I'm completely about gender equality and racial equality, but at the same time for me growing up, I saw the feminist movement, and I actually saw it almost as something that was a little bit like the sixties movement. I was kind of an observer to it. Not that I don't completely acknowledge what we gained from it, but I don't, wasn't part of that sort of political movement that was the feminist movement, because I was too young to connect to it.

INTERVIEWER:

Do you think it was successful?

00:42:05:00

MAYA LIN:

Yes and no. I think it was successful in that women are in all walks of careers, in all walks of life. Do we still assume that? And I don't know, but my classmates told me, "well, if you will go into law and they find out you're a woman and you're going to have kids, they track you differently." And I'm

sure that's still the case. Or that, like the internet situation, what my kids are being exposed to, where the guys are, all these Wiz programmers and the girls are like … let's face it, they're the bimbos. I don't know. These are not good role models for us. And so you look at TV today, and until we really are aware of the massive stereotyping that's going on, that might not in any way reflect on everyday life, and how many CEOs right now are women. And how many of us are at the top of our field.

00:43:15:00

MAYA LIN:
But if the media images don't reflect that, then what are we telling our girls? And our boys, as to what the expectations are. And so in that sense, one could say that I have learned the lessons of feminism, but for me, oddly, I feel slightly a little apart from what I saw as almost a bit of a movement, but I still think we learned a lot, and there's so much we need to be sort of aware of.

INTERVIEWER:
These are questions that we ask everyone. And so what's the most meaningful, useful piece of advice you've ever received?

00:43:55:00

MAYA LIN:
I'll say, I won't say who it is. Don't worry what you're doing, follow your heart, go for … don't worry how people categorize you, just pursue your loves.

INTERVIEWER:
What's the one piece of advice you'd give to a young woman on building a career?

MAYA LIN:

Again, don't ever believe when someone says you can't do it.

INTERVIEWER:

What about work life balance, having children and maintaining a career?

00:44:23:00

MAYA LIN:

I think it's so funny because it's one big juggling act and you can absolutely do it. And you won't sleep. And your hours won't be a 24 hour day, they will be a 30 hour day. And somehow, I think maybe we are slightly wired to multitask, and you can get it all done, and still be at home in time for dinner.

INTERVIEWER:

What accomplishment ... I think you don't ... are you most proud of?

MAYA LIN:

Can't say.

INTERVIEWER:

What was your first paying job?

00:44:54:00

MAYA LIN:

I worked for a…I was in high school, my parents did not want me to work. I wanted to work after school, so I worked at a five and dime shop called Murphy's Mart in the sewing department, folding up bolts of fabric. I loved it.

They were like, no, no, no, don't do this. I just felt really proud that I could make a little pocket money.

INTERVIEWER:
What three adjectives best describe you?

MAYA LIN:
Hard to say. I would probably say creative, multi-tasker and exceedingly energetic. Just always on.

INTERVIEWER:
And what person that you've never met has had the biggest influence on you?

00:45:41:00

MAYA LIN:
Probably an artist named Robert Smithson, who I saw one of his shows at the Whitney. And it was all about connection of land art to inside a museum. It was called Site Non-Sites. There are times in your life, I would hope everyone has it, where you see a work of art and you're just brought to your knees. And his work has always been that for me. And he died making an artwork in the middle of the desert, way before I would ever have had a chance to know him. And so he's very, very inspirational to me.

INTERVIEWER:
And to an 18 year old who thinks they can't do something or it would be impossible to ...

MAYA LIN:
I think-

INTERVIEWER:
... accomplish something?

MAYA LIN:
I think if you work really hard, if you study something, if you know your facts, if you believe in it and you work really hard, it's amazing what you can accomplish.

INTERVIEWER:
And when people say that something you think is wrong, what do you say to them?

00:46:52:00

MAYA LIN:
You know, this is a hard one. I think early on, you have to trust that you know you're right. But at the same time, youth can also lead to folly. So I think as long as you've done your due diligence, and you've worked through the facts and you've studied it and you feel that what you've done is right, by all means, you have to believe in it. And if you don't believe in it, no one else will.

INTERVIEWER:
And when you were young, who was the most helpful to you during that difficult time?

00:47:27:00

MAYA LIN:

There was an art critic who took me under his wing. He had interviewed me and he realized that there was a naivete about me and an innocence. And I didn't know this at the time, but he actually emailed me and said, if you need help when you're in Washington, give me a call. It was architectural critic by the name of Wolfram Von Eckardt. And he actually shepherded me through, well basically I had no allies in DC. At some point I was persona non grata, no one would touch me because it was such a hot topic. And Wolf kind of took me under his wing and he guided me through a bit of the Washington politics. He was a mentor in a way, and he was wonderful.

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MAYA LIN:

So that was just so … he just … and the way in which I answered his questions by phone, he knew that I was just this kid who probably was going to get into a big mess. Anyway, so he was very, very, very kind and a couple colleagues of his really kind of like were there when I was completely all alone. I did not tell my parents what I was going through because I didn't want to worry them. So I was basically in Washington by myself, dealing with this craziness and I didn't want to worry my parents, very Chinese. So Wolf and his friends were kind of really helpful for me.

INTERVIEWER:

What was the hardest thing for you?

00:49:02:00

MAYA LIN:

At that time? Just … I don't know. I can't say. I think the hardest time for me has been knowing that I built that project, knowing it was my first project out, getting people to see both the art and the architecture past that piece, and seeing my work as a balance, that's been the hardest thing.

INTERVIEWER:
Stepping out from that.

MAYA LIN:
Well, not so much stepping down, but understanding that your life's work is a balance, and that you need to be seen as a whole, as an artist.

END TC: 00:49:41:00