



Big as All Outdoors

By Kathleen Vanesian

Janet Echelman expands the sky with colossal fiber sculptures that respond to natural elements and reshape urban environments.



ABOVE: *Her secret is patience* (with detail), 2009; painted galvanized steel, changing sets of recyclable high-tenacity polyester braided twine netting, and color lighting; 145' x 353' x 289'. Downtown Civic Space Park, Phoenix, Arizona. Photo: Craig Smith. Detail © Karie Porter. All photos courtesy of Janet Echelman, Inc.

Monumental scale is a crucial element in the work of Boston-based sculptor Janet Echelman. “Even when I made my pieces small, I would imagine them large. Essentially, they are about finding that experience of mystery and contemplation,” explains Echelman, whose gigantic works, made of knotted materials ranging from industrially produced netting to handknotted fiber, become instant icons wherever they are installed around the world.

This includes *Her secret is patience* (2009), a 100-foot-tall, shape-shifting form made from UV-treated, recyclable polyester netting attached to two gigantic steel rings. The grand-scale public art piece hovers over the new Downtown Civic Space Park in Phoenix, Arizona, which covers two city blocks and is now one of the major stops on the city’s recently opened light-rail route. Echelman’s subtly color-stripped, floating sculpture was collaboratively created by a team of international engineers, using a combination of hand-baited and machine-loomed knotting. The city used 2.5 million dollars from its One Percent for Art ordinance to commission Echelman to cre-

ate a piece to anchor its newly rehabbed downtown area.

Fondly referred to by its local, unofficial title “Sky Bloom,” the pastel-colored, ever-morphing, weather-driven piece, which variously calls to mind a tethered tornado funnel cloud, a floating flower, and a languid, breathing organism, is suspended almost forty feet above the park from cables attached to sturdy steel poles. Its suspension draws the viewer’s eye skyward, evoking a sense of the celestial.

The title for the piece is taken from philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson: “Adopt the pace of nature; her secret is patience.” As explained by Echelman, *Her secret is patience* was inspired by Arizona’s mythic summer monsoons, featuring billowing, vertical clouds buffeted by dust-filled winds that are accompanied by spectacular kaleidoscopic sunsets and lightning flashes that seem to crack open the sky. Destructive monsoon weather, as well as the effects of unrelenting desert sun, had to be taken into account in designing, installing, and maintaining the project. Echelman was also impressed by the flora of the Sonoran Desert, especially the blooms of Arizona’s distinctive cactuses, the saguaro and the night-blooming cereus. While spectacular during daylight hours, *Her secret is patience* takes on a powerfully mystical quality at night, when it is dramatically lit from below against the dark sky with computerized colored spots that change slowly with the seasons, bathing the netting in deeply saturated hues of purple, blue, orange, pink, and red.

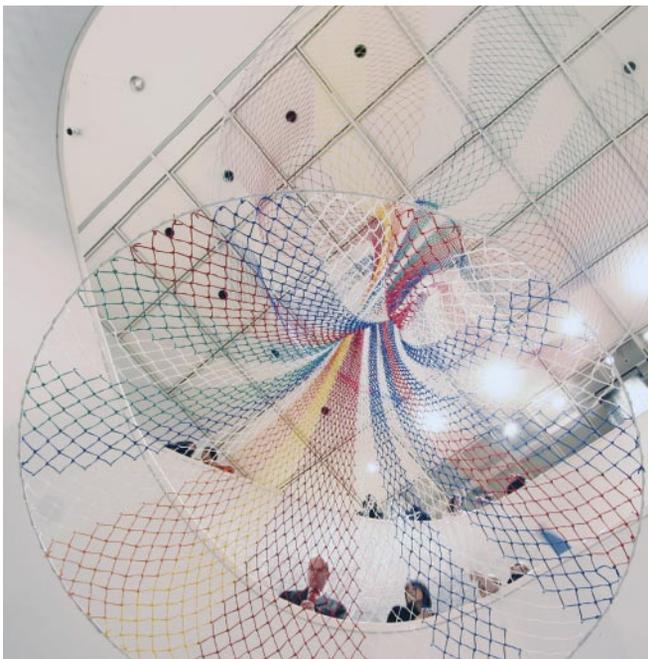
“My mother was in the dress business, so I have always had a feel and love for textiles,” Echelman reveals. “Initially, I was a painter, but my painting really started with this kind of textile underpinning. I am visually influenced by textiles and consider myself a textile junkie.” In fact, the artist’s first major solo exhibition, curated by abstract impressionist Robert Rauschenberg in 1989 for the Barbara B. Mann Performing Arts Hall in Fort Myers, Florida, was of batik canvases she had made while living and working in Indonesia. “He bought three of them at the opening,” Echelman recalls.

After earning a degree in visual studies from Harvard in 1987, Echelman was awarded a Fulbright grant to teach painting and study Indian textiles at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, India. While there, a conference took her to southern India, where she was introduced not only to bronze casting, but also to the handknotted nets of fisherman working near the foundry. Captivated by their ceaseless movement, she started to test the nets on the beach.

A recent culmination of her early experimentation with fishing nets can be seen in *She Changes* (2005), the 160-foot-tall netted wind sculpture installed in Porto, Portugal, within sight of the Atlantic Ocean, directly above a three-lane highway roundabout. The artwork, constructed from Tenara Architectural Fiber and steel rings, draws its inspiration from the ancient fishing legacy of its seaside location and also suggests the shapes of local tide-pool creatures. The project won a



ABOVE: *She Changes*, 2005; painted galvanized steel and Tenara Architectural Fiber. 160' x 300' x 240'. Praca Cidade Salvador, Porto, Portugal.



2006 Industrial Fabrics Association International (IFAI) International Achievement Award and a 2004 Public Art Network's Year in Review Award.

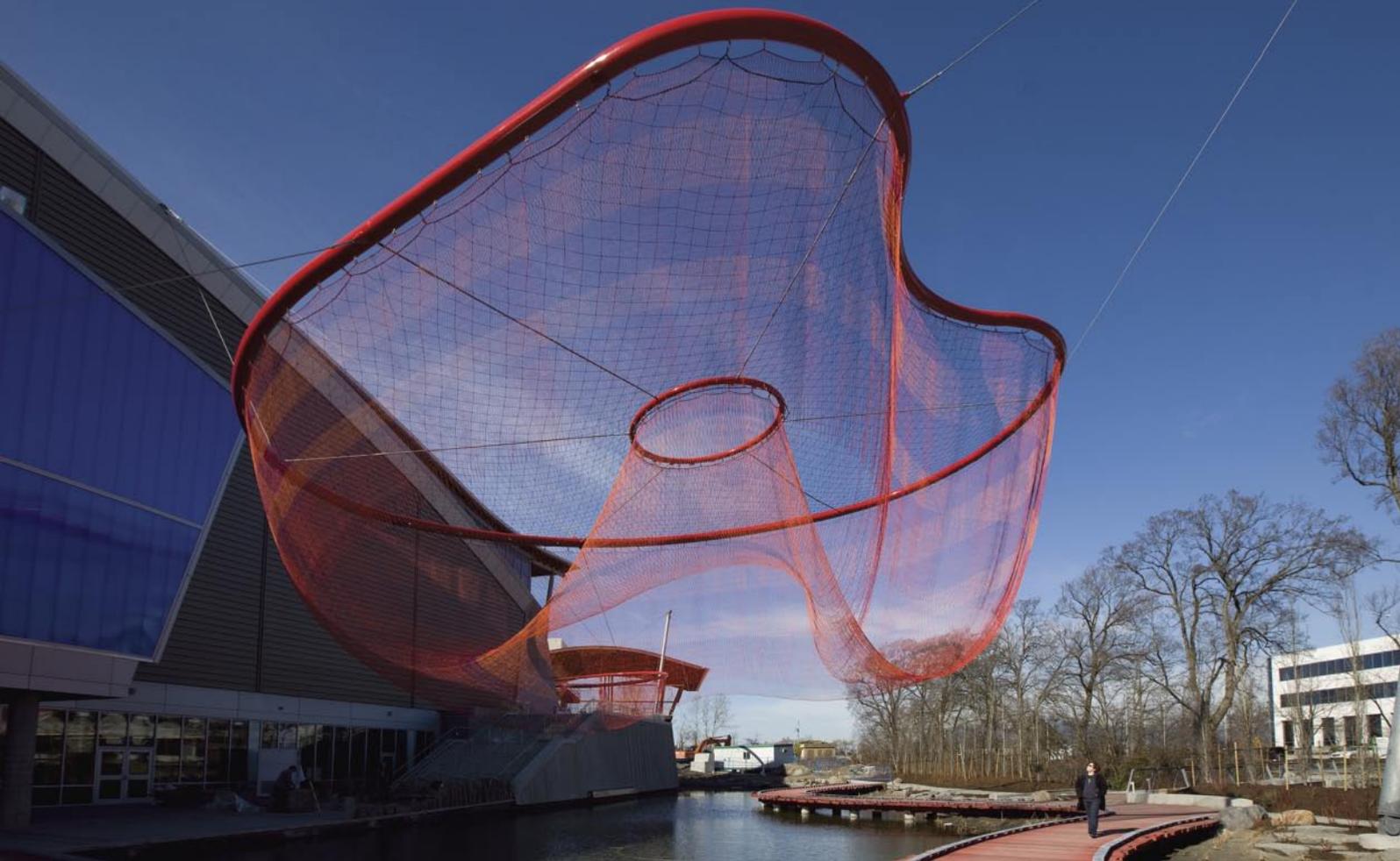
Lace-patterning began to appear in Echelman's work after she traveled to Lithuania in 1998 to create a sculpture for Europos Parkas, Open Air Museum of the Centre of Europe. There she discovered that Lithuanian lace doilies utilized the same knotting method that the Indian fishermen used for their nets, with the addition of intricate baiting involving increases and decreases of knot count to create complex patterns. She collaborated with Lithuanian lace makers to create *Trying to hide with your tail in the air* (1998), her first work with lace patterns. More recently, the artist employed these traditional knotting techniques in *The Expanding Club* (2007), an elegantly swagged, handknotted nylon net with steel fittings, which was included in *The Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting* traveling exhibition initiated in 2007 by the Museum of Arts and Design in New York.

A visiting fellow at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design until August 31, Echelman is currently finishing the Asian-themed *Water Sky Garden* (2009), an ambitious public water-garden project located adjacent to the Richmond Olympic Oval in British Columbia, Canada. The ice oval will be an official venue for the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Winter Games. In the piece, Echelman honors the fact that the city of Richmond has the largest immigrant population in Canada, the majority of which is Chinese. The focal point of the garden's design, which incorporates Chinese elements, references, and sensibility, is a suspended net sculpture in the shape of a Chinese red lantern. The form is taken from the Chinese Lantern Festival, during which thousands of red paper lanterns are hung in temples and public spaces to celebrate the full moon of the first lunar month in the Chinese calendar. The climax of the festival is the nighttime release of illuminated sky lanterns, which represent prayers for good luck.

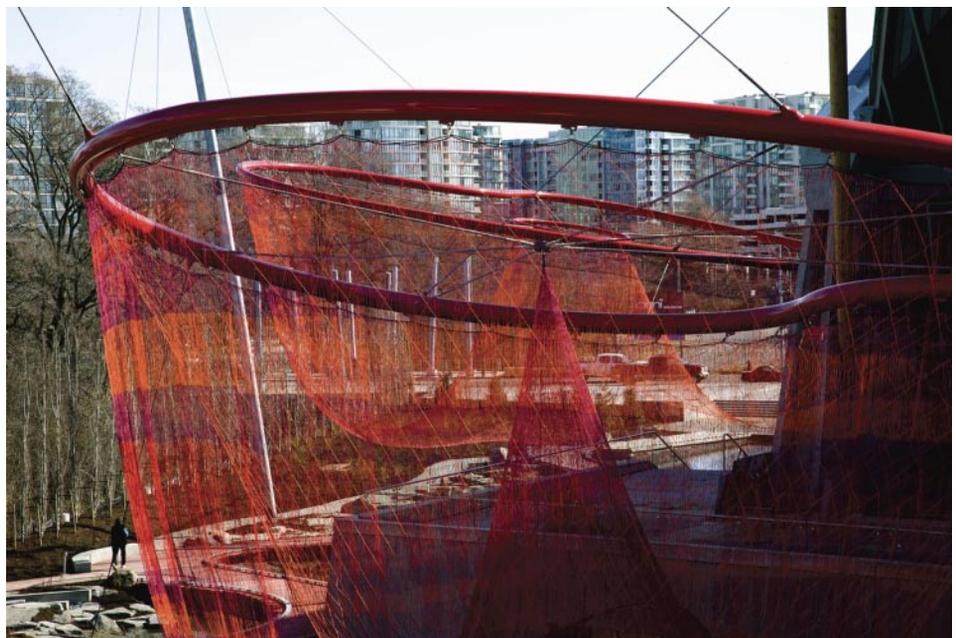
For *Water Sky Garden*, the artist worked closely with architects, urban designers, engineers, landscape architects, and lighting designers to attain thematic and ecological integrity complementary to the Olympic oval. The artwork's reflecting pools have been designed to collect water from the oval's five-acre roof for reuse. The piece will offer an aesthetically compelling environment that transcends its Olympic beginnings: a contemplative public water garden with fountains and boardwalks that snake throughout the garden to mimic the choreography of the traditional Chinese Dragon Dance. 

The artist's website is www.echelman.com.

LEFT: *The Expanding Club*, 2007; handknotted nylon net, steel fittings; dimensions variable. Installation view at the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Photos: David Feldman.



Echelman's 2009 design team includes: *For Her* secret is patience: CAID Industries, fabricator and project engineering; Diamond Nets, net fabrication; Foresite Design and Construction, sculptural foundations; M3 Engineering, steel structure engineering; NETServices, net installation; Nexus Steel, structural erection; Paul Deeb of VOX, lighting. Both projects included: Buro Happold, net engineering; Peter Heppel Associates, aeronautical engineering; Speranza Architecture, consultant. *For Water Sky Garden*: Cole Brown Henry Consulting, public art consultants; Fast+Epp, structural engineering; Hotson Bakker Boniface Haden architects+urbanistes; Phillips Farevaag Smallenberg, landscape architecture; Joseph Scott, lighting design; Vince Helton and Associates, fountain mechanical.



ABOVE: *Water Sky Garden* (with detail), 2009; painted galvanized steel rings, Tenara Architectural Fiber, painted red cedar, water fountains; total area about 75,000 sq. ft. (or 82' height x 300' width). *Richmond Olympic Oval*, an official venue of the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Winter Games, Richmond, British Columbia, Canada. Photos: © Peter Vanderwarker.



To see a video about the making of Janet Echelman's netted sculpture *She Moves* (2005), visit fiberarts.com.