

## Janet Echelman Casts a Colorful Net in Hong Kong

The artist recently installed a large scale public sculpture for the Peninsula Hotel's Art in Resonance initiative in Hong Kong, and has other projects landing soon in Jakarta, Austin, and Los Angeles.

By Kristen Tauer | March 27, 2019



Janet Echelman by George Chinsee

“They say the only things you can’t escape are death, taxes and the progression of time,” says Janet Echelman. “This is about the discovery that things are more relative than they might appear. Even the circle of the Earth in a day is not the same from one day to another.”

The Boston-based artist has been in Hong Kong, where she recently installed her latest site specific public net sculpture just in time for the Art Basel crowd’s arrival, although art insiders aren’t the primary audience.

The new public installation, titled “Earthtime 1.26 (Hong Kong),” is anchored to the facade of the historic Peninsula Hotel and suspended, seeming to float, over the street. The piece is the latest addition in her Earthtime series, which has been installed in Madrid, Dubai, Mexico City and Beijing, and was commissioned as part of the hotel’s ambitious Art in Resonance initiative curated by Isolde Brielmaier and Bettina Prentice. It will be on view through June 21.

“For me, the piece seems as if it has come from space and landed in the midst of Hong Kong,” says Echelman, who is particularly interested in the idea of weaving something new with something old. “This place of contrasts, of vibrant pulsing with humanity and this old building — amidst the waterfront and all the newness, in lands this sculpture.”

Lounge chairs have been set up underneath the colorful structure, an invitation for the public to observe the piece and engage in a moment of contemplation amidst the dynamic chaos of the city. “It’s an invitation to be present,” Echelman says of the sculpture, which morphs shape as wind passes through, and glows at nighttime. Despite its grand nature, the piece — a net of colored fibers woven into twine and knotted — is rooted in an exploration of interconnection, and acts as a prompt for viewers to pause and consider their role within the larger system.

In terms of scale, the sculpture represents ideas both unfathomably large and as specific as a single point. It’s completely abstract and entirely concrete.

“The physical sculpture is a manifestation of interconnectedness; it’s this knotted network, and when any single knot or node moves, every other node is affected,” says Echelman, who based the structure on mapping data of the surface of the Pacific Ocean in relation to time of day.

Using customized computer software, her studio is able to model how even a slight change at a specific point affects the rest of the structure.

“All of these works are very much about change — there is no static sculpture, it is always adapting and changing. Your perception of it is changing, too, but very literally with different sunlight, different patterns and projections, different color, and the wind. So it’s not even the same shape at any given moment. It’s about this continual fluidity,” she says. “I want it to be the speed of the sunset, where it’s very, very gradual, so you can’t really note any specific moment of change but yet you realize that it has changed.”

It also speaks to the shifting of time in a specific way. The title of the piece refers to the amount of time the Earth’s day was shortened on the day the form was mapped: 1.26 microseconds. “I’m very intrigued by the way I experience time; the way all of us experience time. And the assumption that I used to have, [was] that time was marching forward in a regular fashion,” she says.

Despite the mathematical origin of her designs, taken at face value, they are just simply beautiful.

“It’s a very broad cross-section of people who walk down the street. It’s everyone, and they’re not expecting art with a capital A,” she says. “It becomes a communal shared experience, something out of the ordinary. I just sometimes will sit back and observe people underneath the sculpture. And I see strangers start asking each other questions. There’s something about breaking those barriers that is important to me. It’s an opening.”

The artist has erected her colorful net sculptures all over the world, and her studio has new pieces coming in Los Angeles and Austin, Tex., Gwanggyo Lake, South Korea; Mumbai; Jakarta, Indonesia, and Bonn, Germany, for Beethoven's 250th birthday. She's finishing the design for a permanent work near her Tampa Bay hometown in St. Petersburg, which will be installed later this year or in early 2020. She recently unveiled a permanent piece using water as the primary material in front of Philadelphia's city hall, the original site of the city's water works. Titled "Pulse," the piece traces the path of underground subway trains in real time using colored mist.

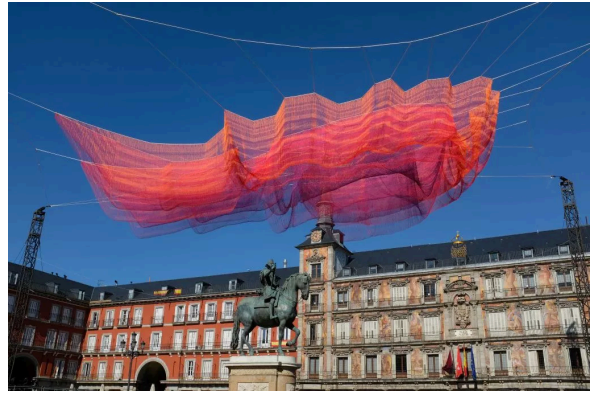
Her own artistic journey will come full circle with the installation of a new commission for the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta; Echelman spent her early 20s living in Bali, while finding her way as an artist. "It's very exciting to be able to give something back to a place and a culture that had given so much," she says of the piece, which is composed of red, violet and pink tones to complement the volcanic, geologic quality of the area.

Just as her pieces reference both the meta and micro, her process for creating a site-specific work is aided by an open goal, whether it's to express the spirit or mission of an organization — such as for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in downtown Seattle — or to create a piece that will become a "signature work" for a city. For Greensboro, N.C., she was commissioned to celebrate the state's textile history. "It's like a custom garment for the city. It's couture for the sky."

The fibers of Echelman's artistic journey are also tied up in fashion. Her mother owned five designer dress boutiques, and as a child she would sew together discarded scraps of fabric from the backroom. After graduating from Harvard and living in Bali, Echelman headed to India on a Fulbright grant to teach painting. It was there, after her paints failed to show up, that she pivoted to sculpture. While watching fisherman on the beach reeling in their nets at the end of the day, something clicked.

"I thought, 'Well, that's a way to create volumetric form without heavy solid material that I couldn't afford anyway,'" she says. "So sometimes the constraint becomes a gift. The hardship pushed me out of my comfort zone, and for the better." Just like her work, it's all interconnected.

"My whole life is about a series of mishaps and misfortunes that I grapple with how to turn them around. I applied to art school to be an artist — I applied to seven art schools, and I was rejected by all of them. Had that option been open to me, perhaps I would have taken it. Because it was not open to me, it forced me to find my own way and that's how I decided to go to Bali," she says. "It was not a premeditated plan. It was just trying to flexibly respond to what was possible."



Right: *Earthtime 1.78 (Madrid)*, photo by Sara Houlison; Left: *Earthtime 1.26 (Amsterdam)*, photo by Peter Dejong