Christo Imagines Central Park in Saffron
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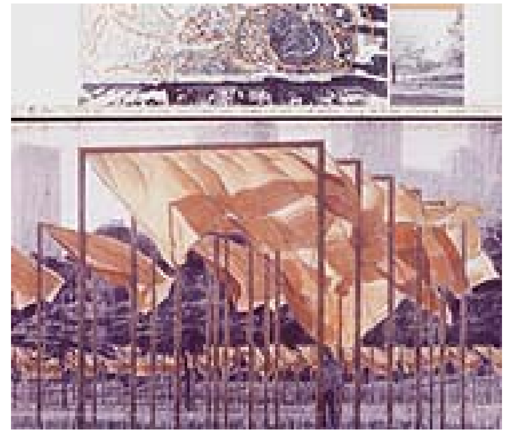

CHRISTO calls Jeanne-Claude "Amour." When he is agitated, which is often, he calls her "Cherie," as in "Nononono, Cherie!" When he decides to let her win, he says "Madam." Then he kisses her. It is necessary for him to do this carefully, since she wears a wide slash of Orange Slip lipstick, which she reapplies often. The lipstick is calculated to clash with her hair, which is a species of the bordello red once standard in B westerns.

"Nononono, Cherie, please!" Christo is saying one recent afternoon in their downtown Manhattan digs. He is vainly trying to deter Jeanne-Claude from emptying the contents of a bulky manila folder labeled "The Gates, Project for Central Park, New York City" onto a coffee table laden with books about their monumental art projects.

Christo doesn't really want to talk about "The Gates" right now. He'd rather talk about "Christo and Jeanne-Claude in the Vogel Collection," a four-decade survey of their work currently at the National Gallery in Washington. There one can see photographs and drawings of the Reichstag they wrapped with silvery fabric, of the 11 islands in Biscayne Bay, Florida, they surrounded with hot-pink cloth, and the 1,340 blue umbrellas they deployed across the rice paddies of Japan.

But "The Gates" is too irresistible to ignore. Christo and Jeanne-Claude propose to festoon 26 miles of Central Park's walkways in swatches of translucent saffron fabric supported by thousands of metal gates. They first conceived the project in 1979, and though it was rejected in 1981, they have never given up on it. Now its fortunes could change, in large part because of the election of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg.

Mr. Bloomberg was a supporter of the project in private life, and he has already begun to let artworks reach farther into the park as part of the current Whitney Biennial. All at once, in a city determined to re-energize tourism after the attacks of Sept. 11, a boffo attraction might not be such a bad idea.

Other things, too, have changed since 1981. In an art world awash in performance and installations, Christo and Jeanne- Claude's panoramic collaborations no longer appear to be bizarre exceptions, though the very fact of the pair's celebrity continues to make them suspect to many art insiders. And the view that huge crowds are anathema to Central Park has shifted as well, now that rock stars and the Disney corporation have staged extravaganzas there.

Drawings for the Central Park project show a meandering trail of 11,000 rectangular steel gates, each 15 feet tall with a free- hanging panel of material waving from the top. The gates would begin at the park's pedestrian entrances and continue at nine- foot intervals. Viewed from a distance, the billowing cloth would outline the park's cat's cradle of winding promenades, which Christo describes as "very Victorian, roundish." "The Gates" is designed to be installed for two weeks in the winter, after the New York City Marathon and before the forsythia blooms.

The mayor can't single-handedly make "The Gates" happen, and whether it will is still a delicate matter. All he can do is suggest a strategy, open doors and lead the way. It will take all of Christo and Jeanne- Claude's considerable capacity for seducing, cajoling, badgering, politicking and educating to win the support of the five community boards surrounding the park, the parks commissioner and a healthy majority of the Central Park

Conservancy, the nonprofit group that manages and supports the park. "Central Park is like the Mona Lisa of landscape architecture," says Christo. "The conservative vision is that the park should be closed like the Metropolitan Museum. If they had a chance they would charge for tickets, like a museum. On the liberal side, the park is the only place where underprivileged people can go in the summertime; the only place."

Jeanne-Claude, who like her husband goes by one name, interjects: "They don't have a house in the Hamptons." She is perched at the edge of the herring-bone tweed sofa, which Christo leans against, preferring a seat on the floor.

They have yet to approach Mayor Bloomberg directly, though they were invited to his inauguration.

"I think that it is decent to let him do his very hard work first, because no mayor of New York City has ever had such problems," Jeanne-Claude says.

"Horrible, horrible," Christo says.

They are all too aware of the difficulties they face, including the fact that the 1979 cost estimate — $8 million, and who knows how much now — raises hackles, even though the couple finance all their projects themselves from sales of Christo's work. They do not accept donations; they do not take public money. To do so would compromise their artistic control.

Last time around, there were irate letters to the editor and two negative editorials in The New York Times. One, in October 1980, appeared under the headline "A Philistine Shrug for a Droopy Idea."

"Central Park needs loving hands of restoration, not exploitation," the editorial said.

In rebuttal, the art historian Leo Steinberg wrote in The Times, "Those who have followed Christo's work know that every one of his projects, once realized, engendered joy and elation, and that every one of them is resisted initially with sanctimonious appeals to higher ideals, such as economy or the inviolability of nature and art."

It was to no avail. The next year, Gordon J. Davis, then Commissioner of the Department of Parks and Recreation, turned down "The Gates" in a 107-page document that he has called "a major statement of philosophy and principles governing stewardship of Central Park."

The turndown did not stop the Christos, as they are collectively called, although his family name is Javacheff. They turned their focus elsewhere; they are accustomed to projects that take time to mature. It took 24 years and the fall of the Soviet empire to get the permissions that led to the "Wrapped Reichstag" in 1995, when five million visitors went to view the emblem of Germany's cataclysmic history swathed in a million square feet of billowing silvery drapery.

"We used to say that we have to live with the consequences of the `Wrapped Reichstag' on our shoulders," Jeanne-Claude says. She pauses theatrically. "People were telling us, `We do not want five million visitors here.' Now, I do not believe that the City of New York in the present situation does not want visitors, and a good influx of visitors."

Christo and Jeanne-Claude have lived and worked in a former industrial building a block north of Canal Street since 1968, the year they proposed wrapping the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum and No. 1 Times Square. None of those projects were realized. In fact, there has never been a Christo and Jeanne-Claude project in New York City, even though they like to say: "We don't live in America at all. We live in New York, Manhattan."

They were born on the same day, June 13, 1935; he, the son of the owner of a small chemical factory (later nationalized under communism) in Bulgaria; she, who became the step-daughter of a French general, in Morocco. She's the pedagogue, driving home sound bites with pointed fingers, repeating them in case you didn't get it the first

time. He's the dreamer, the artist in the pre-Warhol sense, romantic and visionary, with fly-away hair. The new United States edition of their biography, "Christo and Jeanne-Claude," by Burt Chernow (St. Martin's Press), tells it all.

"People don't know us," Jeanne-Claude says. "We told Burt things as personal as if he had been sleeping with us." It is an authorized biography; the Christos provided the photographs from their archives and hold the rights.

After enduring the standard Socialist Realist art education, Christo smuggled himself out of Bulgaria in 1957 in a freight car. He met Jeanne-Claude de Guillebon the following year in Paris, where the penniless but hunky émigré bedded, impregnated (the result is their son, Cyril) and eventually wed her. She knew nothing about art. He became her tutor. And then, as his art became more ambitious and environmental, as it expanded the themes of border crossings, fragility and transience that had marked both their lives, she became his collaborator.

In the old days, before feminism, Christo stood on lecture stages alone and signed the work alone on the theory that no one would permit a woman to work on the scale they did. In 1994, they went public and began to sign work together. Basically, if it's indoors and handmade, it's by Christo; if it's outdoors, it's by Christo and Jeanne-Claude.

Their Barnum & Bailey impulses to "borrow a space and create gentle disturbances for a few days," as Christo puts it, are not inexpensive. The "Wrapped Reichstag" cost the artists $13 million; "The Umbrellas," $26 million. To pay for their projects the Christos borrow from the bank through their C.V.J. Corporation and pay it back by selling art.

Preliminary drawings for "The Gates," for example, go for up to $260,000 each. After the completion of each project, they mount a traveling exhibition of drawings, collages, engineering studies, fabric samples, scale models and photographs. The Smithsonian American Art Museum is trying to raise $7 million to acquire the 349-piece "Running Fence" exhibition (24 miles of nylon fencing the color of wave caps that marched across Northern California ranch land to the sea in 1976) for the museum's re- opening in 2005.

The Christos find it necessary to repeat endlessly that they pay for their projects themselves because they do them for themselves. They do them to see how it will look and feel. No photograph can suggest the experience of a Christo and Jeanne-Claude project in real time. Everything is present at once: landscape, weather, history, politics, emotion, quixotic human encounters and instantaneous changes in the quality of light, as if from inside an Impressionist painting.

For the 1969 "Wrapped Coast, Little Bay, One Million Feet, Australia," they swaddled the craggy coast in a sand-colored fabric that they call Erosion Control. For the 1972 "Valley Curtain, Grand Hogback, Rifle, Colorado," they hung an orange curtain that reached 365 feet high across a gap in the Grand Hogback Mountain Range. They garbed the Pont Neuf in Paris in 454,178 square feet of chic champagne-hued cloth and simultaneously dispersed 1,340 blue umbrellas across the rice paddies of Ibaraki, Japan, and 1,760 yellow umbrellas across the sere hills of Southern California.

"Our art has absolutely no purpose, except to be a work of art," says Jeanne- Claude. "We do not give messages."

"It is absolutely irrational," says Christo, whose formative experiences in Bulgaria left him with an aversion to anything bearing the least resemblance to agit-prop. There, for a time, it was his task to construct Potemkin Village situations along the railroad, hiding the misery of the collective countryside. Now his projects have the opposite effect. They reveal the systems that govern their sites: the effect of Germany's past on its future at the Reichstag, environmental emergencies in Biscayne Bay.

The Christos are an act, and they take it on the road. They have perfected the long process through which they try, person by person, power group by power group, to get the permissions and money they need to complete

their projects. They lecture (they will be at the Guggenheim Museum on May 7), wine and dine the influential, the suspicious and the sympathetic, meet with politicians, community boards, engineers and environmental groups. Their museum exhibitions are usually for a cause: to persuade people to do a project, to document it when it is over or to sell work.

The National Gallery show, through June 23, offers a rare opportunity to see "The Gates" in the context of all the Christos' projects. The show is a tribute to their friends of 30 years, the collectors Herbert and Dorothy Vogel, whose idea it was. In 1991, the museum acquired the Vogels' collection of more than 2,000 contemporary artworks, including many by the Christos.

For four years in the 1960's, Christo constructed miniature, and then larger, storefronts. Their windows were draped in fabric and often lighted from within, suggesting intimate mysteries and disengaging the work from the "commodifying" that many other artists also shunned at the time. Two of the little-known storefronts with which he made his solo debut at the Leo Castelli Gallery in 1966 introduce the National Gallery show.

The wrapped packages in the exhibition — including one from 1961 which preceded the Christos to the United States — are touchingly pathetic, poetic and handmade, like the prized possessions of 20th-century refugees, with whom Christo and Jeanne- Claude still strongly identify.

The drawings, for all their insouciance, are working documents, conceptual in purpose, assembled with relevant engineering studies, contour maps, street plans. Among these are plans for their other current venture, "Over the River, Project for the Arkansas River, Colorado." For that, they propose to roof a 40-mile section of the river with intermittent segments of shimmering transparent panels, which will be experienced differently from cars passing above or from rafts below. "Over the River" is currently making its slow way through the environmental assessment stage. Thus far it has cost the Christos $1.75 million.

At home in Manhattan, drawings for "The Gates" fill the wall behind the sofa; drawings for "Over the River" face it. In a sense it is a race to determine which has the best possibility of getting the go-ahead first: Eastern or Western, urban or rural.

"At the start of a project we never know what it is," Christo says. "And this is so exciting, because the permitting process gives all the soul, all the energy to the work. It is not invented by us."

In the meantime they are setting about beguiling and converting the necessary "shakers and movers," as Christo calls them.

"As we get older and Christo's hair turns gray and mine turns red, and people know us a little better, it doesn't make things easier to show our previous work," says Jeanne-Claude. "They just express themselves differently. Now they say, 'What you do is marvelous, but please not here!'"

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