

Janet Echeleman

interview • liz rice mccray

World-renowned artist Janet Echeleman is known for her impressive, larger-than-life art installations, which are displayed in major cities globally in both permanent and temporary exhibitions. An artist who defies classification, Echeleman works with unconventional materials such as fishing net and atomized water particles to create mesmerizing works that are both interactive with light, color, and wind as well as human touch. A recipient of numerous awards, Echeleman is a pioneer in the frontier of technological art. Her works are inspired by real natural catastrophes such as the scientific data sets of the 2010 earthquake and tsunami in Chile. We caught up with Janet to ask her a bit about her creative process, the sources of her inspiration, and her vision for the future of her art in an ever-evolving world.

Perhaps you could describe where you are right now. This way everyone reading along can imagine the setting.

I'm in my Boston studio surrounded by clearstory windows, with colorful string models suspending down from the 16-foot high ceiling. We've just finished a meeting with my structural and aeronautical engineers who are working with me on a monumental project for New York City.

I know you worked with many other mediums before arriving at the techniques you currently use,

so can you tell me what you find most fulfilling about working with these technological materials?

I was a painter for more than a decade, when I traveled to India on a Fulbright to teach painting and present a series of exhibition for the U.S. Embassy. I shipped my paints and tools and waited in a fishing village in South India famous for its sculpture and monuments. The deadline for the shows arrived but my paints did not. Instead of hitting my head against a wall about what wasn't there, I took another look at what was there. I went for a walk on the beach to clear my head and watched the fishermen bundling their nets into mounds on the sand. I'd seen it every day, but this time I saw it differently - a new approach to sculpture, a way to make volumetric form without heavy solid materials.

My first satisfying sculptures were made in collaboration with the fishermen. We hoisted them onto poles to photograph on the beach. I discovered their soft surfaces revealed every ripple of wind in constantly changing patterns and was mesmerized.

The idea of creating an expressive gesture is still central to my work. But instead of creating a paint stroke with a brush on a canvas, now I'm making an urban gesture with my sculpture - at the scale of the city.

Working at this size means I simply can't do everything myself. To create these sculptures, my studio works with a wide range of engineers, designers, computer



You have works displayed in cities all over the world. What is the message that transcends cultural boundaries that you most hope to convey to people through your art?

I leave my work open for each person to complete. My hope is that each person becomes aware of their own sensory experience in that moment of discovery, and that leads you to create your own meaning or narrative. You complete the artwork.

It's important to me that the work is out in the public realm where everyone feels entitled to be, frequently over the street. When I installed a sculpture in Sydney, Australia, a man who lived on the street came up pushing a grocery cart. He asked me what the work was and shared with me what he saw in the sculpture. I realized he might never have chosen to enter an art museum, but he felt comfortable to engage with this work located over the public streets. It's like breathing air. I want my work to be as accessible and free as breathing air.

I choose to spend my life sharing art in cities around the world, inviting people to have an experience underneath the sculpture and form a relationship with it, as they notice the interaction with wind and sunlight as it changes in the midst of their daily life. I don't believe art should be separate from life.

Well said, I agree... Some of your recent works allow for people to interact with them via technology or touch. Why do you feel it's important for people to experience art in this way as opposed to simply viewing it?

There's also something special about impermanence, and knowing the sculpture is ever changing as the public interacts with it, forcing us to live more fully in the present moment.

Technology is often blamed for isolating us from one another, and I want to continue to explore how we can use technology in new ways to connect us in physical space. The ability to interact with an artwork brings a new level of engagement. For my recent London sculpture, suspended above the city's busiest intersection, Oxford Circus, everybody was invited to interact using any kind of cellphone. You didn't have to download an app either, just accept the local wifi network, and suddenly your browser would invite you into the art. You could select a color and press your thumbprint on a map of the sculpture, and suddenly your fingerprint was projected in colored light onto the surface of the sculpture floating overhead. It was like a mood ring of the city at any given moment, or a portrait of the collective thoughts of the public. And in that moment, the virtual and physical worlds become one.

Within your creative style where the sky is literally the limit, what do you envision on the horizon for future undertakings?

We have the power to shape our world. Most people in the world are living in cities today, and I think public art can play a vital role in creating meaningful shared experiences that bring out our best communal selves.

It seems that the more I work towards this, the farther I want to push the limits. My colleagues and I are constantly asking questions, exploring new territory, and looking towards the living, breathing world around us for inspiration.

Will you give us some insight to your creative process and explain the steps of creating one of your installations?

Each site is a guiding force for an artwork. When I make the first site visit, I get feel for its space, talk to the people who use it, and spend time uncovering its history and texture to understand what it means to its people. I work with my studio colleagues to brainstorm, sketch, and explore all ideas, without limiting our known constraints or censoring our ideas in the early stages. As the sculpture designs begin to unfold, our studio's architects, designers and model-makers collaborate with an external team of aeronautical and structural engineers, computer scientists, lighting designers, landscape architects, and city planners to bring my initial sketches into reality. We fabricate our artworks through a combination of hand splicing and knotting together with industrial looms and then install on location. It is a gradual, collaborative, and iterative process from every angle and often takes more than a year to go from idea to the final artwork.

What advice would you have for young people seriously pursuing art?

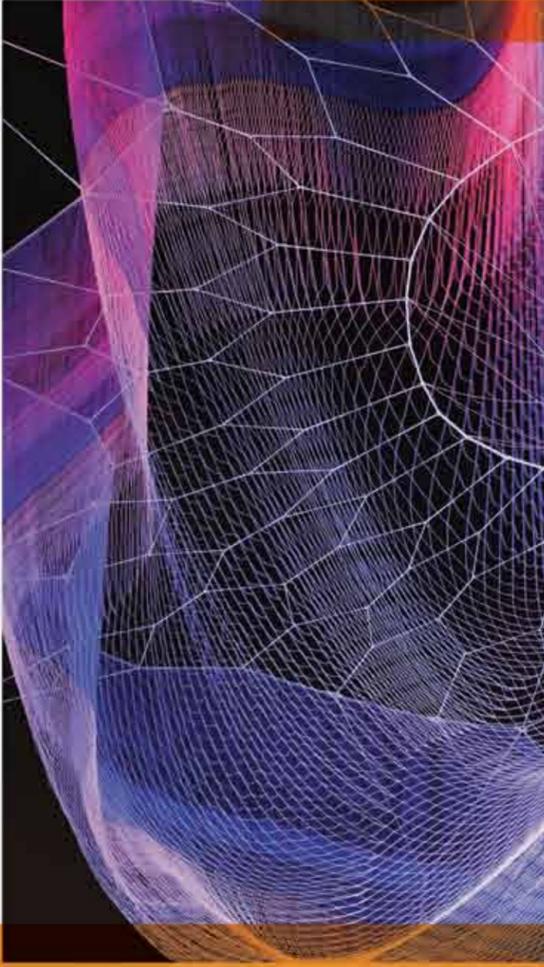
I always return to the words of poet Rainer Maria Rilke in *Letters to a Young Poet*: "Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now."

When I started making art, my biggest challenge was learning to hear my inner voice and finding a way to notice and pay attention to my own ideas. If you start with yourself and make sure that you fully believe that what you're doing will create positive change in the world, then you can go out and share your vision with genuine belief. And authenticity is most important. If you can hear and speak with your own authentic voice, you have the most valuable quality, and no one can take it away from you.

Finally, what drives you most to create?

My dream is to create oases of contemplation and softness amidst the hard-edged cities we have created thus far. I look all around me for inspiration - at the forms of our planet in macro and micro scale, to the patterns of life within it, to the measurement of time, weather patterns, or the paths created by fluid dynamics. I am always in search of inspiration from life, partly as a way of making sense of my own place within this mysterious world we have inherited.

Thank you Janet for taking the time to answer our questions. To see more of Janet Echeleman art, go to www.echeleman.com.



scientists, and architects. It's a collaborative, iterative process. I feel lucky to be an artist working today, because the custom software design tools and highly-engineered fibers that are 15 times stronger than steel enable me to create monumental and permanent works that I never could have before.

Will you tell us a little bit about some of the challenges as well as triumphs that you have experienced while working with your innovative techniques?

Finding the vision that completes each site - the right concept, the right aesthetics, proportions, and sequence of color that all speak to the pre-existing site, which is always a challenge. I wish it would get easier, but it hasn't yet. Each time, I have to search and search, never knowing if that right idea will come. Each time there's a new problem to solve, and I suppose that is precisely why I love this. It keeps me on my edge, always learning and pushing into that uncomfortable zone.

Skies Painted with Unnumbered Sparks, which premiered on the Vancouver waterfront with the TED Conference's 30th anniversary, was our first project to stretch long distances from pre-existing skyscrapers, which required us to overcome immense practical and technical challenges. Our

engineers from Arup told us that at 750 feet it turned out to be the largest pre-stressed rope structure in the world.

My original goal was to sculpt at the scale of the city, as a soft counterpoint to hard-edged buildings, while attaching exclusively to pre-existing buildings as if the sculpture were literally laced into the fabric of the city. My first big hurdle was that the kind of computer software tools I needed to do this simply did not exist. Fortunately, a company that builds design tools (Autodesk) believed in my idea from the start, and their engineers dedicated two years to develop the tool we needed.

Another hurdle was convincing tall buildings to let me attach to their roofs. Just hoisting more than a ton of fiber sculpture into the air over an active city and a federal port seemed impossible. It was like a dream, as our team worked through the night to gently lift it over bus shelters and trees to alight above water, plaza, and street. It was terrifying attempting something that had never been done before, and until I saw it floating in the sky I could not believe it. I remember the first night, watching its translucent layers gently moving in the wind - one of the most satisfying moments of my life.