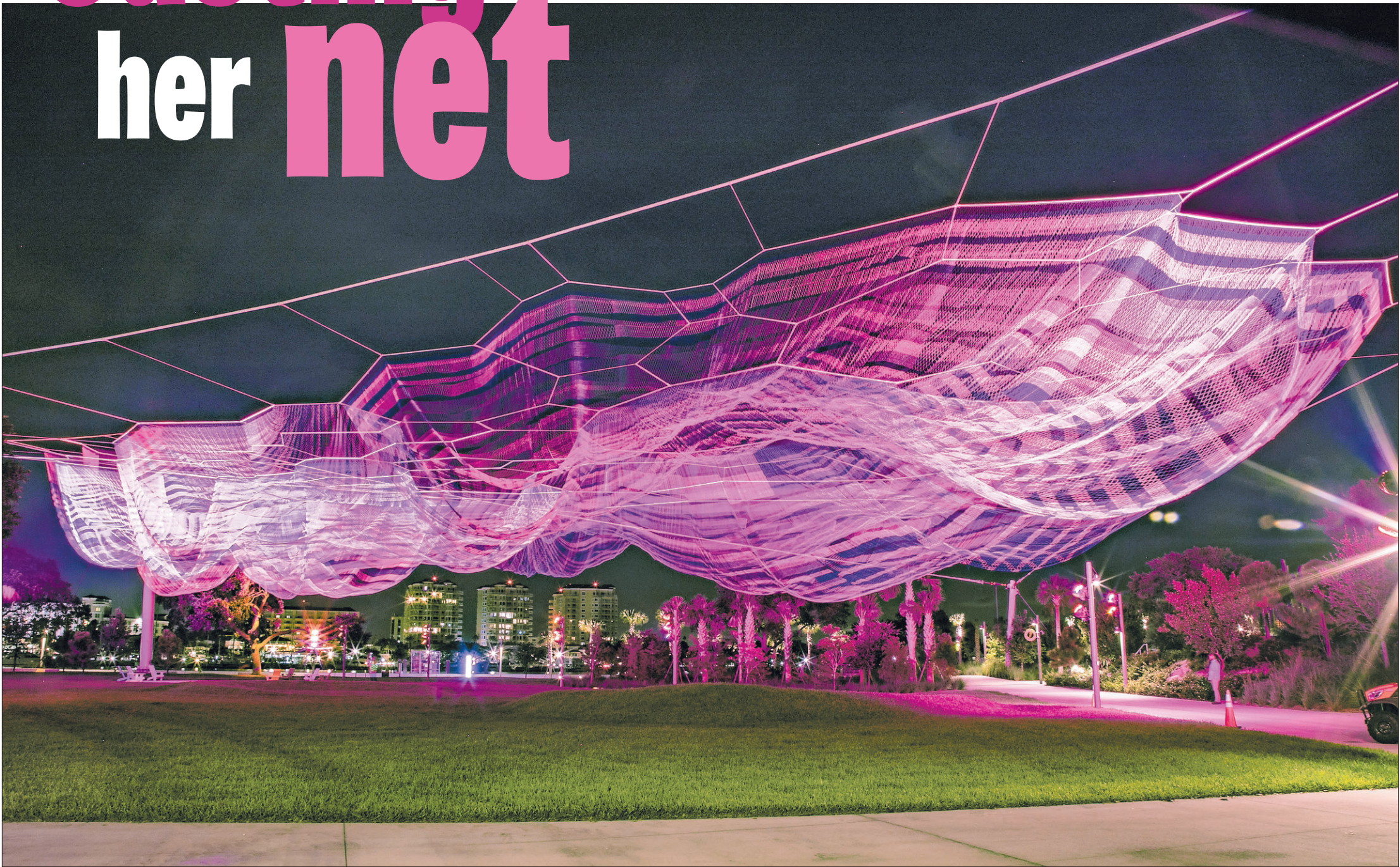


ARTS

# Casting her net

Tampa-born artist Janet Echelman captures many meanings in *Bending Arc*, her new aerial sculpture at the St. Pete Pier.



BOYZELL HOSEY | Times

Janet Echelman's *Bending Arc*, the signature sculpture at the new St. Pete Pier, is lit up on June 30 during a test run. The opening lighting scene is about "warmth and passion."



SCOTT KEELER | Times

The aerial net sculpture is soft and airy, yet it is designed to withstand 150 mph winds.



Courtesy of Andrew Sachs

Janet Echelman is pictured in front of another of her aerial net sculptures.

BY MAGGIE DUFFY | Times Staff Writer

While she's not physically here, with the installation of *Bending Arc* complete at the new St. Pete Pier, Janet Echelman is having a homecoming.

## Celebrations

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Happy 100<sup>th</sup> Birthday,  
Jack

**Jocko the Renaissance Man**  
with Love from your sisters,  
Twila & Judy

0000094449-01

The Boston-based artist was born and raised in Tampa. But her prestigious art career has taken her around the world, where she installs aerial net sculptures that come alive with the movement of the wind, and with colorful LED lights at night.

Echelman said that of all the sculptures she's created, *Bending Arc* is the most meaningful.

"This is my hometown," she said. "My parents and family still live there. It's very special to create a hometown piece. I never have a chance to revisit most of my pieces. It's nice to have it in a place that I can visit over and over."

Every installation she creates, with an expert global design team that includes architects, aeronautical and mechanical engineers, lighting designers, computer scientists, landscape architects and fabricators, is unique to the city in which it resides.

When she began planning *Bending Arc*, she drew on her love of Florida's nature and beaches, and came from an emotional place of fun and leisure. She made patterns based on striped umbrellas from old postcards she'd studied and the barnacles that cling to the Pier.

But during her research, the piece took on a different meaning, one she had no idea four years ago would be so incredibly timely once the piece was installed.

She was studying the Pier's social and political history and learned that Black people were not allowed into the old pier until 1957, when a lawsuit was filed against the city by some Black community members against the city to force integration of Spa Beach and Spa Pool.

This led to a 1957 U.S. Supreme Court decision to allow the integration of Black people at municipal beaches and pools. But the law wasn't implemented. In response, Black community members staged multiple "swims" in 1958, but the city manager closed the beach and pool each time.

Echelman recalled her own childhood memories of her grandmother telling her about signs on establishments around town banning Black and Jewish people, including one on the Tampa side of the Gandy Bridge.

So the piece was created with those who were denied access in mind. The title is taken from a phrase by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

"The title speaks to the positive direction of change of inclusion and equality," Echelman said. "When I see the moral arc of Tampa Bay moving towards justice, it's meaningful to me."

It's also important to Echelman that her sculpture is accessible to everyone. She intentionally uses everyday materials and methods like knotted fishing net. In this case, she knotted 180 miles of twine, so people feel comfortable with the work and don't need a course in art history to understand it.

"I invite people to create their own meaning," she said. "I leave it open-ended, because my hope is that you become aware of your own sensory experience within the work and create your own narrative or meaning. You complete the artwork."

It's also her intention that there is an element of playfulness to the sculpture. She encourages viewers to lie under it and gaze at its softness as it billows with the wind.

As soft and airy as the sculpture is, it's incredibly strong and durable. It can withstand 150 mph winds, the same that a skyscraper must endure.

The sculpture contains 1,662,528 knots that Echelman says represent the interconnection of humanity.

"When a single knot in the sculpture's network moves, the location of every other knot is changed," she said.

The opening lighting scene is about "warmth and passion" and uses a palette of magentas, violets and a burst of orange. The full lighting program will happen in another phase.

Echelman would have typically been here to direct the lighting patterns, the final step in the installation. But she did it remotely via video from Boston recently, along with her lighting designers in New York and a team on the ground in St. Petersburg. She said that it went "astonishingly smoothly."

That kind of ability to adapt is central to Echelman's work. That is how this body of work was born.

In 1997, Echelman was in India on a Fulbright lectureship and was supposed to exhibit her paintings around the country on behalf of the U.S. Embassy. But when her paintings didn't arrive, she had to pivot. Inspired by the fishing nets she saw on the beach every day, she began collaborating with the fisherman to make lightweight, volumetric sculptures that moved with the wind.

"As an artist, constraint can be creatively liberating," she said. And she was flexible during

the process to bring her work to St. Petersburg, which was met with controversy. The sculpture was originally supposed to be installed at Spa Beach, but there was push-back from environmentalists afraid that it would endanger birds.

A series of public hearings ensued. Echelman consulted with several experts, eventually getting a report from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission that deemed the sculpture safe.

Still, the sculpture's site was changed to a family park on the Pier's approach. Echelman is pleased with the location.

"The hearings made the sculpture better," she said. "It opened up the conversation for relocating. The relocated site is better, it's more accessible. The new site can be a central meeting place. The public process improved the outcome."

Echelman also credits St. Petersburg Mayor Rick Kriseman and Deputy Mayor Kanika Tomalin for having "ambitious vision" by investing in public art and a beautiful public space and said that is how a city of the arts moves forward.

She considers the intersection of nature and art in her own work.

"The works are adapting at every moment to the changing conditions of wind and light, finding nature revealed through the billowing surfaces," she said. "It's an invitation to contemplate our humanity. And the need to be humble in the face of our exquisite planet."

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