

He dressed Miami's islands in pink, changing the city forever. Here's how he pulled it off

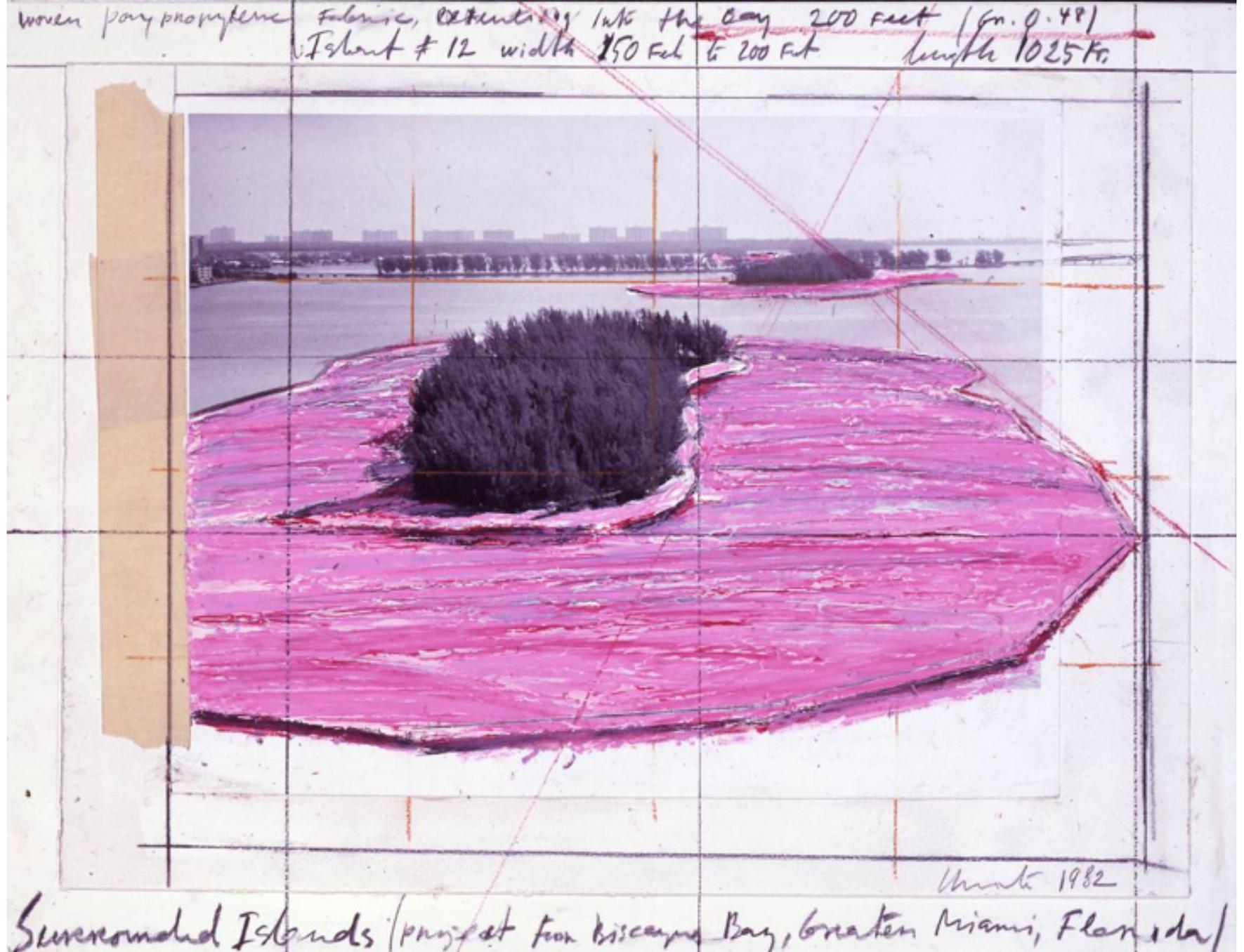
By [Tom Austin](#) Updated October 12, 2018 2:49 PM

Artist Christo shares the fascinating story behind Surrounded Islands, 1980–1983, and takes questions from media during a preview at PAMM on Tuesday, Oct. 2, 2018. By Carl Juste

New World Miami is sometimes short on a sense of history. But everyone who lived here in the 1980s remembers the 10 days that shook the world — or at least the world of art and pop culture — when artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude surrounded a seven-mile-long string of 11 Biscayne Bay islands in pink.

Those who weren't here then can relive the magic of May 1983's "Surrounded Islands" with the new exhibition at Pérez Art Museum Miami, "Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Surrounded Islands, Biscayne Bay, Greater Miami, Florida, 1980-83, A Documentary Exhibition."

Christo himself was here on a recent morning, wearing a pink tycoon-style dress shirt with white French cuffs and a determined air as he took in the show about the historic installation that jump-started the Miami art scene.



Perez Art Museum Miami will take a look back at the 1983 "Surrounded Islands" project by Christo and Jeanne-Claude. Courtesy of Perez Art Museum Miami

The "Surrounded Islands" exhibition — incorporating Christo's early drawings of the project, correspondence with government officials, documentary photographs, and one of the Styrofoam booms used to support about 6.5 million square feet of air-filled pink polypropylene fabric — has traveled to museums in such countries as France, Japan, Belgium and Switzerland. Only now is it making its American debut, bringing a neat symmetry to the life of Miami, PAMM and Christo himself.

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In the early 1980s, the late museum administrator Jan van der Marck — then working on the 1984 opening of his Center for the Fine Arts (CFA) in downtown Miami — championed the project. The CFA became Miami Art Museum and then Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM), now set in a Herzog & de Meuron building overlooking Biscayne Bay. Yes, the same waters that inspired “Surrounded Islands.”





The artist Christo worked with partner Jeanne-Claude to create the “Surrounded Islands” in Biscayne Bay in 1983. He died May 31, 2020.

For his part, Christo — like Cher, he has always been a one-name artist — knows that art is ultimately about a good time.

“ ‘Surrounded Islands’ is totally useless, totally irrational: It’s about physical pleasure and also the angst I feel as an artist, the fight to make something that pleases me first,” Christo recalls. “In my career, I’ve wrapped the Pont Neuf and the Reichstag, and ran a 24-mile-long fabric fence in California. Every project is a struggle, but I *need* contact with other people and physicality in my life. When I make art, I want to feel pleasure, but I also want to feel *real* things, like real fear and not just the illusion of fear.”

Ultimately, “Surrounded Islands” is a love story: Christo and Jeanne-Claude were born on the same day, June 13, 1935, and were together from 1958 — when they first met in Paris — to her death in 2009 in New York, where Christo still lives. The PAMM exhibition, which occupies an entire upstairs gallery, opens with an enormous photo mural of the couple holding hands and walking along a sandbar between islands 9 and 10, looking like two distracted aliens who had dropped down from Mars rather than Europe.

Christo, born Christo Vladimirov Javacheff in Gabrovo, Bulgaria, to a Bulgarian industrialist family, describes himself as an “educated Bulgarian Marxist who has learned to use capitalism for his art.” Unlike the contemporary era — when vastly less ambitious art projects are paid for by grants, condo developers, Louis Vuitton or a host of other problematic entities — Christo supports his work by selling preparatory drawings and collages. He believes in the freedom of paying retail: After a meeting with then-Florida Gov. Bob Graham and his cabinet, Christo immediately agreed to rent the submerged lands around the 11 islands of “Surrounded Islands” for \$12,827.08.

Jeanne-Claude, born Jeanne-Claude Marie Denat, hailed from a French military family and had a background that included a stint in Casablanca, Morocco, and schools in France and Switzerland. I first met the couple during the early 1980s, when the collectors Joan and Roger Sonnabend had a party for the artists at the hotel they owned, the Sonesta on Key Biscayne. The prevailing opinion then was that Christo was the dreamer, Jeanne-Claude the tough cookie. Whatever, the case, they were a tight couple, and without her,

“Surrounded Islands” might never have happened. She had the foresight to ban Christo — whom she called “Don Quixote” — from the more intense legal proceedings, when he was “out of myself” and at risk of saying something terminal.



Documentary photograph of “Surrounded Islands,” by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, from 1983. On display at Perez Art Museum Miami through Feb. 17, 2019. Wolfgang Volz *Courtesy of Christo*

The PAMM exhibition, which was coordinated by PAMM curator and longtime Miamian Rene Morales, traces the entire history of “Surrounded Islands.” In October of 1980, the CFA’s van der Marck invited the couple to Miami with the idea that they might create something for the June 1982 New World Festival of the Arts. The late Bob Herman, who was head of the Greater Miami Opera, organized The New World Festival, which featured work by playwright Edward Albee, choreographer Paul Taylor and artist David Hockney. Miami was always smarter than its clichéd image of sun, fun, and stupidity.

In December of 1980, Christo and Jeanne-Claude visited Miami for their first

reconnaissance mission. "Beth Dunlop, who wrote about architecture for the Miami Herald, drove us around Miami and Miami Beach, back and forth across the causeways," Christo recalls, "and that's when Jeanne-Claude thought of surrounding the islands in Biscayne Bay with fabric. We wanted to look at the way people in Miami live, between land and water: the color pink reflected the tropics and Latin culture."



The artist Christo signed books at the opening of the 2018 show at Perez Art Museum Miami commemorating the 1983 installation "Surrounded Islands." *Perez Art Museum Miami*

For Dunlop, who has since left the Herald, meeting the couple proved to be a singular experience: "Everyone thought they wanted to wrap a building, but they gave no hint of what they were thinking. We drove across the Julia Tuttle and other causeways before having a feast at Joe's Stone Crab. My admiration of their work has grown and grown: They make us see our world in profound and indelible new ways."

In April of 1981, "Surrounded Islands" was announced at a Miami press

conference. In July, the couple filed a joint permit application with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Department of Environmental Regulation: The New World Festival and the old Center for the Fine Arts were co-applicants, a risk that many cultural institutions wouldn't dare in this era, when Miami life is vastly less freewheeling.

In February of 1982, Christo and Jeanne-Claude met with Margarita Cano and Barbara Young, art services administrators for the Miami-Dade Public Library System. (The Vasari Project, an archive of Miami art history at the downtown Miami-Dade Public Library, still holds archival materials from "Surrounded Islands.") In June of 1982, at the old downtown library in Bayfront Park, Young and Cano organized the "Surrounded Islands, Project for Biscayne Bay, Greater Miami, Florida, Documentation Exhibition."

For Young, still an art librarian/curator, "Surrounded Islands" was a shining moment for the library and Miami itself. "We tested pink fabric on the roof of the library," she remembers, "and they loaned us work for the library's Artmobile. I worked on one of the islands, and it was one of those things where you think to yourself, 'This is madness.' But in the end, it was so beautiful, and people from all over the world came to Miami."

In April of 1983, Christo and Jeanne-Claude moved to Miami and stayed on South Beach through the end of the project. "We took over the Leslie Hotel on Ocean Drive," Christo remembers, "and everything felt Bohemian and chic, a bit like Europe, without all the development and high-rise buildings in South Beach now."



To create 1983's "Surrounded Islands," artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude wrapped 11 Biscayne Bay islands in 6.5 million square feet of fabric secured by Styrofoam, steel cables and an anchoring system. A retrospective of the work is on display through Feb. 17, 2019 at the Perez Art Museum Miami. Wolfgang Volz *Courtesy of Christo*

I remember seeing the couple hanging out on Ocean Drive in the evenings, and it was easy to see that Miami was about to change forever. The PAMM exhibit can make any native miss the looseness of old Miami. The Department of Environmental Regulation issued their permit on pink paper. At official City of Miami meetings, Christo would bring along the Maysles filmmaking brothers; their documentary "Islands," about the 1980s project, will be screened during the PAMM exhibition.) At the PAMM preview, Christo talked about one of the judges during the "Surrounded Islands" proceedings — environmentalists tried to stop the project — and the judge's relief to have Christo in his courtroom: The early 1980s was also the Cocaine Cowboys era, and the judge's professional life was consumed with drug dealers.

PAMM has also made its own video project, "Remembering Surrounded

Islands," for the exhibition: The film features 1983 versions of Jimmy Buffett (not a Christo fan), an impossibly young journalist named Michael Putney, and "The Count of Anti-Christo," a Miami idiot who wrapped himself in garbage bags for TV crews. "Remembering Surrounded Islands" also features Miamians Ruth Shack, Dunlop, Cano, Young and artist Carlos Betancourt, who says in the film, "I went to Pelican Harbor, where they had the boats and pink fabric, and this was, to me, *the world*."

Miami truly was the center of the world during "Surrounded Islands," and after 35 years, Christo is still in the game, "Art is about *things* now, not the *real* thing, and 'Surrounded Islands' was *very* real."

If You Go

What: "Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Surrounded Islands, Biscayne Bay, Greater Miami, Florida, 1980-83, A Documentary Exhibition."

Where: Pérez Art Museum Miami

When: Through Feb. 17, 2019

Hours: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday and Tuesday; Closed Wednesday; 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Thursday; 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Friday through Sunday.

Admission: \$16 for adults, \$12 for seniors, students, and youths ages 7 to 18; free for children 6 and under

Info: 305-375-3000; www.pamm.org

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