

Montage

Art, books, diverse creations



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Net Effects

Janet Echelman’s urban sculptures take to the skies.

by OLIVIA SCHWOB

THE WORKS of Janet Echelman ’87 tend to take on lives of their own. Installed in public spaces from Amsterdam to Sydney, her sculptures are essentially massive fishing nets that float high in the air, somewhere between taking off and coming in to land. Tucking and weaving into themselves, they reveal organic forms; projected colored light makes them appear internally luminescent. They have a biological essence, but seem more expansive than any organism. Gazing up through the bright, rippling screen of one of Echelman’s installations, viewers

might imagine themselves at the center of a distant galaxy.

Echelman herself is remarkably grounded: she speaks in full sentences; her desk is very neat. To make nebulae out of string is, she says, “damn hard.” That’s why nobody had tried it before—the technology has evolved as Echelman has required it to. The completed pieces that reach her in wooden shipping crates are the result of a finessed industrial-design process. In her studio in Brookline, Massachusetts, four young designers tap away at customized state-of-the-art software programs, ma-

Skies Painted With Unnumbered Sparks (2014), in Vancouver, allowed viewers to choreograph its lighting using their mobile devices.

neuvering computer-generated models in digitally rendered space. They are part of an international

team that includes dozens of others: structural engineers, lacework artisans, fabricators at a net factory in Washington state who produce the sculptures from digital plans. Each work has two major components: the top, a web made of triple-braided ultra-high-molecular-weight polyethylene (a lightweight fiber 15 times stronger than steel), gives shape and support to the bottom, hanging net panels spun from polytetrafluorethylene (ensuring color quality and ultraviolet resistance). The two halves are then hand-spliced for

strength; the whole is carefully calibrated for extreme wind loads and weather conditions. If the Department of Defense starts producing fishing nets or abstract art, it will look to Studio Echelman for pointers.

Paradoxically, perhaps, Echelman's route has been charted by chance and adaptation. Suffering an eye condition that made reading difficult, she took up painting at Harvard as a break from paper-heavy government classes. She became enamored of a story about Henri Matisse, who, unable to hold a brush in his old age, came up with a cut-paper technique that produced some of his most radical and lasting work. The origin myth of Echelman's current method echoes that story—a painter deprived of paints. While she was stationed in the Indian village of Mahabalipuram on a Fulbright fellowship, a shipment of her art supplies was lost en route from Cambridge. Pressured by the ticking clock to finish pieces for an exhibition, she looked to the village's fishing industry for inspiration, and began to fashion volumetric, contemporary forms with traditional net-making techniques.

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Day and night renderings of the sculpture that will hang over Boston's Greenway from May to October 2015. Its colored banding evokes the lanes of traffic that ran through the neighborhood before the Big Dig.



Echelman and another 2014 work, *Allegory*, that hangs in the University of Oregon's basketball arena. Its five distinct forms are meant to suggest the teamwork between players on the court.



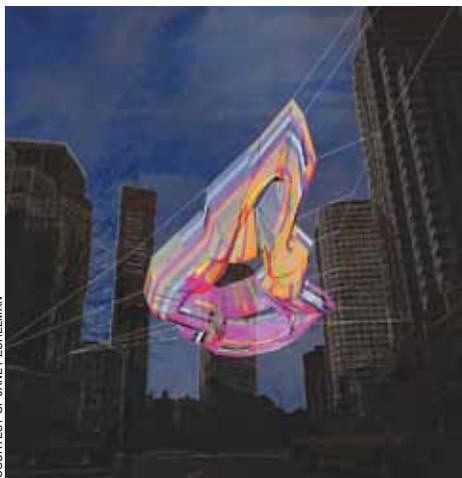
Echelman acknowledges this limitation of her process: "I'm no longer the hands; I can't be," she says. (A new commission in Boston will involve nearly half a million knots.) But to her, this development fits within a broader history of public structures: "I think of cathedrals," she explains: "the multiple generations of workers collaborating to create something bigger than themselves."

Dynamism is found elsewhere: once installed in its site, and juxtaposed with unyielding urban architecture, her work comes to life. Echelman wants to create improbably soft forms that challenge the monoliths surrounding them. In scale, her work reflects the influence of artists she characterizes as "the big boys from the '60s": a "punch you in the face" school of public intervention that includes Richard Serra, whose minimalist sheet-metal monuments seem more at home on a city block than her own nets do. Echelman's tone is closer to that of Eva Hesse, whose intimate

rope and textile sculptures evoked the human body. Indeed, Echelman's handmade mock-ups look like the work of a more joyful Hesse: magnified, manufactured, and buffeted by wind, they become gestural. Echelman's nets draw energy from the tension between these two inspirations: structure and body. "Point and counterpoint," she explains. "Without the city, it becomes less interesting to me."

Their flexibility and physicality allow the nets to respond to forces of wind and other weather—sometimes even changing color—but just as important, their design reflects social context. The commission due to hang above Boston's Rose Kennedy Greenway for six months, starting in May, draws on the site's specific history: the Greenway fills part of the crater left by the Big Dig, which sought to reverse the damage of earlier urban renewal but disrupted city life for a decade. Critics remain skeptical about the Greenway's ability to reactivate the area as a human environment, but Echelman is giving it her best shot. She hopes, through the net's design, both to acknowledge that history and to "knit the city back together," providing a landmark around which the healing process can organize itself.

Ultimately, Echelman is driven by what she calls a work's "social potential." She is always looking out for new ways to make her installations interactive: Vancouver's *Skies Painted With Unnumbered Sparks* (2014) incorporated software that gave viewers control over the light projections via their mobile devices; another recent collaboration used dancers' bodies to control the nets' movements, opening up future kin-



COURTESY OF JANET ECHELMAN

UPPER LEFT: TODD ERIKSON; UPPER RIGHT: EMA PETER BOTH COURTESY OF JANET ECHELMAN

esthetic possibilities. Only when viewers make a work their own does she consider it a success. One early installation, a permanent red and white vortex billowing over a traffic circle in Porto, Portugal, is

called—depending on whom you ask—the “Anemone”, the “Fishermen’s Monument”, or the “Patron Saint” of Porto. Echelman’s favorite photograph of the installation features men in dark business suits sprawling

on the grass underneath: pedestrians darted across three lanes of traffic just to lie under it and look up at the sky. “The work’s not alive in the white box of a gallery,” she says. “The public completes it.”



“Wrestling at Every Moment”

A young composer, finding his next notes

by SOPHIA NGUYEN

MATTHEW AUCOIN ’12 is unsparing toward his past work, especially the operas. Half-kidding, he claims, “I’d love to just burn all of it.” He has youthful assurance that he’ll write more and better pieces, but also more fuel for the flames than most people his age: he’s composed music since childhood, and his pieces have been performed in venues from Zurich to Salem, Massachusetts; he’s also conducted orchestras across America and in Europe.

Already he knows his creative rhythms: “I compose in the morning, and I go until I’m dry.” He tries to write every day, and always at the piano. “I find that if I’m engaging physically with this box, this hunk

of wood and metal, it pushes back at me. If I’m just sitting at my desk composing, I’m doing what I want rather than what the music wants,” Aucoin explains. “I don’t think I would be able to honestly discover a new space without engaging physically.”

Within a single conversation, he will alternate between describing music as something to “wrestle” with, and as something elusive, even delicate, vulnerable to injury through carelessness. Casually defying the old truism “Writing about music is like dancing about architecture,” he would reject its premise that the world of literature and the world of sound are essentially separate. At Harvard, Aucoin concentrated in English and wrote a cre-

ative thesis in poetry, while maintaining an active presence on the extracurricular music scene. Afterward, he matriculated in Juilliard’s composition program, but was by his own estimate “a derelict grad student.” Opportunities beckoned beyond the classroom—assistant conducting at the Metropolitan Opera and the Rome Opera, an apprenticeship with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra—and so, feeling confined by conservatory culture after four years of the liberal arts, he says, “I ran away screaming.” (He still managed to complete a graduate diploma.)

Composing opera allows him to pursue both language and sound, but he takes them one at a time. Aucoin always starts with the libretto: “I want to approach it as a stranger, who slowly becomes intimate with how the language works.” He hopes to upend a few commonly held beliefs—that English is a bad language for opera; that lyrics should act as “the subservient wife” to music—and cites the example of W.H. Auden and Igor Stravinsky’s *The Rake’s Progress*. In it, he says, “There are two rhythms, and two kinds of music, wrestling at every moment. A lesser composer might have said, ‘Give me something sweet, and flowing, and easy,’ and that’s what a lesser poet would have done. And a lesser composer would have done what the words want.”

Aucoin has been drawn to American poets as operatic subjects: in *Hart Crane*, the protagonist duets with his lover on the Brooklyn Bridge; in the one-act *From Sandoz*, James Merrill and his partner listen to a ghostly voice through a Ouija board. The American Repertory Theater will premiere *Crossing*, about Walt Whitman, at Boston’s Shubert Theatre in May. During a Harvard lecture and recital to introduce the work, Aucoin spoke of how, in his senior year, “I was very much in love with someone. Worried that my feelings would be unrequited, I came to see music as unrequitable love, and to see that it gains power by its very unrequitability.” His opera imagines Whitman in the midst of a midlife crisis, writing mostly journal entries or letters on