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The Floating Piers

An artist’s ability to envision something out of nothing is extraordinary. They sculpt with the heart, feeling the contours of their creation with the soul and breathe life into every grain of sand and clay that goes into their creation. They create with love and a fiery passion, chiseling away deep into the night, all to feel under their hands what they envision in the minds. However, molding sand and clay to create a sculpture needs a mind that could create something extraordinary out of nothing. The entire process begins and culminates when the artist’s vision is finally realized, with its physical manifestation standing right before him. While all art forms are majestic in its own way, the process of working with Land Art is something completely unique. Astonishing in its manifestation, the artists that work with land art have a very peculiar sense for foresight. In areas where other artisans see creation, something new and unique, they see possibilities. Possibilities of what an object was, and what it could be. They envision things in a different way, and no one has been more different in their approach to art than Christo and his lovely wife, the fiery-haired Jeanne-Claude.

Land art has some exemplary pieces under its umbrella that are not only remembered with great reverence in the art world, but they are also deemed awe-worthy by visitors as well. From Andres Amador’s *Earthscapes* (Amador), to Martin Hill’s *Synergy* (Hill), *Desert Breath* by D.A.ST. Arteam (Stratou, Stratou and Konstantinidis), there is no shortage of memorable pieces of land art (Mahan). However, Christo and Jeanne-Claude were in a class of their own. The couple, born on the same day i.e. 13th of June 1935, were a match made in heaven. Typically, artists have their muses, ones that inspire them to create a certain piece of art. However, Jeanne-Claude was Christo’s partner in every sense of the word. The Bulgarian-born Christo met the Moroccan Jeanne-Claude in Paris when she commissioned him to create a portrait of her mother. They fell in love through creating art, and the rest, they say, is history. The pair was a true master at Land art and their creations are still a marvel for the art world, despite none of them being permanent in nature, to date. They also excelled at creating environmental art, where every single piece of the exhibit is taken down in such a manner that it leaves behind no trace. Additionally, all the materials used are recycled (Hutter and Throsby). Commenting on the matter, Christo is of the opinion that it takes courage to put up a piece of art that does not remain. That it is gone after it’s finished, with only drawings and collages left behind (Getlein and Gilbert).

The duo had been created art for the better part of the late 20th century. In a way, they can be considered pioneers in the field. Land art stands out from other forms in terms of its placement. Other artists, they create art based on the location, the size of the sculpture needed or the canvas it would look good on. However, with land art, also known as Earthworks, the equation changes a bit. The artists have to not only envision their project but also have to look for the perfect, natural location for its execution. Christo and Jeanne-Claude extensively traveled the globe extensively, looking for the right locations for their projects. They funded them through private sales and while the artwork was mostly credited to Christo, it was retroactively credited to both of them (Grimes, Lewis, and Lewis). Their work has always been impressive, controversial and inspiring. While they have maintained that it does not have any commentary or meaning associated with it, it is rather hard to believe that given the purpose of their very first art installment, *The Iron Curtain*. It condemned the formation of the Berlin wall, using 86 colorful oil barrels put in place in a Paris alleyway to block the flow of traffic. The 4 meter-high-wall stayed up for hours, before being taken down. The never called it anything but a response piece with no political connotation attached to it. However, it had quite an impact on the general public and helped Christo make a name for themselves (Cekander).

The dynamic duo has a number of illustrious and impactful projects to their name, from *Wrapped Coast* in 1969 to the *Valley Curtain* in 1972 to the *Running Fence* in 1976, Pont Neuf and Reichstag projects, and finally *The Gates* in 2005, their projects have been applauded (Bourdon). Their work has always inspired debate, for being ambitious and yet thrilling at the very same time. They have had environmental conservationists on their heels time and again. However, one of the biggest examples that not only shows their affinity to environmentally friendly projects but also their ambition is *The Floating Piers* (Christo and Jeanne-Claude). It was a site-specific work of art that consisted of 70,000 sq. m. of saffron yellow fabric. It was carried or suspended over a modular floating dock system that comprised of 226,000 polyethylene cubes. It was exhibited in June of 2016 between the San Paolo Islands of Sulzano and Monte Isola, although it has been in the works since 1970 (Brownlee). The exhibit remained open for the public until July 2016 and lasted for a total of 16 days.

Christo himself called the project irrational and useless, stating that projects like these only exist because he and Jeanne-Claude would like for them to exist. If people, other than the pair, like them as well, then it is the icing on the cake (Povoledo). However, according to Baracco and Wright, the Floating Piers is a powerful work, playing on the principles of aesthetic-ness. While it could have had meaning associated with it and the general public would have loved it, the project is brilliant the way it is and the idea behind it, the sense or the ability to walk on water, just makes it all the more attractive. Their work stood for joy and beauty, in their own words. It was created from patience and made with pure passion (MacGregor). MacGregor from the Smithsonian saw a reflection of his energy in the floating piers. Christo wanted his audience to experience the saffron pier with the platforms, the pristine blue water of the lake and the mountains capped with green trees and white snow. He wanted to them to see a cohesive picture of what he called, not the fact that he built a floating orange pier.

The exhibit, despite the number of days it stayed in place or the number of visitors it received, didn’t leave any harmful implications on the environment. In fact, the team of individuals working on the project made sure that the area was left in a cleaner state then it was when they arrived. This is rather similar to what Robert Smithson did with the Spiral Jetty earthwork sculpture. It was constructed back in 1970 and was considered the world’s foremost example of land art. It is an iconic 150 feet-long and 15 feet-wide structure has that was created out of mud, basal salts, and even salt crystals. It juts out in a clockwise formation from the shore of the lack and was even submerged under the rising waters at one point. However, it resurfaced once the waters of the Great Salt Lake in Utah receded as a result of drought and it was open to public viewing.

Smithson was inspired by the outer space when he created the spiral jetty. It is easy to understand, since only a year prior to its inception, Neil Armstrong was the first human to set foot on the moon. Thus, while humanity was in the process of reevaluating its relationship with the great cosmos, Smithson was putting his very own twist on things. Interestingly enough, the spiral jetty uses an anti-clockwise spiral. This is a symbolic representation of time moving backward, as opposed to taking its natural course (Phaidon). The spiral jetty was created with a theme in mind. Its placement was deliberate, with the area being cited as a possible oil drilling source. It showed signs of people trying to extract the oil that seeped from the ground and Smithson chose this place for precisely that reason. He called it a “secession of man-made systems” that were closed in “abandoned hopes” (Capps). It is the only piece of art that even comes close to exploring the idea of walking on water, but it still doesn’t even come close to the unique perspective of Christo’s work.

Christo called is art a ‘madness of things to be done’. He and Jeanne-Claude considered that artists do not retire. They simply stop making art when they die. A decade following the death of his collaborator and life partner, Christo continues to work on the projects they created together. He tries to see what she would think of the work he is doing now, and he continues. One step, one artwork at a time, he tried to create installation art transformative perspective. The mere scale the projects were constructed on were legendary and attracted both notoriety and attention. There was no symbol associated with most of his work, but the symmetry, texture, variety and value associated with them gave his earthwork cultural meaning. Every visitor saw something in his work, and formed the inspiration for many things for years to come.

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