

going out guide

Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Over the River

Note: This event has already occurred.

202-387-2151

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TYPE: Mixed

Media

INFORMATION:

202-387-2151

Overview



Wolfgang Volz

This exhibition features collages, maps and drawings that chronicle the artists' preparations as they intend to suspend silvery fabric across the Arkansas River in Colorado.

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Christo River Show Doesn't Float Everyone's Boat

By Blake Gopnik

Washington Post Staff Writer

Wednesday, October 22, 2008

Museum-goers have been asked to consider good art and bad art, art that plods and art that amazes. But they're not often asked to consider art that does not exist. That, however, is what's happening in a touring exhibition called "Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Over the River, a Work in Progress," which the Phillips Collection organized and debuted last weekend.

This odd show, which has been granted one full floor of the museum's special-exhibitions space, presents a work of art that has yet to be made, and may never be. That work is -- or hopes to be -- a classic piece of the trademark "environmental art" turned out by veteran artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude. (Those are the stage names of the Bulgarian-born Christo Vladimirov Javacheff and his French wife, Jeanne-Claude de Guillebon.)

The couple who brought you islands off Miami petticoated in pink, the wrapped Reichstag in Berlin and thousands of orange "gates" in Central Park are now planning to suspend eight huge panels of silvered cloth over a 40-mile stretch of the Arkansas River in Colorado. For two weeks, the project will -- sorry, may -- cover the river with almost six miles' worth of translucent canopies, hovering between eight and 25 feet above the water and reaching almost bank to bank. (A gap is planned on either side to allow visitors to get underneath, and to minimize environmental impact.)

The piece may end up looking great, and changing the way we think of nature and the works of man. (One of Christo's first great projects, the "Running Fence" that stretched across 24 miles of California hills in 1976, seemed to do just that.) Or, as an example of 1970s art held over to the 21st century, "Over the River" may turn out to be a vast waste of time, money and resources. There's no way to know unless, or until, the thing gets built.

After all, the whole point of this kind of art is to make work that's so big,

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so ambitious and so full of impact that only nature can contain it. It's about escaping white-walled galleries, not filling them.

At the Phillips, the galleries' white walls are filled with ranks of engineering drawings, aerial photos and maps used in planning the project. Dull as that sounds, those are some of the more interesting objects in the show, since they give real insight into the project's design and logistics, over the 16 years since it was first conceived.

They are certainly more compelling than the piles of pedestrian photographs documenting the C. & J.-C. team as it headed into nature to choose a site and test-drive the design. Those could come from any Outward Bound brochure. (How's this for the label on a picture in a world-famous art gallery: "On a hot day in August, the team cools off with an ice-cream break.")

And even those images are less eye-glazing than photo after photo after photo showing meetings between the artists and the quizzical stakeholders whose go-ahead they need. (The project, still not approved, won't happen at least until 2012.) The pictures tell us that there have been objections to surmount, but no one bothers to let us in on what those might have been. We're not given anything that would let us decide, for ourselves, whether to take sides with the artists or with their opponents.

It's easy to think of reasons to question the project. Consider, for instance, the canopy's 100,000 square yards of custom-woven "fibrillated polypropylene fabric coated with vaporized aluminum on both sides." We're told it will be recycled after use, and that's all well and good. But it ignores the most important of the three R's of environmentalism: "reduce." And just think of all the fuel that will be burnt as urban SUVers flock to this attraction, sited more than two hours from the nearest major cities. There's a sense that this kind of '70s-era "environmental art" has more links to heavy industry -- to old-fashioned well-drilling and dam-building -- or to industrial-scale tourism than to some more recent art that's been made with genuine ecological feeling. (A summer project at the Contemporary Museum in Baltimore, for instance, featured an artist who replants ornamental lawns with attractive vegetable gardens.)


This whole exhibition feels more like a publicity campaign for a product than like a considered investigation of an important aesthetic event.

Strangely, that's especially the case for those objects in the show that look most like art, at least according to the hackneyed notions about art that Christo used to fight.

Hanging between the blueprints and the meeting shots and the maps, there are a bunch of huge pastel-and-collage drawings done by Christo in "preparation" for the finished project. They've got some of the look of true preparatory drawings -- erasures and grid lines and cross-outs. But in such deluxe and obviously arty objects, that look feels entirely faked. Mostly these drawings recall the hundreds or even thousands of other, nearly identical drawings that Christo has turned out, and that he sells to rich collectors and museums to help fund his grandiose outdoor ventures.

Almost everyone agrees that museums are on a special-exhibition treadmill, and that it's exhausting them. Eliza Rathbone, chief curator of the Phillips, has admitted to the problem. So has Dorothy Kosinski, the museum's new director. (Note that this Christo show was conceived under her predecessor.) So here's an easy measure for the worth of any show: Would a museum-goer's precious time be better spent in it, or in the permanent collection?

Right now at the Phillips, the answer's easy. Unless you've a yen to see photos of famous artists eating ice cream, skip "Over the River." The museum's got Vuillards and Klees and Rothkos that are really worth your while.

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