

Janet Echelman: Integrating Form and Space

by Denise Carvalho

Whether embracing the outdoors or filling architectural spaces, Janet Echelman's monumental sculptures are as light and open as they are large. How can they be open and yet fill spaces? They interplay positive and negative space in their own structures as they balance opposites. They are not grounded, they float. But these sculptures are also spatial interventions, since they function as mediators between natural and architectural space. Echelman's objects are more than just beautiful; their visual language implies that every difference, every tension, visual or conceptual, can appear lessened when incorporated into a greater process. Even the hard edges of surrounding architecture may appear organic in the context of her shapes.

The idea is that the language of art is always universal, even if it is also local and immediate. For this reason, most of Echelman's major pieces assimilate different cultural influences. Her hybrid tendency is not accidental; it reflects the postmodern condition, a condition of unified aesthetic differences, interconnected with all the other forces of globalization, social and economic. Echelman's work maintains its connection to a formal aesthetic language in which universal beauty is implied. Her work does not take a critical stand for or against globalization. Instead, it demonstrates what has been stated again and again, that art stands as an individual and independent language, though it clearly reflects world phenomena.

The critical aspect of her work perhaps consists in the intervention of the womb-like, almost invisible structure as a parallel visible space from which we can note our relationship to architecture. From here, we can distance ourselves from our architectural surroundings enough to notice how unrelated to them we have become. In relation to nature, Echelman's work functions as a reminder of a manmade world, with its interwoven relation between our innate tendency to mimic nature and our desire to surpass it, between our intimate relation to the making of a work and the contemplative distance that separates us from the final object.

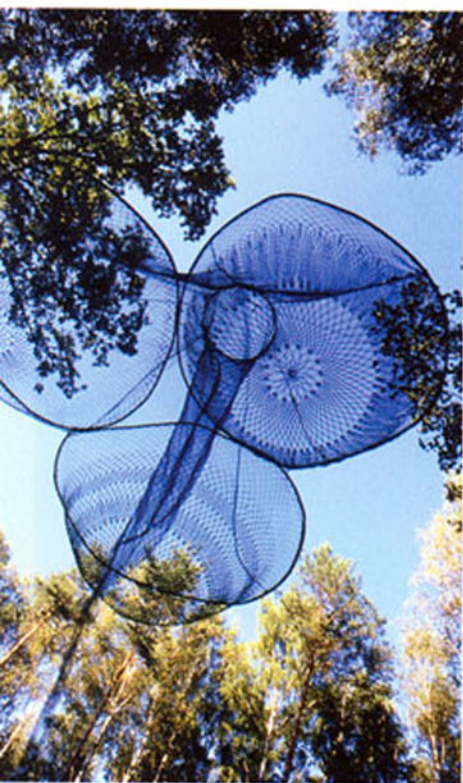
Target swooping down...bullseye!, a 20,000-square-foot lacy net funnel form made with 1.56 million handmade nylon knots, was created to span the monumental circular entrance courtyard at the 2001 ARCO art fair in Madrid. The floating structure transformed visual experience into a sensation of being embraced. The work's organic form invoked the closeness



Above: *Inside Out / Steel Lining*, 1998. Knitted stainless steel, nylon, steel, and sign, 36 x 13 ft. diameter. Installation at the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University. **Below:** *Trying to hide with your tail in the air...*, 1998. Hand-knotted and machined nylon nets, electrical and lighting materials, and steel, 18 x 9 ft. diameter. View of work installed at the Museum of the Center of Europe, Vilnius, Lithuania.

between two sensorial experiences: the visual and the tactile. The feeling of being absorbed by this lightweight, open form allowed the viewer to feel the fusion of aesthetic form and architectural space. During June and July 2001, the work traveled to Burgos, Spain, to the Casa de Cordón, the 15th-century stone courtyard where Christopher Columbus was welcomed home by Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand after his second voyage to the "New World." In this location, the work created a new relationship with architectural space. At ARCO, with the proscenium-like entrance hall, the form seemed to mimic its architectural surroundings; at the Casa de Cordón, the sculptural form appeared more detached and less absorbed by its spatial surroundings—it seemed more dramatically centered, more sculptural.

It is interesting to note that Echelman's sculptures fluctuate in their relationship with space: sometimes adjusting to the architectural surroundings while being absorbed by them, sometimes requiring special placement where they are viewed in detachment. This quality of being influenced by surroundings while also influencing them derives from Echelman's ability to incorporate distinct cultural languages already inherent in the environment.



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Clockwise from above: *Target swooping down...bullseye!*, 2001. Hand-knitted nylon lace net, 140 x 140 x 90 ft. View of work as installed at ARCO, Madrid. *Target Swooping II*, 2001. Hand-knitted nylon lace net, 140 x 140 x 90 ft. View of work as installed at the Casa de Cordon, Burgos, Spain. *Roadside Shrine I: Cone Ridge*, 2000. Vinyl-coated polyester attached to the interstate highway, 17 x 9 x 57 ft. View of work installed in Houston.

The organic language reflects her hand-crafting process. Her intimate process of weaving the soft and flexible nylon knots into a pattern is extended to the horizontal environment as well as to its vertical limits, emphasizing an aesthetic comportment in which feminine and masculine energies are balanced out.

Cone Ridge (2000) was an eye-catching installation in Houston, Texas, commissioned by Buffalo Bayou Art Park. In this piece, Echelman anthropomorphizes the language of an interstate highway, with its white lines and traffic cones. The installation included



six open structures that resembled upside-down cones placed side by side. Each of these cones was mounted under the structure of an overpass, creating a skin around the architectural skeleton of the highway. The liveliness of the contrasting colors and the playfulness and elegance of the shapes resembled anything from candy to teeth, giving a touch of humor to the cold surroundings of the highway.

Echelman's experience in India, while on a Fulbright fellowship, resulted in her first public sculpture, *Bellbottoms* (1998), in Mahaballipuram, India: a large floating organic form made of a net skin on an armature of bronze and steel. Curvilinear shapes and bright colors are conjoined with cultural roots in an interplay of sexuality and energy.

Trying to hide with your tail in the air... (1998), a permanent installation commissioned by the Museum of the Center of Europe in Lithuania, examines art in relation to history, as well as the relationship between architecture and the outdoors. Made with a

stainless steel armature covered by green-colored and hand-knotted lace (30 by 12 by 12 feet) and camouflaged by surrounding trees, the installation alludes to the changing histories of Eastern European forests, to the stories of the people who hid in them, suffered, survived oppressive regimes, and finally regained independence. These fragments of social memory confirm art's capacity to document history in its objective and subjective forms.

This organic weaving of history, fluid and continuous, cannibalistic and nomadic, is the core of Echelman's work. As cultural hybridity increasingly becomes part of the contemporary environment, her work attests to the increasing challenge of creating art that is fresh and beautiful while still reflecting the critical stance of our times.

Denise Carvalho is a frequent contributor to Sculpture.

