A BIG IMPORTANT ART BOOK: NOW WITH WOMEN!
Profiles of Unstoppable Female Artists—and Projects to Help You Become One
DANIELLE KRYSA, FOUNDER OF THE JEALOUS CURATOR
Chapter 11

SHARE WITH THE PUBLIC

like Janet Echelman, Bunnie Reiss, and Victoria Villasana
Janet Echelman
B. 1966 | USA

American artist Janet Echelman was raised in Tampa, Florida. As a child she was a serious classical pianist, which was great help when applying to Harvard. There she studied history and documentary filmmaking and later earned a master’s degree in counseling psychology. So no, Janet hadn’t spent her childhood drawing, painting, and dreaming of creating huge public installations all over the world. In fact, she’d never even really made art until university, when she decided to take an elective drawing course—mainly as a way to minimize her reading load.

"After that drawing class, I had a chance to take one more art course before graduation, then realized being an artist was the only thing I wanted to do.

I thought I should give it a try, because there would always be time for compromise if I failed.

Upon graduating, now ready and excited to be an artist, Janet applied to seven art schools—and was rejected by all of them. No problem: Janet would create her own curriculum. She moved to Hong Kong in 1987 on a Rotary Club-sponsored scholarship to be an ambassador of goodwill and took the opportunity to study Chinese calligraphy and brush-painting. When her scholarship ran out, she made her way to Bali with only $300 in her pocket and began learning from local artists to combine traditional Indonesian batik with contemporary painting. Sadly, her bamboo house was destroyed by a fire, so Janet decided to return to the States. For seven years she taught and was an artist-in-residence at Harvard—until she was offered an opportunity to travel again, which of course, she took. Janet returned to Asia, this time taking on a Fulbright lectureship in India.
LEFT TO RIGHT
She Changes, Porto, Portugal, 2009, painted galvanized steel and TENAX® architectural fiber, 41.4 x 73 x 48.8 m. Porto, Portugal.
As if it Were Already Here, Boston, MA, 2019, hand-painted stainless and braided high-density polyester fibers with colored LED lighting, 182.9 x 109.7 x 91.4 m. Boston, Massachusetts.
1.26 Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2012-2013, Spectra® fiber, high-density polyester fiber, and colored lighting, 70 x 42.2 x 9 m. Amsterdam, Netherlands.

The answer is, of course, everything she has made since then. Janet makes beautiful floating sculptures as big as the buildings they float beside, creating breathtaking centerpieces for cities around the world from London, Amsterdam, and Boston to San Francisco, Singapore, and Sydney. And Janet’s nets were only the beginning: she has also started working with atomized water particles. She continues to push her ideas with artwork that—thanks to wind and light—constantly transforms itself right in front of your eyes.

Janet collaborates with a huge range of people to produce these pieces, often referring to public art as “team sport.” Her team began with the fishermen in India and now includes aeronautical and mechanical engineers, architects, lighting designers, landscape architects, and fabricators.

The result is a truly communal experience, not only for the team involved, but for the thousands of viewers who walk by, drive past, and lie under Janet’s soft, flowing, ultralightweight foams of artistry and engineering.

Public Accolades for a Public Installation Artist
Janet Echelman is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, and her TED Talk “Taking Imagination Seriously” has been translated into thirty-five languages with 1.8 million views. She was named an Architectural Digest Innovator for “changing the very essence of urban spaces,” received the Smithsonian American Ingenuity Award in Visual Arts, and ranked #1 on Oprah’s list of “50 Things That Make You Say Wow!”
Since she was a painter at this point, the plan was of course to paint and exhibit her paintings during her time in India. Janet had her supplies shipped to Mahabalipuram, a small fishing village where she’d be staying. She arrived, but her paints did not. Perhaps it was a sign from the universe, or just an opportunity for an artist with moxie, but Janet did not let this stop her from creating.

Mahabalipuram was known for sculpture, and so Janet began working with the bronze casters in the village. Unfortunately, her Fulbright budget didn’t allow for expensive heavy materials, so once again she would have to readjust her plan.

One evening she was watching local fishermen bundling their nets on the beach. Could nets be the way to create volume without weight? Yes, yes, they could.

Janet spent her year in India collaborating with not bronze casters or artists but fishermen. She used their traditional knot-tying techniques to create beautiful netted sculptures, but the final piece of the puzzle fell into place when the nets were hoisted up onto poles so Janet could photograph them. She was mesmerized when she saw their “delicate surfaces revealing every ripple of wind in constantly changing patterns.” Janet now had her sights set on a truly artistic horizon and began to ask the very important