

# An oral history of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's 'Surrounded Islands'



An aerial view of Christo and Jean-Claude's "Surrounded Islands." On Oct. 4, the Perez Art Museum Miami will revisit the landmark installation with a new exhibit and an art talk by Christo. (Wolfgang Volz / Courtesy)



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**C**hristo and Jeanne-Claude's "Surrounded Islands," the artists' ambitious project to dress Biscayne Bay's spoil islands in pink fabric, was only on view for two weeks in 1983. But it left a lasting impression on South Florida's art scene.

An engineering and artistic feat that required \$3.1 million of the couple's money and more than 400

local workers to cut, sew and build, “Surrounded Islands” opened to the public on May 7.

By May 19, it was gone. The workers, **guided by Christo and Jeanne-Claude**, denuded each island of its shimmering pink fabric.

Following is an oral history on the making of “Surrounded Islands” and the lasting influence it left behind, as recalled by workers, Miami-Dade County employees, aides to Christo and Jeanne-Claude and art historians.

Beginning Oct. 4, the Perez Art Museum Miami will revisit the duo’s landmark project with hundreds of archival photos, drawings and a 40-foot-long scale model. “Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Surrounded Islands, Biscayne Bay, Greater Miami, Florida, 1980-83: A Documentary Exhibition” will close Feb. 17.

## On Miami in the 1980s

“Miami in 1980 and 1981 was a rough-and-tumble place, raw around the edges, but still exciting, trying to find its identity, trying to assimilate 125,000 Cubans from the Mariel Boatlift. Suddenly, this couple comes along and says, ‘Hey, we want to put some pink cloth around the islands in Biscayne Bay.’ And people generally said, ‘Huh? For what reason?’ ” — **Michael Putney, senior political reporter for WPLG-Ch. 10, from the Perez Art Museum Miami-produced documentary “Remembering Surrounded Islands.”**

“This isn’t the Miami I grew up in Puerto Rico thinking of, the Miami of Frank Sinatra [...] the Fontainebleau. This was a Miami that had forgotten its past.” — **South Florida artist Carlos Betancourt, who helped build “Surrounded Islands”**

“Jan van der Marck, who was the first director of the Center for the Fine Arts [which later became Perez Art Museum Miami], had convinced Christo and Jeanne-Claude to come to Miami and see what was going on down here.” — **Ruth Shack, a former Miami-Dade County Commissioner (1976-1984)**

## On Christo’s personality

“Jeanne-Claude and Christo walked into my office, recommended by an attorney who was an environmental lawyer, in Tallahassee. Christo immediately started telling me who he was, and he’s

quite expressive, and he has quite an accent. And suddenly, Jeanne-Claude, who's equally exotic and dramatic, says, 'Christo, stop that. Look behind his desk. He has one of your 'Surrounded Islands' drawings on his wall.' The money he'd pay for the project — the entire installation and all the people associated with it — would come from the artworks. And that caused people to not understand what this was about." — **Joseph Z. Fleming, an attorney who represented the married artists in Miami**

"It's all about Christo's persuasion, getting people to be excited, getting the input of engineers, getting the politicians behind it, and in Miami, Ruth Shack, the [Miami-Dade] county commissioner at the time, was particularly gung ho about it, and she's an art collector. A lot of artists from that time period, broke down the barrier of what was art and what was life." — **Bonnie Clearwater, director of NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale, former director of Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami (1997-2013) and former director of Lannan Museum in Lake Worth (1986)**

"They didn't toe the line within the trajectory of the art world. They built their own insulated operations, from the way they financed their projects. The way they carried everything out was tightly controlled. It speaks to their obsession with detail, and to their willpower. They forged this whole forum of art that blasted through so many conventions." — **Rene Morales, Perez Art Museum Miami curator of the "Surrounded Islands" exhibit**

"Christo and Jeanne-Claude, they were incredibly diplomatic and seductive in the way they could get people to do things that led to these massive projects. — **Franklin Sirmans, director of Perez Art Museum Miami**

## On getting permits

"Suddenly, these little spoil islands [in Biscayne Bay] that nobody paid any attention to, people were worried about the havoc it would create on the local wildlife. Some people were worried about ospreys, some about manatees, about the fish." — **Margarita Cano, a former art reference librarian and community-relations coordinator for Miami-Dade Public Library**

"When the project was proposed, I was chairman of the Biscayne Bay Management Committee. My initial reaction was, 'Hey, this bay is beautiful enough without putting pink propylene in it.' I was focused primarily on the environmental aspects. When [the project] came before the County

Commission, I sort of forcefully led the charge against it [and] the project was dead. After, over lunch with Christo and Jeanne-Claude, I asked them, 'Explain to me why this is art.' And it didn't take me long to realize how ignorant I was." — **Harvey Ruvin, Clerk of Courts for Miami-Dade County (1992 to present), in the Perez Art Museum Miami-produced documentary, "Remembering Surrounded Islands"**

"Part of this permitting process was about educating people and politicians, [Miami-Dade] County, as I saw it. I think [Christo and Jeanne-Claude] enjoyed the battle, but it was also a great frustration with problem-solving, finding the fabric, getting the right attorneys." — **Marsha Orr, a former visual arts coordinator for the state's Division of Cultural Affairs and a "Surrounded Islands" worker (January-May 1983)**

"Miami Shores, North Miami, the city of Miami, the city of Miami Beach and the county government. There were multiple levels of bureaucracy [Christo and Jeanne-Claude] had to work through. The sheer number of permits, all sorts of documentations and regulations they had to comply with, really indicates how difficult it is to work through a Kafkaesque, government system. But it proved that ultimately a pair of artists can be successful. You just needed a very compelling vision, determination to the point of obsession, and that's it." — **Rene Morales**

## Wrapping the islands

"We worked with the Christos at the library and tested the fabric. We put pails of water on top of the old main library, at Biscayne Boulevard and Flagler Street, and filled the pails with bay water, and then each day, we would send out for fabric to see if the colors [bled when submerged]." — **Barbara Young, a former art reference librarian and curator, Miami-Dade Public Library**

"We felt like we were part of something monumental. They used Pelican Harbor [Marina] to deploy the boats. They had a fabric factory in Hialeah where they loaded cargo ships, fabric slings, sewing equipment. These people were all hired by Christo to sew the panels of the fabric together. But it was too small, so those panels were taken to Opa-Locka [Executive Airport] because it had a large airplane hangar where the fabric could be unfurled and sewn." — **Marsha Orr**

"They were working very hard, if not around the clock, to make this project. To getting the booms down to the islands, they talked about a shipping barge. Then, someone had the realization that they can just tow them in the water." — **Rene Morales**

“We got right to this magical world of pink, of Styrofoam. In one split second [...] there was drama, there was production and that insane pink. This energy, it felt like the time when a hurricane comes, and there’s this unifying force in the community, and all of us were a family.” — **Carlos Betancourt**

“The excitement in Miami was the assembling, the building. My friends were out in bathing suits for a week, moving that gorgeous fabric, which sat on the top of the water and absolutely shimmered. It was magnificent.” — **Ruth Shack**

## The public’s reaction

“I mean, I was getting phone calls at the office from people just wanting to say how fabulous it looked. I don’t even know how they got my number. Once, an extermination company asked me to use the fabric after the project was finished to wrap a building with it for tenting. I had people wanting to auction off pieces of the fabric.” — **Marsha Orr**

“Some people were like, ‘What is the point? How much money are you making off this? If there’s no money to be made, why you doing it?’ Many people were resistant until they saw the beauty, the harmony of the green trees and the pink, shimmering fabric on the blue bay.” — **Rene Morales**

“I was out at Pelican Harbor, herding international press wanting to interview Christo. We hired temp workers, and this guy came up to me who helped stuff the Styrofoam booms. He’d had a tough life, you could tell, with his missing teeth, and he said, ‘Hi, these are my kids. I have never done anything significant in my life. Can I take my kids out on the water to see what I did?’ We found a boat, and we got ’em out on the water.” — **Marsha Orr**

“For 13 days, it was the buzz of the community. Everyone was standing on the causeways that spanned Biscayne Bay to see it. I remember one day coming home from work, early sunset, and I was headed east on the causeway, and to my right, the light of the sunset reflected off the pink propylene, and this iridescence in the trees.” — **Harvey Ruvín**

“It was such a gorgeous, gorgeous project, such a beautiful gift for Miami.” — **Barbara Young**

## On the Perez Art Museum Miami exhibit

“It’s a huge show, about 300 objects, I believe, with original drawings and short films. There’s a 40-foot scale model of ‘Surrounded Islands,’ composed of thick plastic and artificial trees.” — **Rene**

## Morales

“When you walk through the exhibit, you get this sense of, ‘Ah, there’s an idea in Christo’s head.’ He puts the drawings on paper by hand. But piece by piece, sketch by sketch, you realize, ‘Oh, this isn’t about jotting down an idea. It’s about the execution of a major project in Miami’s urban landscape.’ To me, that’s just, ‘Wow.’ The draftsmanship is unparalleled. [Christo and Jeanne-Claude] clearly had a vision, and they knew how to execute it, and you can spot it from the very first drawing.” —

**Franklin Sirmans**

## On its influence on Art Basel Miami Beach

“It was the beginning of the Europeanization of South Beach. Jeanne-Claude asked me to put his European collector friends in the art deco hotels, the Carlisle and Cordoza. They had a massive following, bringing the world’s attention to Miami and South Beach. It brought a sense of pride to the Miami artists, a ‘we can do this, we can make it here’ attitude, an inspiration.” — **Marsha Orr**

“‘Surrounded Islands’ turned positive attention on Miami Beach. Many of the artists [who worked on the project] became crucial members of an underground art scene on Lincoln Road in the late ’80s and early ’90s. — **Rene Morales**

“The two greatest projects in Miami through my 60-odd years of history here have been Christo, which cost us nothing and brought us incredible international acclaim, and the second is Art Basel, which didn’t cost a single cent. In fact, we make money from the cabs, the lunches, the dinners, the hotel rooms.” — **Ruth Shack**

“‘Surrounded Islands’ was a catalyst, but there was already an art scene here that encouraged it, and built on it. It sent a strong message to artists that what they do is valued and appreciated, and that even the most ambitious project isn’t out of the realm of possibility, and the city will forevermore be known for this big art splash.” — **Bonnie Clearwater**

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