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VISUAL ARTS

## An art installation of ‘pink islands’ changed Miami forever. Now this museum holds its legacy

BY AMANDA ROSA

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It was the artwork that changed Miami forever, and it only lasted two weeks.

Eleven lush green islands wrapped in floating, Barbie-pink fabric dotted Biscayne Bay in 1983. An ambitious public art project years in the making captured the imagination of South Florida and the rest of the world. And suddenly, a troubled city known as “Paradise Lost” was painted in a beautiful, new light.

“It was literally a watershed moment,” said Bonnie Clearwater, the director and chief curator at NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale. Now, the late artist duo Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s iconic artwork “Surrounded Islands” has found a permanent home in South Florida.



# Miami Herald

Christo and Jeanne-Claude wrapped 11 islands with 6.5 million feet of pink fabric for 'Surrounding Islands' installation.

NSU Art Museum announced Wednesday the Christo and Jeanne-Claude Foundation has gifted the museum "Surrounded Islands," or more specifically, a treasure trove of archival documents and materials that trace the project's history and creation. The acquisition includes over 43 preparatory drawings and collages made by Christo, photographs, photo murals, environmental studies, permits, correspondence with government officials, scale models and sections of the original pink polypropylene fabric.



Christo and Jeanne-Claude working on the Surrounded Islands project, Florida, 1983.

# Miami Herald

The museum will showcase the “Surrounded Islands” documentation exhibition in February.

“The Christo and Jeanne-Claude Foundation is delighted to designate the NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale, part of Nova Southeastern University, as the permanent home for the Surrounded Islands documentation exhibition,” said Karin J. Barkhorn, the foundation president. “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.”



To create 1983’s “Surrounded Islands,” artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude wrapped 11 Biscayne Bay islands in 6.5 million square feet of fabric secured by Styrofoam, steel cables and an anchoring system.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude, two iconoclastic artists known just by their first names, were a married couple who cared very little about the commercial art market, Clearwater said.

On the exact same day, June 13, 1935, Christo was born Christo Vladimirov Javacheff in Gabrovo, Bulgaria, and Jeanne-Claude was born Jeanne-Claude Marie Denat in Casablanca, Morocco. They were married in 1962 and were together until Jeanne-Claude’s death in 2009. [Christo died in 2020](#).

Christo and Jeanne-Claude were best known for creating large-scale, ephemeral public artworks that turned public spaces into something worth noticing. They [wrapped Paris’ Arc de Triomphe](#) in fabric, [wrapped Berlin’s Reichstag](#) building in fabric, installed [floating piers](#) in Italy’s Lake Iseo and placed [saffron-colored gates](#) in New York’s Central Park.



# Miami Herald



Photo of 'Surrounded Islands' that shows the floating pink fabric surrounding little manmade islands in Biscayne Bay.

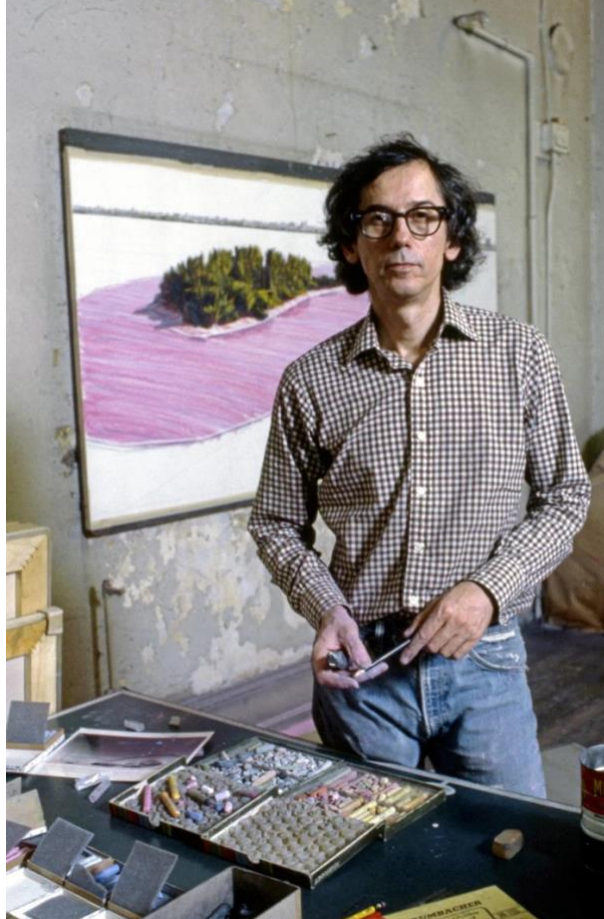
"The community would be activated for a major project that would really make people aware of their own surroundings," Clearwater said. "Things that they pass all the time, whether it's a building or, in this case, the waterscape of Key Biscayne."

Jan van der Marck, the founding director of the Center for Fine Arts (which would later become Miami Art Museum and ultimately Perez Art Museum) [invited the couple to consider working in Miami](#). Christo and Jeanne-Claude were enchanted by the beauty of Biscayne Bay and its manmade spoil islands, even though they were littered with trash.

It took three years of coordinating with government agencies, researching marine biology, battling lawsuits and securing permits for the duo to realize their artistic vision in South Florida. The [process was labor intensive](#) and daunting. The couple raised the funds on their own to pay for it themselves. And they took painstaking efforts to keep the project as environmentally conscious as possible, going as far as to take inventory of all the birds living on the islands, Clearwater said.

# Miami Herald

“‘Surrounded Islands’ is totally useless, totally irrational: It’s about physical pleasure and also the angst I feel as an artist, the fight to make something that pleases me first,” Christo told the Herald in 2018, when [PAMM showed an exhibition of the “Surrounded Islands” documentation and materials.](#)



Christo in the 1980s.

“In my career, I’ve wrapped the Pont Neuf and the Reichstag, and ran a 24-mile-long fabric fence in California. Every project is a struggle, but I need contact with other people and physicality in my life,” Christo said. “When I make art, I want to feel pleasure, but I also want to feel real things, like real fear and not just the illusion of fear.”

But what was the point in creating an artwork that would be taken down in a matter of days?

“As Christo and Jeanne-Claude would say, once it is experienced, it lasts forever,” Clearwater said. “Because you cannot unexperience it.”

Christo, Jeanne-Claude and a 430-person crew finally unfurled millions of square feet around the islands. The public criticism quickly turned into fanfare. Clearwater recalled hearing residents’ stories of looking at the islands from their downtown offices or riding on boats as children to get a closer look.

# Miami Herald

People loved it. The media devoured it. Hometown pride was at an all-time high. The artwork catapulted both the artists' careers and Miami's reputation on an international level. Christo and Jeanne-Claude became super stars, and Miami was thrust into the art world's radar at a time of social and economic turmoil, Clearwater said.



International artist Christo at a 2018 PAMM exhibit of archival materials used to create 'Surrounding Islands.'

The artists paid the workers who helped install the project, but many kept their checks as mementos instead of cashing them, Clearwater said. The checks had Christo's signature on it.

"People want to be part of something bigger than themselves," she said.

Clearwater said she hopes the "Surrounded Islands" acquisition and exhibition will inspire residents and local artists to do big, outlandish, impractical yet brilliant things. Impactful artworks like "Surrounded Islands" are possible because Christo and Jeanne-Claude paved the way, she said.

"What we hope through our exhibition is that it triggers the public and artists' imaginations," she said. "We want to use this opportunity to really show how art can bring communities together and create a sense of place."