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## Two artists once dressed Miami islands in pink skirts. Now 'Surrounded Islands' to become exhibit at NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale.



NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale: Gift of the Christo and Jeanne-Claude Foundation / Courtesy  
Christo and Jeanne-Claude's "Surrounded Islands" project wrapped 11 Biscayne Bay islands with pink fabric for two weeks in May 1983. The project will be revisited in an upcoming NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale exhibit in February 2025. (NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale: Gift of the Christo and Jeanne-Claude Foundation/Courtesy)



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The epic engineering feat on Biscayne Bay quite possibly marked the only time Miami drivers were happy to be stuck in traffic.

On May 7, 1983, cars congested on the causeways and some passengers even hopped out to witness the bizarre spectacle in the bay: 11 tiny, man-made islands wearing brand-new skirts of hot-pink polypropylene fabric. The spoils islands looked like sunny-side up eggs shimmering in the sea.

And then, two weeks after it arrived, Christo and Jeanne-Claude's ambitious public project "Surrounded Islands" disappeared — but not before raising South Florida's international art profile decades before Art Basel.



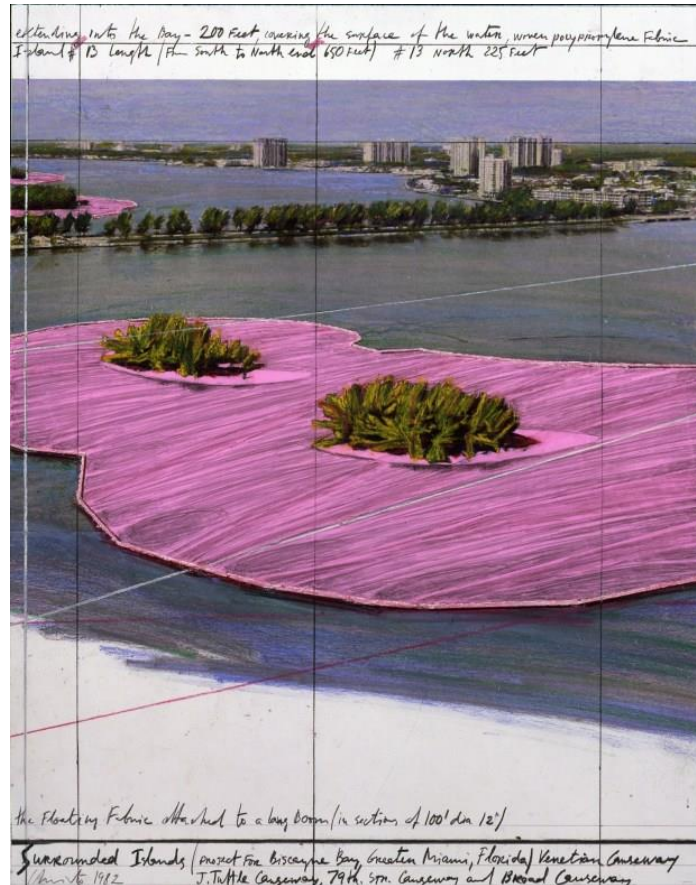
Wolfgang Volz / NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale: Gift of the Christo and Jeanne-Claude Foundation/Courtesy/

Married artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude in Miami's Biscayne Bay while working on their "Surrounded Islands" project. (Wolfgang Volz/NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale: Gift of the Christo and Jeanne-Claude Foundation/Courtesy)

Now, 41 years later, the landmark artwork has found a permanent home at NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale. Last week, the Christo and Jeanne-Claude Foundation gifted the museum "Surrounded Islands" — which director Bonnie Clearwater calls a "treasure trove." The acquisition features 43 drawings and collages, leftover fabric, videos, engineering surveys, environmental impact studies, photographs and city permits, all of which capture the bizarre installation from idea to execution, and the government hurdles in between.

"A gift of this caliber brings Fort Lauderdale's cultural landscape to the next level," Fort Lauderdale mayor Dean Trantalis says.

Clearwater will present a "Surrounded Islands" documentary exhibition on the second floor of the NSU Art Museum starting Feb. 22, 2025. The show, curated by Christo himself before his death in 2020, is modified from the version that [Pérez Art Museum Miami](#) mounted in 2018.



NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale: Gift of the Christo and Jeanne-Claude Foundation / Courtesy

To create 1983's "Surrounded Islands," artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude made extensive drawings before wrapping 11 Biscayne Bay islands in 6.5 million square feet of polypropylene fabric. (NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale: Gift of the Christo and Jeanne-Claude Foundation/Courtesy)

"I'm keeping my ideas under wraps," Clearwater says. "The idea is that you'll come up our museum's grand staircase and be hit with a major jolt."

Of course, no jolt was bigger than the transcendent experience of seeing "Surrounded Islands" up close in 1983. The product of three years of work and 6.5 million square feet of pink woven fabric, the project was as expensive as it was all-consuming. By the end, Christo and his artistic partner and wife, Jeanne-Claude, had spent \$3.1 million and hired more than 400 workers — including newly arrived Cuban and Haitian immigrants and local artists — to cut, stitch, sew and transport the floating pink fabric across the bay. They also removed 40 tons of trash littering the uninhabited islands.





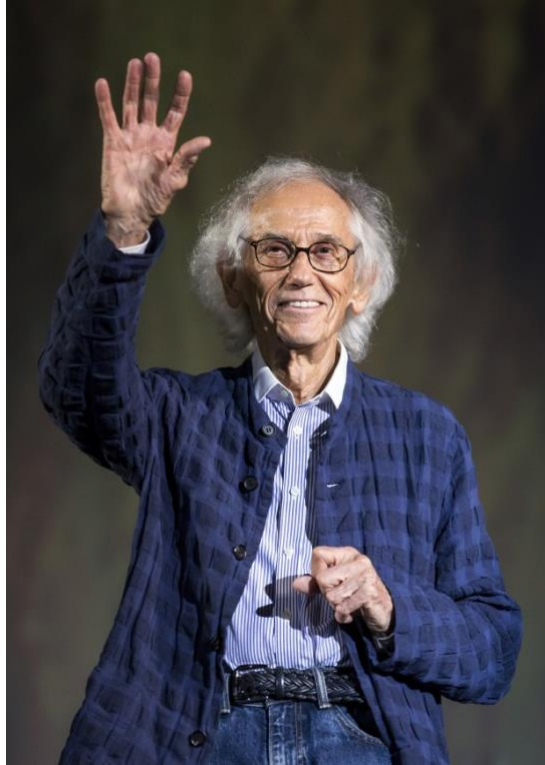
Wolfgang Volz and Perez Art Museum Miami / Courtesy

Artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude spent \$3.1 million dressing up 11 tiny manmade islands in Biscayne Bay. (Wolfgang Volz and Pérez Art Museum Miami/Courtesy)

"It's become part of local mythology now," Clearwater says. "The scale of this project was the opening salvo that made the world take notice of Miami."

Christo and Jeanne-Claude called "Surrounded Islands" an environmental project — and it wasn't their first. By the time they started work on this project in 1980, their best-known feats included stretching a white nylon "fence" along 24 miles of California farmland in 1976 and wrapping 1.5 miles of rocky coast near Sydney, Australia, with synthetic fabric in 1969. After "Surrounded Islands," the artist duo famously wrapped fabric around Paris' Pont Neuf bridge and Berlin's Reichstag building. (Jeanne-Claude died in 2009.)

Yet nothing compared with the government red tape that came with dressing 11 Biscayne Bay islands in hot pink. Part of the collection is a 43-page environmental impact study the artist couple paid for by selling early concept drawings of "Surrounded Islands." One study even counted the number of birds on the islands.



Alexandra Wey / AP

Artist Christo brought a documentary exhibit on the creation of “Surrounded Islands” to the Pérez Art Museum Miami in 2018. (Alexandra Wey/AP)

“It was very difficult to convince authorities to do this exhibition,” Christo told the [South Florida Sun Sentinel in 2018](#). “The fear of failure was always there. ‘Surrounded Islands’ only took three years, but it took many steps the public doesn’t realize that we took.”

Art historian Jonathan Fineberg, author of “Christo and Jeanne-Claude: On the Way to The Gates, Central Park, New York City,” says “Surrounded Islands” set the bar for big, bold, impractical yet ambitious artworks in South Florida.

“It also completely transformed Miami Beach into the glittering art scene that it is today,” Fineberg says. “[It’s] one of the most visually stunning projects that Christo and Jeanne-Claude ever did.”

*The “Surrounded Islands” documentary exhibition is scheduled to debut on Feb. 22, 2025, at NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale, 1 E. Las Olas Blvd. Visit [NSUArtMuseum.org](https://www.nsuartmuseum.org) or call 954-525-5500.*