Espace Sculpture

Christo and Jeanne-Claude
Works from the Weston Collection

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Christo Vladimirov Javacheff began his artistic career in the realm of propaganda when, as an art student in his native Bulgaria, he and his classmates were sent by the government to rework the landscape, arranging the placement of haystacks and farm machinery along the route traveled by the Orient Express so as to meet the aesthetic expectations of those aboard the train and ensure that nothing untoward or unexpected jarred them from their aesthetic complacency and so lead to politically undesired questions about the real state of the communist country.

Years later, having left the eastern bloc, he met and married the Moroccan born Jeanne-Claude Denat de Guillebon. Collaboratively working as Christo and Jeanne-Claude, they went on to create the most recognized public and site-specific art in the world, dating back to Dockside Packages, Cologne Harbour (1964), their first formal collaboration and the first work in which the wrapping of objects (in this case, a stack of oil barrels and large rolls of industrial wrapping) occurred.

This past winter, their latest project, The Pont Neuf Wrapped, Project for Paris, Drawing in two parts, 1983, Collection of George Weston Limited, © Christo 1983, 2005, was completed after ten years of planning. And Wrapped Building, Project for Number One Times Square, Allied Chemical Tower (1985), a collage for an as-yet uncompleted work for a downtown New York City location leads to a pair of related works — one a collage, the other a drawing (both in two parts) — entitled Wrapped Reichstag, Project for Berlin (1982 and 1984, respectively), a work that finally came to fruition in 1995 after 24 years of planning. Clearly Christo and Jeanne-Claude think in the long-term.

While early pieces like Package on a Table, Project had comprised little more than a drawing/collage with perhaps the work’s title written across the top, a general formula for the production of such preliminary work was established early on. Typically, each such work involves two elements: a large drawn/collaged component proffering a perspectival view of the planned work shown as it would look in situ; and, along the top, bottom, or side of that primary element, a smaller, separate piece incorporating a topographical map of the site denoting the work’s proposed location within it.

Interestingly, while their primary work involves architecture and the landscape, Christo and Jeanne-Claude have worked recursively, turning their sights self-referentially upon objects of pre-existing aesthetic purposes. With Wrapped Monument to Cristóbal Colón, Project for Barcelona (1984) and Wrapped Statues, Sleeping Faun “Barberinische Faun,” Project for der Glyptotek-München (1984), the couple
sought to address sculpture directly, subjecting classical sculpture — of both gallery and public varieties — to their trademark wrapping.

The sole maquette of the exhibition testified to their abiding interest in oil drums. While their earliest site-specific collaboration was a wrapped dockside stack of such things, they made their first real headlines with Iron Curtain-Wall of Oil Barrels, Rue Visconti, Paris (1961-62), in which they completely blocked a city street with 240 barrels for a period of eight hours in a work echoing the revolutionary days of the Paris Commune. Most recently, they mounted the much longer The Wall, 13,000 Oil Barrels, Gasometer, Oberhausen, Germany (1999), an indoor installation. Wedged between those two exhibitions is a proposed site-specific work for the United Arab Emirates (to date, 28 years in the planning, though the preparatory drawing in the show dates back only 25 years), and the scale model exhibited here, Oil Barrels Mastaba, Project for ICA, Philadelphia (1968), an enormous flattened pyramid comprised of a sculptural stack of oil drums.

Not all of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's work is under wraps.