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BROWARD COUNTY

'It's a living work': 'Surrounded Islands' endures at this Fort Lauderdale museum

By Amanda Rosa

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NSU Art Museum curator Bonnie Clearwater stands in front of a panoramic image from 1983 of one of the islands covered in pink by artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude. NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale will host an exhibition featuring newly acquired photos, models, drawings, letters, and documents related to 1983 conceptual art project, "Surrounded Islands," which involved surrounding eleven man-made islands in Biscayne Bay with pink fabric. Carl Juste cjuste@miamiherald.com

Years of planning, designing, pleading, fundraising and negotiating came down to three crucial days. The artists only had three days to install a monumental artwork that would paint Miami in a new, pink light. On the first day, winds were high and the bright pink fabric ballooned as workers tried to unfurl it in Biscayne Bay. Everything had to go perfectly the next two days, all while TV news camera crews on boats and naysayers on land watched on. On May 7, 1983, artist duo Christo and Jeanne-Claude and their team got it done: "Surrounded Islands," 11 small islands perfectly outlined in hot pink.

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At the NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale, a small gallery dedicated to broadcast news coverage of the artwork installation plays on vintage televisions. Museum director Bonnie Clearwater laughed at an interview one boy gave to WTVJ: "It seems like a waste of money. It's only up for two weeks." Read more: These Miami islands turned pink, and the city reacted in all sorts of ways This weekend, NSU Art Museum opens its highly anticipated Christo and Jeanne-Claude "Surrounded Islands" documentation exhibition months after the Christo and Jeanne-Claude Foundation announced it gifted the museum an extensive archive of documents, photographs, preparatory drawings and other materials that trace the project's history and creation. That means NSU Art Museum is the permanent home of this iconic artwork or, more broadly, its legacy.



Displayed are the renderings, plans, and other documents pertaining to the execution of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's 1983 conceptual art project, "Surrounded Islands," that is now part of the NSU Art Museum's collection in Fort Lauderdale, Florida on Tuesday, February 19, 2025. Carl Juste cjuste@miamiherald.com Jeanne-Claude, who died in 2009, and her husband Christo, who died in 2020, were iconoclastic artists known for creating large-scale, ephemeral public artworks around the world,

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like wrapping Paris' Arc de Triomphe and Berlin's Reichstag building in fabric, installing saffron-colored gates in New York City's Central Park — and unfurling reams of pink fabric around man-made islands in Miami.

The NSU Art Museum exhibition kicks off Sunday with a discussion on the artwork with Clearwater and Christo Foundation Board member Jonathan Fineberg. The show is likely to remain open as is for about a year. In the future, some iteration of the exhibition will always be on display, a spokesperson said. "The museum's dedication to exploring topics that deeply connect with the South Florida community and its commitment to fostering meaningful discussions through scholarly research align with the ethos of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's art," Karin J. Barkhorn, President of Christo and Jeanne-Claude Foundation, said in a statement. "We are particularly excited that the museum will permanently display key sections of this historic exhibition, ensuring that the legacy of Surrounded Islands continues to inspire awe for generations to come." Decades after its installation, longtime South Floridians remember "Surrounded Islands" fondly. It was a two-week spectacle that got Miamians to see their own city differently and, for once, brought positive international attention to a city dealing with a rough reputation.



A scale model of one of the covered islands from 1983 is juxtaposed next to a large photograph of the actual conceptual art installation, "Surrounded Islands," which involved surrounding eleven man-made

islands in Biscayne Bay with pink fabric. Carl Juste cjuste@miamiherald.com “The project wasn’t just this,” Clearwater said pointing to a diorama model of “Surrounded Islands” displayed on tables. “It was everything that went into making that project possible, including all the memories.”

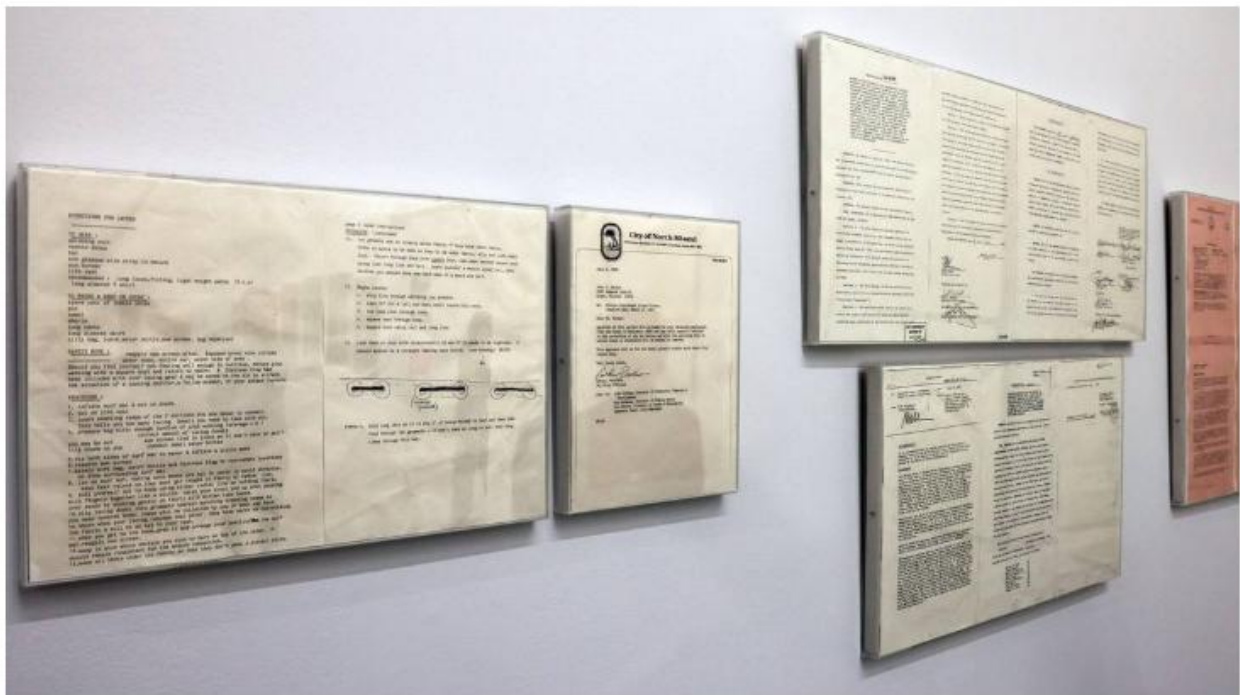
“Our feeling is that it’s not the past, because it’s a living work,” she added. “It’s a work of your memories, the new memories that the kids are going to have when they’re coming here.” The art of organization Along the curved wall of the museum’s second floor, right where visitors finish climbing the main staircase, the show immediately starts with floor-to-ceiling projections of video footage of “Surrounded Islands” from all angles: from the air, from a boat and even from below. “[The video] is on the island, and you dive under, you’re under the pink, and at one point, the entire screen turns pink,” Clearwater said. “You’re completely immersed in it. We wanted to create a big visual impact.” Another projection screen shows behind-the-scenes footage of crew members pulling bands underwater to connect to anchors and painstakingly unfurling and connecting the fabric. Another massive wall is entirely covered in a mural-sized photograph of “Surrounded Islands” with the Miami skyline in the background. Nearby, reams of pink fabric, the exact kind used for the artwork, pools in a section on the floor.



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NSU Art Museum curator Bonnie Clearwater tours the exhibition featuring newly acquired photos, models, drawings, letters, and documents related to Christo and Jeanne-Claude's 1983 conceptual art project, "Surrounded Islands." Carl Juste cjuste@miamiherald.com "We could wrap another island ourselves," Clearwater joked.

The story of the artwork played out through tons and tons of paperwork. Clearwater stopped to read the original piece of paper that started it all. Jan van der Marck, the founding director of the Center for Fine Arts, which eventually become the Perez Art Museum Miami, wrote a letter to Christo dated Jan. 27, 1981. Van der Marck was working on an ambitious project for the following year called the New World Festival. "What are the chances of your giving us an approximation of what you will do and a formal acceptance by the time you come again, one month from today?" Van der Marck wrote. "With greetings to Jeanne-Claude."



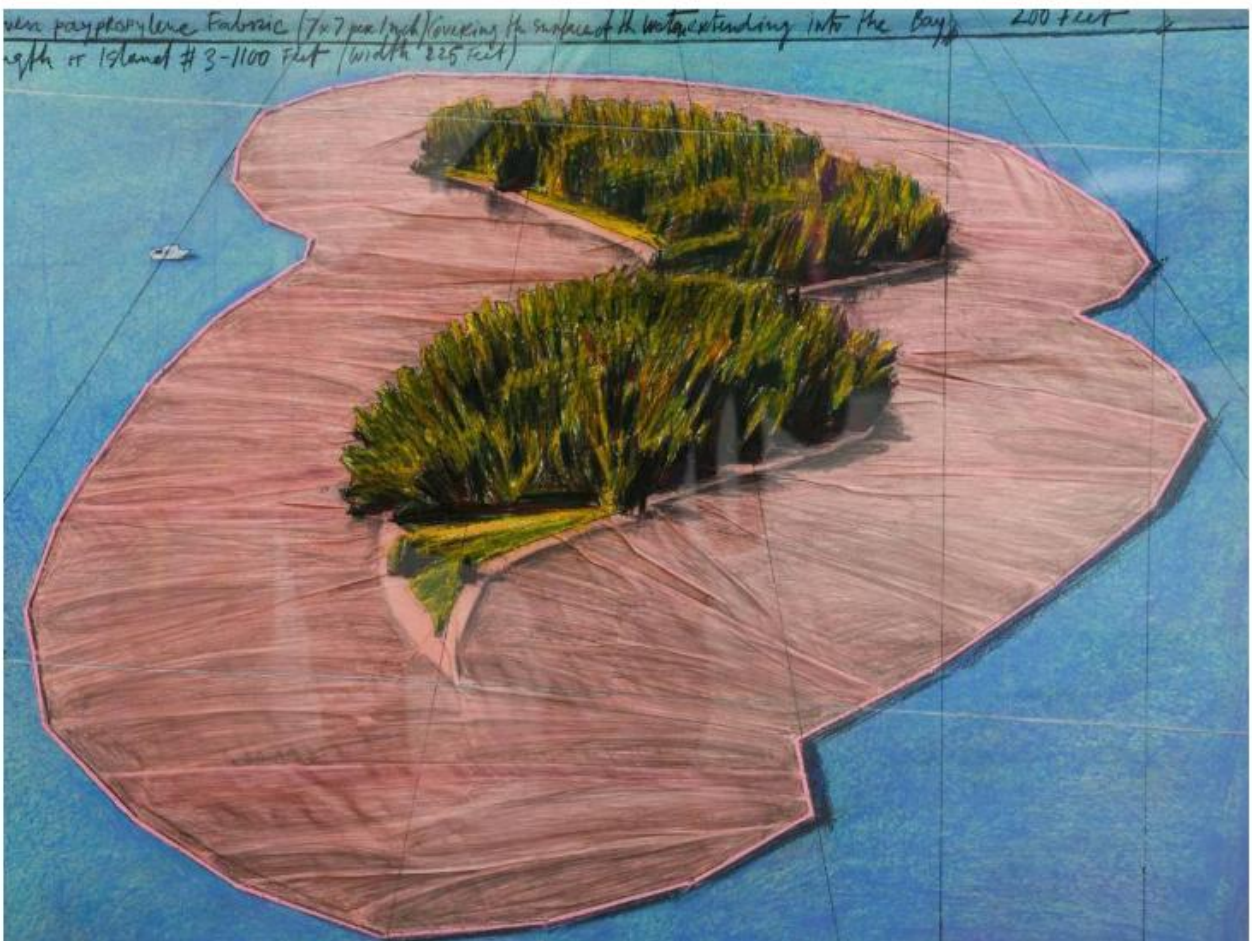
Letters and other documents from the "Surrounded Islands" conceptual art installation are on display for the upcoming exhibition at NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale. Carl Juste cjuste@miamiherald.com "Surrounded Islands" would have been Christo and Jeanne-Claude's contribution to the festival, but they missed it by a year. Their lateness was understandable considering the amount of lawsuits, permits and push back the duo had to deal with to make their vision a reality.

Much of the exhibition displays how much time, effort and careful engineering went into the artwork. Type A people would appreciate the art of organization. Walls display Christo's correspondence with Miami officials, hand drawn images of what "Surrounded Islands" would look like, pink fabric samples and detailed schematics that laid out exactly how and where the fabric would be anchored and unfurled. "I just think it's all so elegant to see," Clearwater said. Those exact measurements proved to be incredible handy. Workers placed land anchors on each island about a month before the final install.

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Worried that someone may sabotage the anchors, Clearwater said, the team crushed some beer cans and left them there as camouflage. But since boaters often littered the spoil islands with beer cans anyway, the workers struggled to find the anchors when they came back. They had to follow the engineering map to find them. Christo was incredibly specific, even on details most people wouldn't notice. Clearwater pointed to how he drew the shadows that would appear underneath the pink fabric and onto the water. He even designed the "booms," the long items that helped keep the fabric afloat once unfurled, to be octagonal in order for their shadow to be just right. "He wanted it to almost look as if it was made with pencil and that it would clearly define the contour [of the island] so that there was no mistaking that this was man made. This was deliberate," Clearwater said. "And thinking about how flat the landscape is in Miami and the water being so flat, the shadow would give it just the slightest bit of elevation." Unsurprisingly, the color pink is everywhere. The original press release about the artwork was printed on pink paper. The marker Christo used to circle the islands on black-and-white images was pink. Even an old map of the Biscayne Bay area just so happened to be pink. But why pink?

"Because it was an unnatural color. It was not a color that was there in the bay. It was very clearly a man made intervention. And it also popped, it was very visible. You couldn't miss it," Clearwater said. "And besides, I can't tell you how many artists I've worked with who come to Miami and say, 'I'm gonna use pink.'"



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Pictured is Christo's drawing of one of the "Surrounded Islands." Artworks, photographs, documents and other archived materials related to the 1983 project are on display at NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale. Carl Juste cjuste@miamiherald.com 'Dreamed bigger than big' A news report from the final day of the installation plays in one of the galleries. "This work will dismantled in two weeks, but the image and the impact of the surrounding islands will last for years to come," the reporter said. "Reporting live from Pelican Harbor. Michael Putney, Channel 4 News.

Putney was right. At the exhibition, visitors can share their stories about the artwork by recording themselves at a kiosk in the gallery space. "Everyone has a Christo story," Clearwater said. "It'll be part of our oral history of the project."



NSU Art Museum collection registrar Caroline McNabb sits at her desk next to black-and-white photographs documenting the process of creating "Surrounded Islands," including the production of the pink fabric and the manpower needed to install it on the water. Carl Juste cjuste@miamiherald.com Miami, its people, its politics and its culture has changed drastically in the decades since "Surrounded Islands." But nostalgia for the artwork endures. Visitors flocked to PAMM years ago when it showed a documentation exhibition on the artwork in 2018. The Fort Lauderdale iteration is likely to be just as popular.

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Christo and Jeanne-Claude were inspired by how the waterway connected Miami and its diverse neighborhoods. Anyone who lived, worked or traveled along Biscayne Bay could enjoy “Surrounded Islands.” “Someone dreamed bigger than big, and they made that dream a reality. It brought everybody together,” Clearwater said. “That’s part of our story. Everybody talked about it, everybody knew about it, everybody had an opinion on it, and it brought in so many people. How rarely these days do we have a shared experience that we could all be talking about at the same time?”



Materials used to create Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s 1983 public artwork “Surrounded Islands” are on display at NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale along with hand drawn plans for what the work would look like. Carl Juste cjuste@miamiherald.com Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s determination to get their big, crazy artworks done, especially “Surrounded Islands,” is inspirational, too, Clearwater said. “It was a masterclass of how to get to yes,” she said.

So, can something like this ever happen in Miami again? “Yeah. Why not?” Clearwater said. “It just takes one crazy person, one creative visionary.

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Christo and Jeanne-Claude working on the "Surrounded Islands" project, Florida, 1983. Photo: Wolfgang Volz
If you go: What: Christo and Jeanne-Claude "Surrounded Islands" Documentation Exhibition
When: Opens Feb. 23
Where: NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale, One East Las Olas Boulevard
Info: <https://nsuartmuseum.org/>