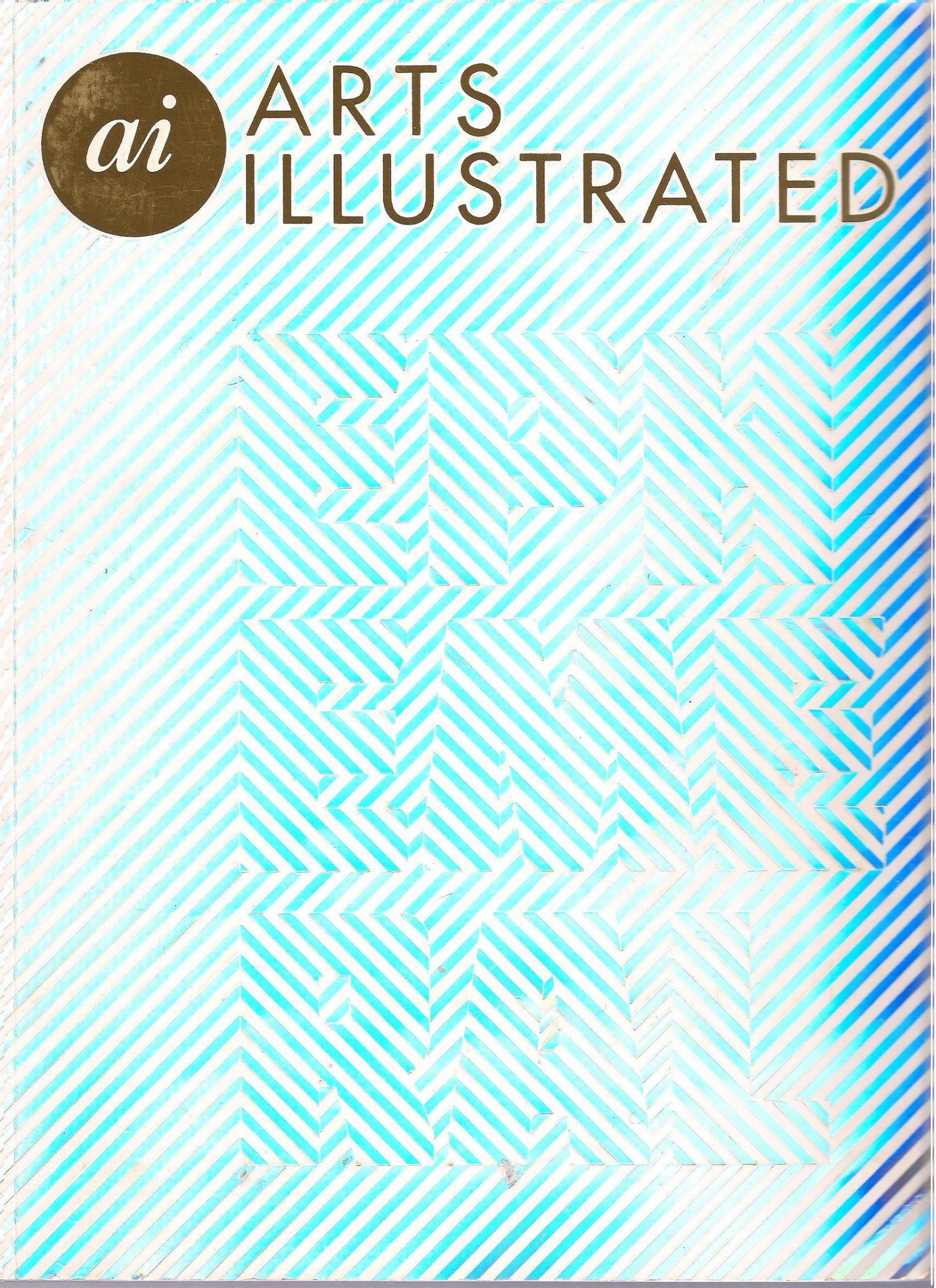




ARTS ILLUSTRATED



HERE NOW, GONE TOMORROW

BY PRAVEENA SHIVRAM

THE SPACE THAT EPHEMERAL ART OCCUPIES IN THE CONTEMPORARY ART LANDSCAPE IS, UNLIKE ITS TRANSIENT NATURE, A PERMANENT FIXTURE

When confronted with the world of 'ephemeral art', two very distinct things happen: first, we are pulled into a void of impermanence, where time becomes a sedate ally and space, a friendly adversary; where the past and the future fuse together forming an irrepressible magnetic shield keeping you centred and rooted to the experience of the moment, and that's precisely the moment, the second thing happens. This void bursts open like a dormant volcano, *searing our memories with its imaginative presence and creative expression, so that we are forever changed, within and without. For ephemerality, at its core, is about the paradox of disintegrating the self (for the artist) in the very act of creation, and discovering the self (for the viewer) in the act of dissolution. Like fingerprints, no two experiences are ever alike (much as no two artists working in this space are ever alike, not in form, in style, in texture, or in genre), making their imprints in our minds that much more real, despite its physical absence.*

Much like its nature, it is quite difficult to pin ephemeral art's beginning, or define its infinite possibilities. The artists are varied and the materials used even more so (sand, salt, chalk, stone, rust, wax, wheat, natural landscapes, flowers, glass, body art, to name a few), making it impossible to pigeonhole the artist or the artwork into a specific category. Ephemeral Art then becomes an all-encompassing umbrella term that embraces the full panoply of possibilities in the *realm of contemporary art. Anything and everything can be reconstructed, where all you need is a central vision, an underlying belief and a strong philosophy that drives the intention, and therefore the creation.*

What sets ephemeral art apart from its traditional counterpart, and what makes this concept exciting, is the metamorphosis of existing, tangible, everyday material into a transcendental construct. And the fact that you cannot ever 'own' a piece of ephemeral art, except in your memories (or as photographs), making this, at once implicitly personal and explicitly communal, owing often to its public displays.

Fallen leaves gathered in a particular fashion can denote the circle of life; stones arranged in a pattern within its territory can alter perceptions; microscopic grains of sand packed together along a shoreline can reflect macroscopic themes; glass bangles twisting and transforming and yet retaining their inherent fragility; and even the human body, when used as a tool, can cleverly convert (and subvert) the aesthetics of space.

It has been an impossible task for us to bring together artists working in this space, as artists share such a unique relationship to their artwork based on their cultural apperceptions, geographical identity and socio-political influences, that we could neither make a generic choice based on style, nor could we make an individualistic choice based on materials used. So instead, we took a leaf out of ephemeral art's history and chose artists, nationally and internationally, purely on an experiential basis – *what moved us, what touched us, what made us want to go back to the artist's work, again and again, what found us serendipitously, what we went looking for persistently, and what made us long for a moment in time to convert these largely virtual, second-hand experiences into tangible and truly ephemeral realities.*

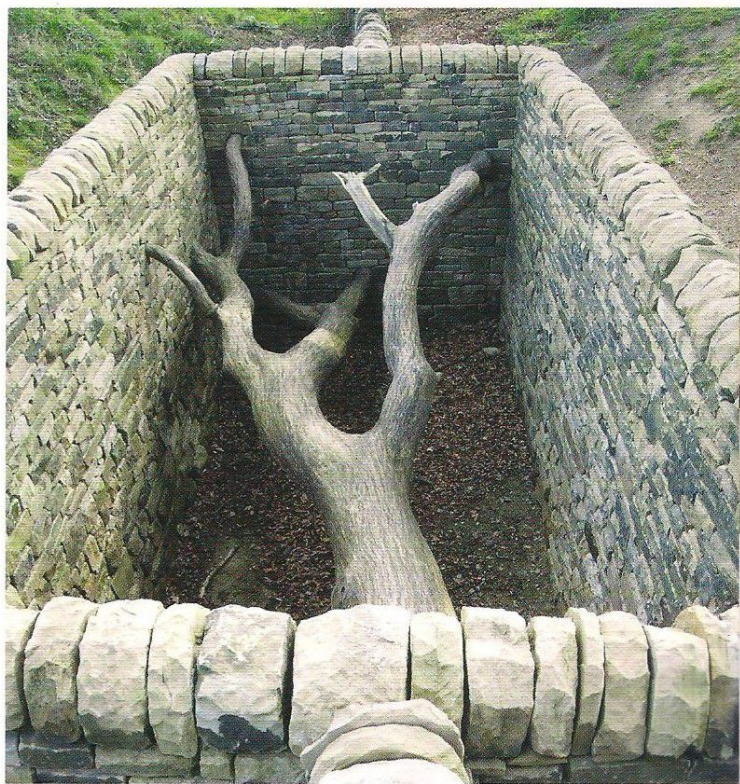
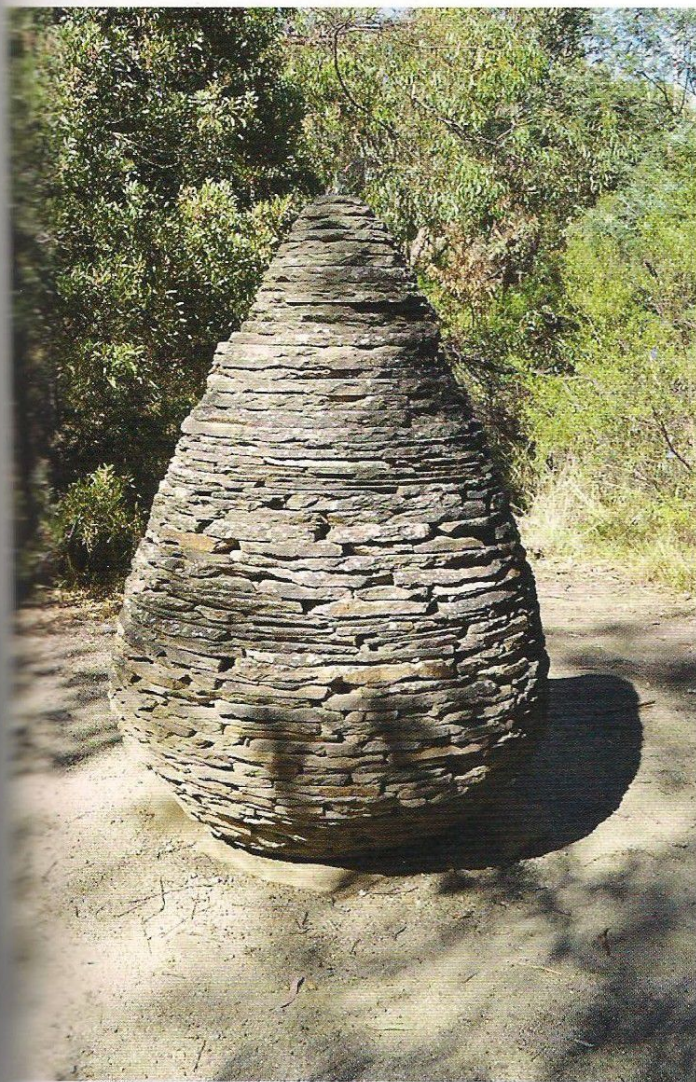
ANDY GOLDSWORTHY, UK

THE ARTIST

Born in Cheshire in 1956, Andy Goldsworthy grew up in West Yorkshire and spent much of his growing up years as a labourer in farms, an experience he often credits to his tryst with art, calling it a 'very sculptural activity'. 'Not just dry stone walls but stacking bales — big minimalist sculptures, beautiful and enormous. Ploughing a field is drawing lines on the land, painting the fields — it's incredibly visual.'

A student of Bradford School of Art and Preston Polytechnic, Goldsworthy, though known for both his ephemeral and permanent installations, impacted public consciousness through his site-specific sculptures, installations and photographs, since the mid-1970s. Goldsworthy has displayed his work in several exhibitions all over the world and is an Andrew D. White Professor at Large at Cornell University.

CAIRN, ANDY GOLDSWORTHY,
HERRING ISLAND, AUSTRALIA, 1997, CREATIVE COMMONS



HANGING TREES, ANDY GOLDSWORTHY, YORKSHIRE
SCULPTURE PARK, 2007, CREATIVE COMMONS

THE ART

Goldsworthy works with a variety of media that originate from the site he is working on — leaves, stones, sand, ice, rain, wood and clay. His ephemeral works are usually evolved in isolation, often with his bare hands and with tools he fashions out of the environment he is in. 'I need the contact and shock of hand on materials.' (© Andy Goldsworthy/Guardian News & Media Ltd), though Goldsworthy is known to be just at ease with larger projects (usually permanent installations) that demand specific equipment and manpower.

THE ARTICULATION

Goldsworthy's ideology stems from a deep connection with the landscape he is working on, drawing on its history, its stories, its legends and the people who may have inhabited it in the past. 'When I make something, in a field or street, it may vanish but it's part of the history of those places,' he says. (© Andy Goldsworthy/Guardian News & Media Ltd). Goldsworthy continues to push the boundaries of contemporary art, not consciously, but as a natural extension of his individuality.

CHRISTO AND JEANNE-CLAUDE, USA

THE ARTISTS

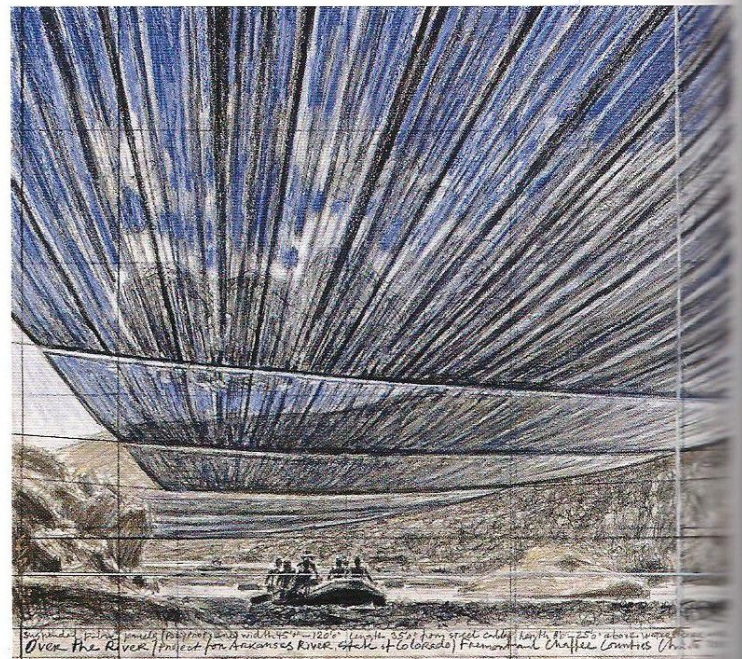
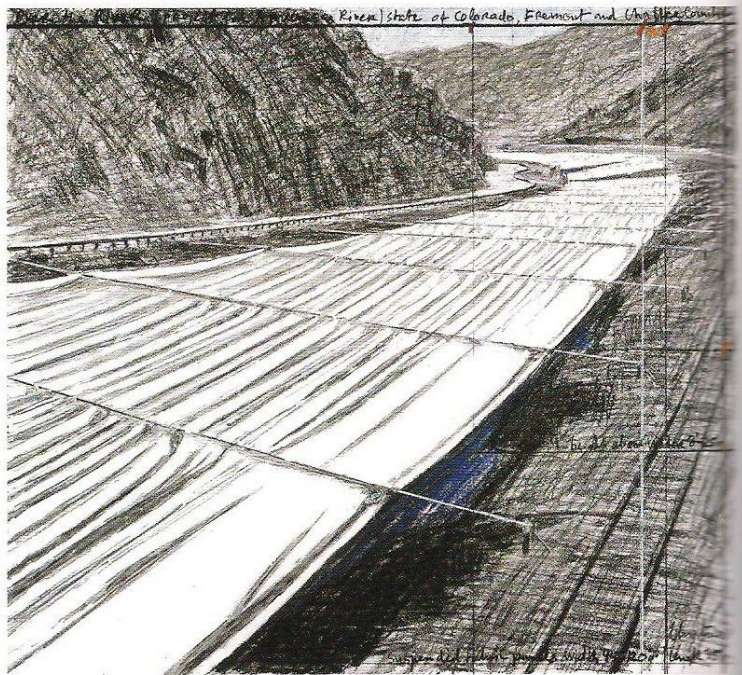
When one thinks of artist-couple Christo and Jeanne-Claude, one thinks of scale, magnitude, deceptive simplicity and the over-powering presence of time. As environmental artists working together since 1961, their projects have often taken several years (ranging from five to twenty-four years) of patient deliberation with the concerned authorities or the community at large (as all the spaces they use for their artwork belong to someone else), extensive research, constant re-alignment of thought to structure, and a meticulous transformation from paper to reality, making their ephemeral creations that much richer, and that much more elusive. Christo and Jeanne-Claude, who have always believed in the aesthetic value of freedom, always have funded their own projects by the sale of Christo's original artworks, including preparatory drawings and collages as well as early works, and believe in freeing the qualities of joy and beauty from its commodity status by making the experience of their installations completely free and accessible to all.

THE ART

They have worked largely with different kinds of fabric as they are 'fragile, sensual and temporary materials, which translate the temporary character of the works of art'. They have used fabric in a variety of ways – Wrapped the Reichstag, Berlin, 1971-95, Surrounded Islands, Biscayne Bay, Greater Miami, Florida, 1980-83, The Umbrellas, Japan-USA, 1984-91, The Gates, Central Park, New York City, 1979-2005, to name a few – and are currently working on Over the River project (conceived in 1992), and Mastaba (conceived in 1977). As environmental artists, they are extremely sensitive to the space in which they situate their projects, making sure they recycle the materials used and restore the site to its original condition.

(TOP) CHRISTO, OVER THE RIVER (PROJECT FOR ARKANSAS RIVER)
DRAWING, PENCIL, PASTEL, CHARCOAL AND WAX CRAYON
2007, PRINT SIZE — 13 7/8" X 15 1/4", 8 3/4" X 9 5/8"
PHOTO — WOLFGANG VOLZ, © 2007 CHRISTO

(BELOW) CHRISTO, OVER THE RIVER (PROJECT FOR ARKANSAS RIVER)
DRAWING, PENCIL, PASTEL, CHARCOAL AND WAX CRAYON
2010, PRINT SIZE — 13 7/8" X 15 1/4", 8" X 8 7/8"
PHOTO — ANDRÉ GROSSMANN, © 2010 CHRISTO

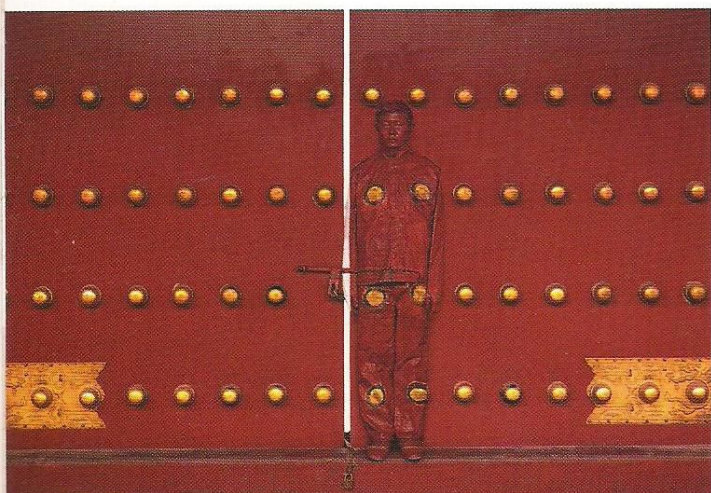


THE ARTICULATION

What drives Christo and Jeanne-Claude's work is to bring in the 'quality of love and tenderness that human beings have for what does not last'. In an interview to the *Journal of Contemporary Art*, when the wrapping of the Reichstag was finally under way, they explain: 'The world can live without *Umbrellas*, without *Valley Curtain* or *Running Fence*. They have no other reason to be there except poetical creativity, total creativity. That freedom is the most important part of this project and this is why they cannot stay, because freedom is the enemy of possession and possession is equal to permanence.'

LIU BOLIN, CHINA

LIU BOLIN, HIDING IN THE CITY, CANCER VILLAGE, 2013



LIU BOLIN, HIDING IN THE CITY, RED DOOR, 2012

THE ART

Bolin simply uses his body, mind and soul, literally, into his artworks. He works by choosing certain specific sites, that is either representative of the city he is displaying his work in, or representative of a particular social issue that he wants to bring to the fore (He read about Venice's impending disappearance due to global warming, and decided to "hide" there to bring that fact to people's attention), and then, with a team of assistants who paint his body, Bolin eventually merges into the landscape.

THE ARTICULATION

Bolin's genius is not so much in the clever way in which he disappears into the background, but the sites he actually chooses. After the initial euphoria of wonder wears off, there is a deep sense of anguish that you are left with, and a multitude of hard questions emanating from the space he has chosen, making Bolin's work stand out despite (or maybe precisely because of) its apparent non-existence.

THE ARTIST

It is tough to separate Liu Bolin the artist from his now-famous 'Invisible Man' persona. Born in 1973 in Shandong, China, and armed with a BFA from the Shandong College of Arts, Jinan, and an MFA from the Central Academy of Arts, Beijing, Bolin began as a sculptor and a photographer, earning his reputation as a contemporary artist of note. That is, till 2005, when the Chinese government had him shut down his studio. Bolin's 'Invisible Man' performance art series was born, as a means of silent protest. "Through this project, I found I was able to express some of the injustices and unfair social issues that occur as a result of rapid economic development, not just in China, but the whole world. I want to find this kind, of social contradictions and show it to the people," he says.

LIU BOLIN, HIDING IN THE CITY, GRAFFITI NO.1, 2012
ALL IMAGES - COURTESY KLEIN SUN GALLERY, NY, ©LIU BOLIN



DEBESH GOSWAMI, INDIA

THE ARTIST

Debesh Goswami can probably be described as one of India's quintessential ephemeral artists. After a Visual Arts degree from Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata, he went on to complete his PhD in Fine Arts from the Université Rennes II, and continues to teach at the School of Graphic Art, Rennes. His installations, performances and photographs are constantly in a state of dialogue with not just the history of art in its entirety, but also India's own antediluvian culture. Born in 1965, Goswami divides his time between Kolkata and France, bringing a definitive multi-cultural aspect to his work that often deals with the questions of identity, mortality and transience.

THE ART

Goswami uses a variety of materials such as bread, flowers, clay and pigments for his artworks. He explains, 'I explore these particular media for the symbolic and active qualities of impermanence they possess. Moreover, I also try to focus on how particular characteristics of the materials relate to specific themes.' An example would be the theme of sustenance, in all its many layers, in his installation of bread.

THE ARTICULATION

In Goswami's repertoire, the theme of ephemerality attains surreal allusions. And that is mostly because of the choice of the materials he chooses for his artwork, all of which have the ability to engage, at once, with the literal and the symbolic. 'Ephemerality is a constant reminder of the mortality of life; we continue and discontinue life. My work too exists only for a brief moment in time,' he says.

(LEFT) UNTITLED, CERAMIC VASES, CLOTH, SIZE - VARIABLE, COURTESY - BHOPAL BHARAT BHAVAN, © DEBESH GOSWAMI

(BELOW) BREAD FOR EVERYBODY, BREAD AND CAR, SIZE - VARIABLE, COURTESY - BRITTANY MUSEUM, FRANCE, © DEBESH GOSWAMI

