

Lani Maestro's work has evolved as a series of restrained material statements that communicate loss, distance, and disappearance, but also memory and healing. In her native Philippines in the 1970s Maestro was an art student and an active participant in the underground movement opposing the Marcos regime. Besides painting political murals and posters in a social-realist style for the resistance, she also composed subtle watercolour works inspired by the austerity of American minimalism and Japanese aesthetics, practices which continue to be reference points for her work. Following her 1982

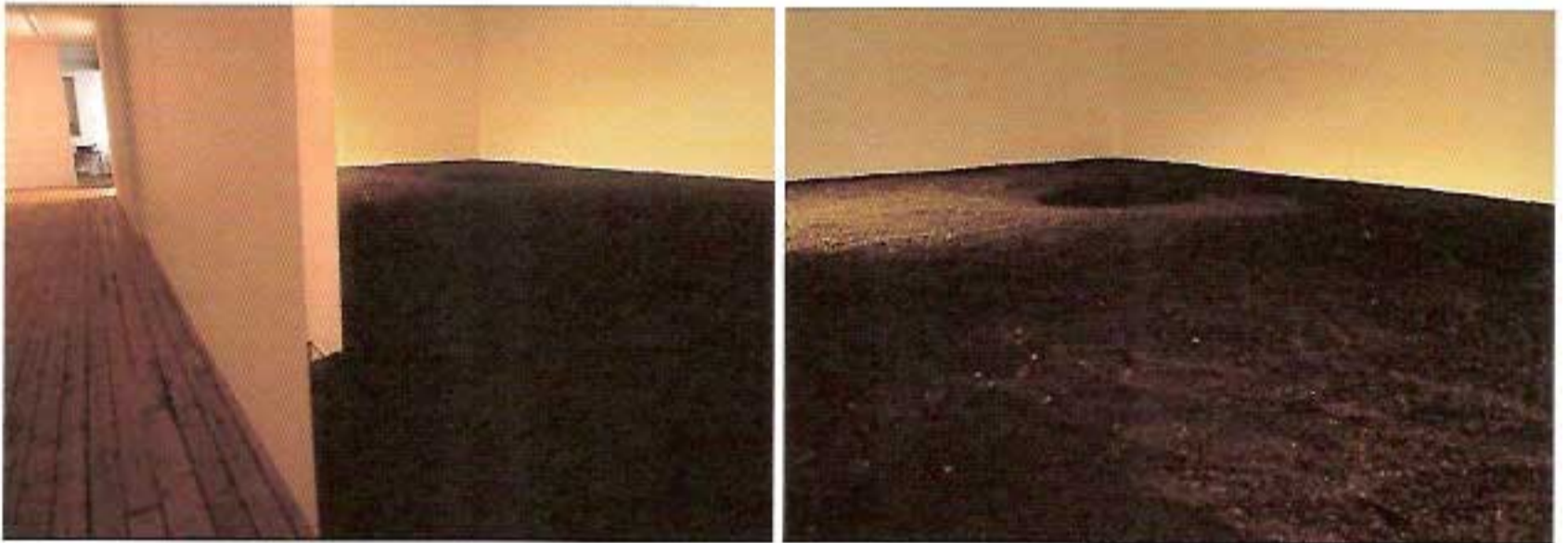


110. *a book think of ocean* (1993).  
Hardbound book (550 pages with duo-  
tone printing on eurodull  
paper and silver stamping on linen  
cover) and oak table.  
Canada Council Art Bank, Ottawa



109. *Cradle* (1996), detail.  
Cheesecloth, sisal strings, palm mats

III. *a wound in the lung* (1994). Earth, wood, glass, gypsum board



move to Canada, she produced a number of explicitly political works bearing witness to the tortures and abuses committed in her homeland. *Manila Envelopes* (1983) reproduced letters and photographs from acquaintances in the Philippines that relate stories about torture, imprisonment, and political disappearance. By piecing these together into loose grids and making them public, Maestro extended her correspondents' acts of witnessing. The installation *The Heart Is Stronger Than The Hand* (1988) included veiled photographs of peasant workers abused by the military, given to her by the workers' relatives. Below, framed glass panels repetitively inscribed with stormy phrases like "slaughter clouds" and "seawater ablaze" leaned against piles of dried maple leaves (a Canadian symbol), near other natural materials which formed a small shrine and the word "faith." On one wall were descriptions of the military atrocities; on another, stories about wounds cured by Maestro's *nanay*, a healer and mothering figure. In the middle of the room, side-by-side video monitors played images of surf rolling onto shore, while the entire space was infused with the voice of a woman reciting a litany of Hispanic and sometimes Arabic names – a sonorously fleeting record of the repetition of loss. The installation suggested the entwining of destructive and curative forces, both natural and human.

Moving from her multi-faceted and overtly politicized early works, Maestro has tended to create equally powerful but more distilled installations. *a wound in the lung*, (1994) is a room filled knee-high



112. *The Heart is Stronger Than The Hand* (1988), detail. Photographs, sheets, silver ink on framed glass, dried maple leaves and flowers, pins, audio, photocopy on acetate

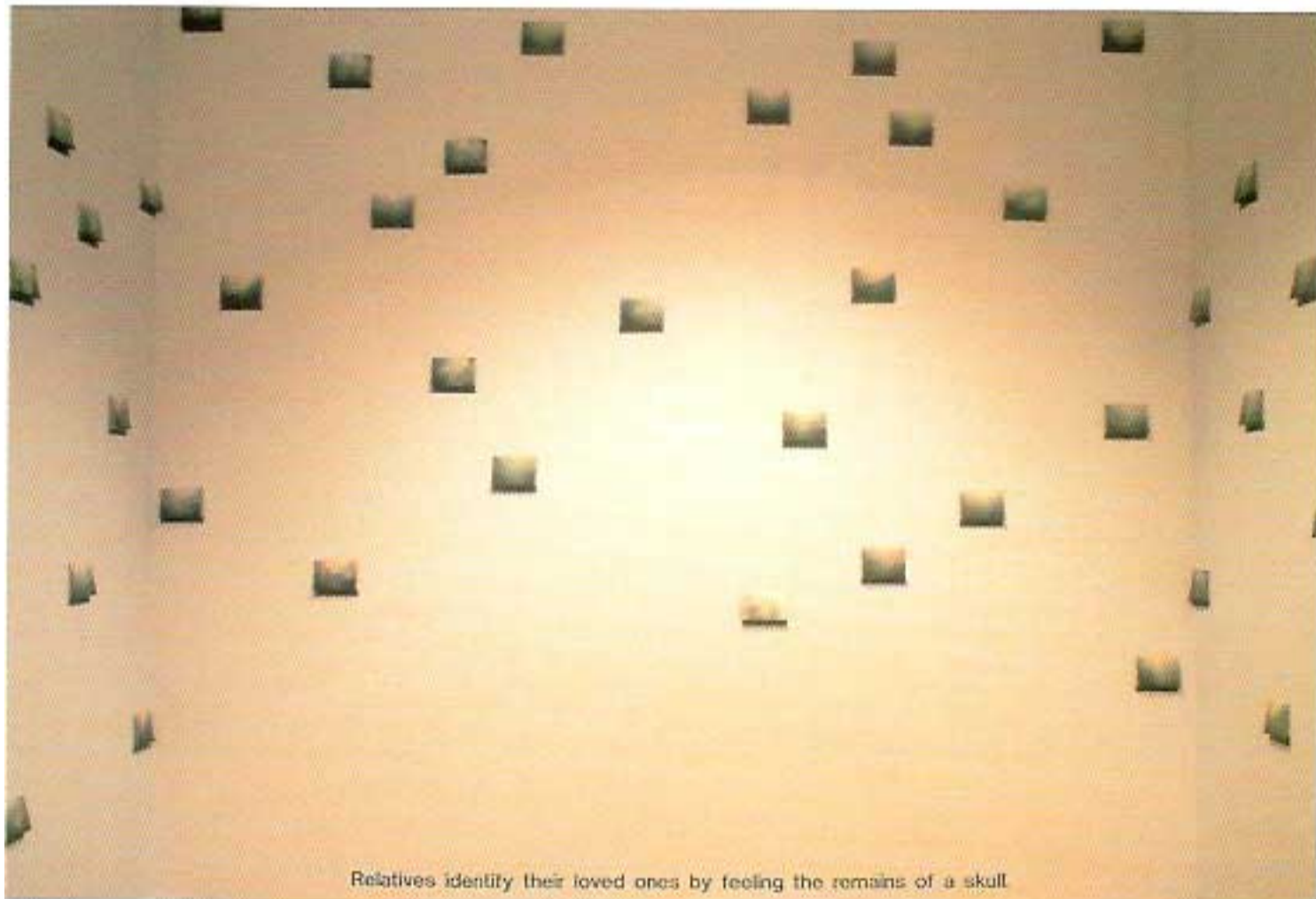
with earth, viewed from a single entrance. Making explicit the pulsing density of Walter de Maria's minimalist *Earth Room* (1968 / 1974 / 1977), Maestro's field is punctuated by a deep depression, whose inaccessibility suggests a private place of irrevocable, fundamental loss, as well as a

passage beyond the architectural confines, perhaps into the healing earth itself.

The evocative simplicity of Maestro's work discloses a world view that accepts loss and exile as ever-present conditions: "The search for identities are all profound longings for this home [that is the mother's womb]. We are all exiles in that we are born into the world. Perhaps, if we accept this state as a condition [then we can be more at ease with our otherness and simply be in that simultaneous place of being and longing (be / longing)."<sup>1</sup> *Cradle* (1996) conveys this sense of finding home in emptiness. Diaphanous square tents of mosquito netting hang from a network of strings anchored to walls and ceiling, creating a tenuous village. A woven palm mat forms the floor of each enclosure. The sheer walls of the cells are membranes that intimate both protection and disappearance. Rina Carvajal describes the restorative power of this quiet space:

"The waving rhythm, the calmness of this place, recalls the pulse of breath during sleep, a feeling of suspension, of the dissolution of limits. With this work the artist has found a space, in the forgetfulness of dreams, where distances can be erased and where memory and silence speak about the inutterable, become a dwelling, a strength and a way of survival."<sup>2</sup>

113. *incision to heal* (1989). Approximately 150 colour photographs with steel angle-iron, vinyl lettering, blue-painted walls. Canada Council Art Bank, Ottawa



In Maestro's work, identity is realized at the point of its disappearance. Individual stories and political struggles are implicated through bodily gesture – implied in the utilitarian objects she adopts, and registered in the acts of manipulating materials. Healing and remembrance, as well as self-realization, are achieved through the repetition of actions and natural cycles. *a book thick of ocean* (1993) is a massive 550-page tome, each two-foot-wide page filled with the same photographic image of an ocean surface. The rhythm of the waves seems to extend into the grain of the sturdy oak table on which the book lies open. The pages of this book are meant to be turned, revealing the wave motion and gradually recording a community and a history of use through handling.

Maestro's work tends to be abstract but direct. She quietly elicits consideration of weighty political issues such as repression, resistance, exclusion, and cultural exchange by creating situations in which her audience can experience palpably the conditions of upheaval and uncertainty that attend these forces. In one unassuming installation, *incision to heal* (1989), some 150 colour photographs of water are propped on metal shelves dispersed across the walls. At the bottom of one wall a text, "Relatives identify their loved ones by feeling the remains of a skull," again refers to the people made



114. *Breath* (1990). Installation with bamboo, spruce, maple leaves, video and audio



to “disappear” by the Philippine military. As they discern slight differences between the photographs, viewers share in a sense of the enormity of the act of remembering in an overwhelming and inhospitable environment. Another, *Breath* (1990), evokes the ambivalence of dislocation and cultural interchange by tying together natural, social, and bodily cycles. A low, inviting platform made of indigenous Canadian wood has one section replaced by a bamboo grille through which is audible a lullaby sung in Tagalog, Maestro’s native tongue. The disparate sources of the materials subtly emphasize the distance between her particular places of belonging. Around the platform, heaps of rotting maple leaves seep onto the floor, sensuously recalling through natural cycles the condition of loss built into all experience. It is the simultaneous grasping (through labour and remembrance) and letting go (through cyclical processes of undoing and distancing) of the familiar that gives Maestro’s work its ultimate sense of spiritual reconciliation and healing. G. K.

#### Notes

1. Lani Maestro cited in Stephen Horne catalogue essay, *Lani Maestro: a wound in the land* (Ottawa: La Chambre Blanche, 1996), p. 20.
2. Rina Carvajal, “Opening to Distance: The Work of Lani Maestro,” *Lani Maestro* (New York: Art in General, 1996), p. 79.