

## Artist Christo revisits the MCA to commemorate his 1969 wrapping project



The artist Christo talks about his 1969 wrap project at the Museum of Contemporary Art when the museum was still on Ontario Street. (Nancy Stone / Chicago Tribune)

By **Cindy Dampier**

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**C**hristo appears on the broad steps of the Museum of Contemporary Art, caught for a moment against the glassy facade, amid a clot of tourists as he reaches the door. Through the glass he catches the eye, his lavender shirt with its crisp white collar, visible in a neat triangle beneath his khaki safari jacket. His shoes are well-polished black oxfords, stylish in spite of his age. His hair, white at 82, waves like an unruly flag, a signature nod to some other-ness — a person you might pass on the street and wonder about: Eccentric academic? No. Film director? Perhaps.

The obstruction passes, and he is met by museum staff who shepherd him behind the scenes, a benevolently amused honored visitor, passing through a momentary blockage.

Christo — who with his late wife, Jeanne-Claude, is best known for creating iconic works of environmental art such as 2005's "The Gates," in New York's [Central Park](#), or 1985's "The Pont Neuf Wrapped," in Paris — is visiting the [MCA](#) to commemorate the museum's 50th anniversary and one of his

first large-scale works in the U.S., “Wrapped Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago” in which he wrapped the MCA in canvas, completed in a blustery January when the museum was still in its infancy.

Yet, though reminiscence is in order, Christo is in forward motion — and perhaps more relevant than ever. “Artist is not a profession,” he says, “it’s an existence.”

Last year, his “Floating Piers” project on Lake Iseo, Italy, drew 1.2 million visitors. “Watching the reactions of the people,” says gallery owner Isabelle Bscher, “it was like Jesus walking on the water or something — it was incredible.” Bscher’s **Galerie Gmurzynska** is offering original Christo drawings of the wrapped MCA project, never shown in Chicago before, at this week’s [Expo Chicago](#). They are expected to sell for \$450,000 to \$850,000 — the artist finances his projects through sales of such work, never accepting commissions.

“We have to be sincere to ourselves,” he says, “and so we never do commissioned work and I’m very radical in that way. It makes many people in the art milieu think I’m crazy. But I’m not crazy, it’s my artistic freedom.”

In January, in the midst of an outcry over the Trump administration’s planned slashing of arts and humanities funding, he exercised that freedom by quietly posting a note on his website announcing that he was pulling out of a project he had been working on for 20 years. Though he insists he had lost interest in the project, which involved stretching fabric panels over the Arkansas River in Colorado, he notes that “the project was all on federal land, you know. And I wasn’t going to deal with the new administration.” Other artist protests may have been louder, but Christo’s felt significant. By some measures, the project was tantalizingly close to realization. And the artist’s investment in it had already reached \$15 million.

“Some artists were protesting to get publicity or attention for themselves,” says Bscher, “but he was very elegant with what he did. He is a very refined person, like an Old World gentleman.”

Still, “Christo was very upset,” says Scott Hodes, Chicago attorney and Christo’s legal adviser and close friend since 1964. “He feels very strongly that art is imbued in our society, it’s what helps us hang on to our humanity. And when he saw what the administration was doing, he said, ‘I can’t do this anymore.’”

Publicly, Christo declines to elaborate on the politics of his decision. “All interpretations are legitimate,” he says, adopting a sly version of the artist’s classic response. “People can interpret my decision any way they like and it is legitimate.” But in removing the work itself, he has left in its place a different kind of art — that of a resounding, pointed silence.

“I escaped from a communist country (Czechoslovakia),” Christo says, talking on the phone from the building in Manhattan where he and Jeanne-Claude lived since they arrived in the U.S. in 1964. “And I will never give up one millimeter of my freedom.” He owns the building, which the couple, who spent three years in the U.S. illegally, bought after Christo became a U.S. citizen in 1973. It houses his studio (on the fifth floor, a walk-up) and living space. He works standing, with no assistant, completing the

drawings, collages and models that give shape to his monumental ideas. He has refused to add an elevator.

Those who know him understand his fiercely independent, exacting nature, and rely on the accompanying twitch of wry humor. Hodes, who met the artist not long after he and Jeanne-Claude moved to New York, considers Christo a brother and remembers the pair in 1964 as “this incredible couple. And she was a gorgeous woman.” Charmed, he assisted them with an immigration question, and “that was the start of a friendship that’s still going strong over 50 years later,” he says.

Hodes’ life as a corporate attorney was changed in 1968, when he got a call from Jeanne-Claude asking for help with a Chicago project — the wrapping of the MCA. Born in Bulgaria and freshly arrived from Paris, Christo spoke hardly any English, yet the artists and their young attorney plunged into the murky world of Chicago city government. “First,” Christo says, “we had to get approval from the Fire Department. There was always something with the Fire Department.”

Concerns about the canvas that would cover the museum were eventually set aside, and with Hodes’ help, the necessary permissions were granted. In January 1969, Christo began wrapping the museum building with heavy, dark canvas, securing it with ropes. “It made very gothic folds,” he says. “I was very excited to do this project in the winter, because I was thinking to have a snow, so the snow would come down in the folds of the fabric. And we had a snow, it made a beautiful effect.” Inside the museum, the artists used painters’ canvas drop cloths to cover the floor and a staircase, enveloping the space.

Reactions ranged from astonishment to confusion. “I had never been involved in anything like this before,” says Hodes, who has handled legal matters for every Christo and Jeanne-Claude project since, “but I was thrilled. And I’m sure people must have thought, ‘What is that artist doing?’”

Chicagoans had to remove their shoes before walking around inside.

“In the evening when the guard tried to be sure that nobody remained in the museum,” Christo says, “the fabric was making it a very silent and very pristine space, and he went down the stairway and he found a young couple making love in the drop cloth.” He pauses: “That project was very inspirational.”

Christo and Jeanne-Claude have often pointed out that the palette of materials they draw on in creating iconic environmental works has enormous range: Fabric, construction materials, people and even the governmental gears of approval processes, public meetings, environmental impact studies. “My art is involving everything,” says Christo. “Much more than any other artist, my art is involved with the real world, with politics and real governors, senators, parliamentarians. I am probably exposed to the real world much more than any other artist.” He is particularly proud that his proposal to wrap Germany’s Reichstag, which houses that country’s parliament, was approved in 1995 over the objections of powerful chancellor Helmut Kohl. “No other artist can say that.”

“For many many months, sometimes 25 years, the work physically does not exist,” says Christo, “but

already has a participatory public. ‘The Gates’ (in Central Park, which was realized in 2005) took 26 years, for 26 years people were thinking about that project, it will be beautiful, be ugly. We like to have that energy to carry the work.”

“In so many ways, what Christo has to deal with is all bureaucracy,” says MCA chief curator Michael Darling. “It’s a lot of dealing with these bureaucratic hurdles to be able to do these projects.” But, he adds, “Social awareness of all kinds is what gives art power and strength. It binds the artist to the general public. It’s when artists become too hermetic and cut off from common experience that I worry. His work has developed in such a way that it’s more open and inviting over time.”

It’s true: More recent projects such as “The Gates” and 2016’s “Floating Piers” beckoned visitors almost irresistibly, leaving an impression of wonder. In a document on their website written by Jeanne-Claude before her death from a brain aneurysm in 2009, she adds to the list of the artists’ materials “the quality of love and tenderness that human beings have for what does not last. ... For instance, if someone were to say, ‘Oh, look on the right, there is a rainbow,’ one would never answer, ‘I will look at it tomorrow.’ “

“This is something very basic, but very important,” says Christo, “that our projects happen once in a lifetime. That one moment happens, you cannot experience it unless you are there. It’s one moment. Like our life.”