NSU Art Museum Director Bonnie Clearwater On the Gift of 'Surrounded Islands'

The institution recently acquired a major gift of documentation and ephemera related to the massive 1983 artwork by Christo and Jeanne-Claude.

By Dan Duray • 10/10/24 10:02am

Nova Southeastern University (NSU) Art Museum director and curator Bonnie Clearwater. Courtesy of the NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale

Florida is in the throes of one of its more turbulent hurricanes, but as we keep them in our thoughts, let's put a silver lining to those clouds: Nova Southeastern University (NSU) Art Museum in Fort

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Lauderdale recently became home to [Christo](#) and [Jeanne-Claude](#)'s *Surrounded Islands*, the major work staged in 1983, following a gift from the artists' foundation. [*Surrounded Islands*](#) saw the pair wrap an archipelago in Miami with reams of pink fabric, some of which was donated to the museum along with over forty-three preparatory drawings and collages created by Christo, as well as photographs and photo murals, engineering surveys, environmental studies, permits, correspondence, scale models and other related ephemera. We recently caught up with the museum's chief curator and director, [Bonnie Clearwater](#), to learn more about this important gift.

Surrounded Islands is one of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's most important and best-known works. Why do you think it enjoys such a reputation?

It was audacious! It was crazy! It was controversial! It was ambitious! It was stunning! It captured the imagination of South Florida's diverse population as an epic event that they could participate in and be part of history. It brought attention to the beauty and fragility of South Florida. And it was ephemeral! Not only was this public artwork the opening salvo that put Miami on "The Map" but it also elevated Christo and Jeanne-Claude's worldwide renown. Although the installation only existed for less than two weeks, it is an indelible image. Over 40 years after *Surrounded Islands* vanished, witnesses and participants excitedly report their experience as vividly as if it were yesterday. Although I did not see *Surrounded Islands* in 1983, I look wistfully at these islands on my drive over the causeway to work and imagine them dressed in their pink glory.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Surrounded Islands, Biscayne Bay, Greater Miami, Florida,1980-83; Gift of the Christo and Jeanne-Claude Foundation. Photo: Wolfgang Volz Copyright: 2024 Christo and Jeanne-Claude Foundation / Collection NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale

How did the NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale come to acquire this work?

The artists entrusted The Christo and Jeanne-Claude Foundation to further their legacy. Christo and Jeanne-Claude curated extensive documentation exhibitions for their major projects that captured the entire experience from conception through its afterlife. The foundation's board reached out to NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale two years ago regarding placing the "Surrounded Islands" documentation exhibition with us. It was important that this documentation exhibition remain in South Florida as a permanent part of its history. NSU Art Museum, located in bustling downtown Fort Lauderdale in an 83,000-square-foot modernist Museum building designed by Edward Larrabee Barnes, is known for its dedication to exploring topics that deeply connect with the South Florida community and commitment to fostering meaningful discussions through scholarly research that aligns with the ethos of Christo and Jeanne-Claude. Christo and Jeanne-Claude bridge two of our major collections: the largest U.S. museum collection of work by the experimental postwar European artists who formed the CoBrA art movement and were their forerunners in community and socially engaged projects; and our contemporary art collection.

This donation includes forty-three pieces of ephemera to accompany the work—preparatory drawings and collages, photographs, engineering surveys, environmental studies, permits, correspondence, etc. Can you speak to the importance of such materials to Christo and Jeanne-Claude's practice?

The process and effort to realize the projects, which could take years and even decades, were an essential part of the work. The couple persevered in the face of criticism and controversy, eventually turning "no" into an enthusiastic "yes." Trials in various courts became essential platforms for the artists to argue the case for their art and fire the public's imagination. As their projects often took place in and focused on nature, they went to great lengths to obtain in-depth environmental impact reports so as to do no harm (the early 1980s marine biology report on Biscayne Bay and the bird inventory are a trove of valuable baseline data for current researchers). The pink fabric used in 1983 to encircle the islands was recycled, but the copious amounts of remaining fabric are part of the documentation exhibition. The original artworks created by Christo not only reveal his creative process but are representative of the original artworks he and Jeanne-Claude sold to fully self-fund *Surrounded Islands*.

Why was *Surrounded Islands* so crucial to the development of a culture of art in Miami?

Surrounded Islands took place at a watershed moment for South Florida. Its global reputation was at a low point but its communities and municipalities had aspirations of entering the world stage. Home to many prominent collectors, including Martin Z. Margulies and Irma and Norman Braman, as well as Miami-Dade Commissioner Ruth Shack, art became the driving force to introduce South Florida to the world stage. Miami-Dade actually was a leader in public art programs passing an ordinance in 1973 as one of the first in the nation to allocate 1.5 percent of the cost of new county buildings for the purchase or commission of artworks. Architect Richard Levine had brought Christo and Jeanne-Claude to Miami in the late 1970s to exhibit in his short-lived contemporary art museum, the American Foundation for the Arts, and plans were afoot to build our museum in Fort Lauderdale with renowned architect Edward Larrabee Barnes (opened in 1986) and the Center of Fine Art in Miami which eventually became the Perez Art Museum (opened in 1986). The excitement *Surrounded Islands* generated in the broad South Florida community and the world fueled the region's ambitions to enter the world stage. It made it possible to attract other major artists for public projects, including Ed Ruscha (fresh from his retrospective) to create a major building-wide mural project for the new Miami-Dade Library (designed by Phillip Johnson) the year following *Surrounded Islands*, and in 1986 the Lannan Foundation donated the entire outdoor art collection that formerly graced collector J. Patrick Lannan's Palm Beach estate to Miami Dade Art in Public Places Trust (I was the Lannan Foundation's director at the time).

In short, *Surrounded Islands* set the pace for future public art projects in South Florida as a way to establish a sense of place, unite a diverse community and shower international attention on South Florida. It ultimately contributed to the "Miami Model" of real estate development pioneered by Martin Z. Margulies, Craig Robins and the "Wynwood Walls" dreamed up by developer Tony Goldman in 2009,

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which is now replicated around the world, including Fort Lauderdale and our museum where the multicolored abstract mural *Acid Free* by Jen Stark (former Miami artist, now based in L.A.) was commissioned as an iconic landmark in 2011.

What, in your mind, are the other great works of art that celebrate Florida?

As noted above, public art is now in South Florida's DNA. Among the iconic public works are Ed Ruscha's murals for Miami-Dade Public Library, Miami artist Purvis Young's *Every Day Life* mural for the Culmer Overtown Library (1984), *A Walk on the Beach* (1995) comprised of nine thousand cast-bronze images of sea-life inset into the terrazzo floors by Michele Oka Doner in the North Terminal D of Miami International Airport, Rockne Krebs' *The Miami Line* (1984) a multicolored light installation that stretched 1,540 feet across the Metrorail bridge in downtown Miami, and of course, the Wynwood Walls by various muralists, launched in 2009 by developer Tony Goldman.

Christo shouting directions during the installation of Surrounded Islands. Bettmann Archive

Christo and Jeanne-Claude are probably best known for wrapping structures of great societal importance, like the Pont Neuf in Paris and the Reichstag in Berlin, but *Surrounded Islands* is one of the examples of their working with nature. How would you contrast this with their work in the world built by humans?

Guess what! The eleven islands Christo and Jeanne-Claude surrounded were man-made, as was much of South Florida's land and waterways. Therefore they have more in common than at first glance, as all three bring awareness to how people live, navigate, and connect with their environment and community. What distinguishes them is that while the Pont Neuf and the Reichstag were steeped in a history that was embedded in the meaning of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's wrapping of these structures, *Surrounded Islands* was making history. These and all of the artists' projects brought fresh attention to buildings, landscapes and waterscapes so that we would never see them in the same way as before. *Surrounded Islands* departs from the other two projects in its painterliness and association with Monet's paintings of waterlilies. It's also a work that was meant to be experienced from a variety of perspectives: from boats on Biscayne Bay, office towers and apartment buildings encroaching the shore, multiple causeways, planes and helicopters. It also photographed exceptionally well and could be captured fully in single iconic shots like glorious Color Field paintings.

Jean-Claude passed away in 2009 and Christo in 2020. In your mind, what has been their lasting legacy on the art world?

Christo and Jeanne-Claude made art "general." Their work could be anywhere and everywhere, and everyone could join in the experience.