

# WORLD SCULPTURE NEWS

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## Six Australian Sculptors



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# Space Sculptor Of Urban Air Garments

Through a variety of influences American artist Janet Echelman has made a wide range of imposing gigantic forms. But some of her most important recent work has been inspired by Asian influences, particularly Indian.

By Joan Lebold Cohen

When a bud opens and the petals extend into space, it is this miraculous structure that completes a flower. This natural phenomenon may have been Janet Echelman's inspiration because it is precisely this idea of extension into space that *Gravity's Angel* (2000) achieves. *Angel* was installed at the Florence Lynch Gallery in the heart of New York's crowded mid-town where buildings elbow each other. I walked up several flights of stairs into a virtually empty gallery—a clean white space—and was puzzled.

Then my attention was drawn to the open windows. Floating from the window frames in front of the building over 29th street like an airy canopy was a series of rectangular, transparent, flag-like pieces of white mesh with circles punched through. "I wanted to expand the controlled gallery space out into Manhattan and to address the holes of the gallery building (its windows)," said Janet Echelman. And a related piece *Window Treatment with 24 Tails* (1998) spilled out from the side windows that looked over a hidden courtyard. "I extended over a hidden court allowing viewers to escape the white box of the Gallery down the fire escape and look up at the metropolis through the veil of knitted stainless-steel," she said.

These creations were made of knitted steel covered with vinyl. The artist explained that after measuring the Gallery she went to a Truck Tarp factory in Connecticut that knits

stainless steel. Using the factory as her studio she cut the pieces and then coated them with vinyl, which gave them a vague canvas look.

These adventurous pieces were not born out of the head of Zeus fully formed. Janet Echelman began as an abstract painter but when she went to Mahaballipuram, India, on a Fulbright in 1997, she must have been deeply im-

pressed by the great South Indian bronzes made during the Chola dynasty (10th – 13th centuries) and she began working in bronze. However, she grew frustrated with the weight and rigidity of the bronze organic forms that she created: "I drilled holes in the perimeter of my bronzes and extended their gestures in curving forms of hand-knotted fishing net," she said.

Mahaballipuram on the shores of the Bay of Bengal is famous for brilliantly carved rock temples. The gods, saints, and demons represented are all part of epic narratives revealed through their gestures called *mudras*. As the figure stands, sits, or reclines, fingers extend and curve into a *mudra* heralding action. These extensions of the postures convey meaning. Working with this idea of extending beyond the body became a theme.

"Earlier I began twisting wires and wrapping scraps of lacy brassieres and hosiery to create miniature models. These models were for spaces into which people could enter and experience the awe and wonder of being a small child lost in voluminous skirts, or the magic and mystery of a huge circus tent," Echelman says.

In India she learned how to knot fishing nets from fishermen and with this new technique created *Suckle Bell Buckle* (1997). Shore Temples in the background, *Suckle Bell Buckle* flies over the beach. An over-size circular net bowl acts as the *yin* for a bronze sperm-like *yang* form, all contained within an open-ended cylindrical net. This is *yin/yang* image, called *lingam* and *yoni* and worshipped as a manifes-



Janet Echelman, *Gravity's Angel*, 2000, knitted steel and vinyl-coated polyethylene mesh. Florence Lynch Gallery. Photograph: Bruce Petchek.

tation of the God Shiva, obviously connotes phallus and female genitalia and is ever present by Indian roadsides and in temples and home shrines. Surely this must have inspired the artist.

In 1998, Echelman was invited back to South India to make a large installation in Coimbatore. She collaborated with a local crew of welders, electricians, and Hindu temple masons. They carved two brick pyramidal cones with indentations and undulations that point skywards. Above these forms that recall the great towering gateways of South Indian temples and that are conceived as sacred mountains, she suspended a nylon net from an arm that hangs like a semi-transparent sheet from a single point. It is 45 feet above the ground. "My sculpture," Echelman says, "is responsive in the sense of environmental interdependence where multiple conditions and occupants of space mutually affect one another. Variations in wind or sunlight affect the piece, and are affected by it, which can slow wind, lower temperature, and cast intricate shadow patterns on the ground."

That same year, 1998, Echelman was invited to create a piece for the Museum of the Center of Europe in Vilnius, Lithuania. Her permanent installation of three giant airborne baskets made of lace-like knotted nylon and steel with a long sock-like tail is suspended above the ground. Provocatively titled *Trying to Hide your Tail in the Air* (1998) this witty construction was a collaboration with Lithuanian lace-makers. According to the artist, "Together we created a 35-foot-tall sculpture which delicately hangs down



**Janet Echelman, Target Swooping Down**, 2001, hand-knotted nylon lace net, 140 x 140 x 90 feet. Photograph: Bruce Petchek.

amidst oak trees, and when the wind blows, might gently swat an inattentive visitor walking by."

Another of her 1998 collaborations, *Inside Out/Steel Lining*, a four-story tornado form that was made with students at Harvard University and installed in the courtyard of the Fogg Art Museum. Echelman sees it "intruding upon the calm isolation of the Ivory Tower." The tail that hangs in the middle of the mesh cone suggests an energized sperm similar in form to the *South India Project* (1998). Echelman wrote, "Viewers are invited to stick their heads inside sculpture."

In 2000, Echelman was invited to make a sculpture in Houston, Texas, in conjunction with the International Sculpture Center Conference being held there.

"I selected the underside of the highway as my site and created a 60-foot-long undergarment composed of six 17-foot-high inverted cones. *Roadside Shrine/ Cone Ridge* (2000) as viewed by some as a giant six-cupped brassiere, and by others as a subversion of the interstate language understood universally by American drivers: the orange safety cone."

The artist had lived in Asia for many years and in many Asian cultures roadside shrines are ubiquitous. One would assume that this must be part of this puzzle. This piece is as witty as it is mysterious, like a Zen Buddhist *koan*, a kind of riddle that can't be answered intellectually—but only through intuition/enlightenment. '

In 2001, Echelman took one of her urban air garments to Burgos, Spain, where she created *Bullseye* as the centerpiece of the ARCO art fair. More than 180,000 people walked under her vast lacy net form that covered more than 20,000 square feet and was composed of approximately 1.56 million hand-made knots. "Whenever possible, I like my work to be within reach of the human hand, both touchable and movable," she said. "Works are often confrontationally suspended directly to eye-level."

This dynamic young sculptor, who graduated from Harvard University with highest honors in 1987, has since received more than 20 awards, grants, and residencies and held more than 30 solo exhibitions. Currently she is working on two major pieces, one for exhibition at the Storm King Art Center in New York State and the other to be permanently shown at BRAC, the world's largest charity, located in Bangladesh. Δ



**Janet Echelman, Cone Ridge**, 2000, 57 x 9 x 17 feet.

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