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She Changes **Janet Echelman's** Porto Princess

by Robert C. Morgan

Porto, in the north of Portugal, is culturally different from the south, where Lisbon is situated. As I was informed by my Portuguese colleagues, the relationship between Lisbon and Porto resembles that between Madrid and Barcelona. Porto is lucky to have constructed one of the truly significant public artworks in recent years. For a critic to make such a claim may be considered unusual nowadays, in that few are willing to align themselves with a work that has affected them on a purely experiential level. Given that much “criticism” today has been usurped by political and marketing associations, what used to

be identified as aesthetic experience is now cynically regarded as an act of false consciousness. While this perception is limiting, there are moments when such external concerns have to be put aside in order to get into the art itself. I don't mind saying that my first encounter with Janet Echelman's *She Changes*—a monumental, red and white, membrane-like sculpture at the Praca Cidade San Salvador in the town of Matosinhos along the shoreline outside of Porto—was an experiential one. I found the work significant as a paradoxical expression of an indigenous culture that had been transformed, in the process of crossing over the Atlantic, into a multi-cultural idea.

But there is another side to the story as well. Given a rather harried

and exhausting trip to Porto, I was not in the best state of mind to look at art upon my arrival. The ultra-compact, 48-hour venture was not well-organized. There were flight problems, connection problems, hotel problems, and weather problems—to name a few. Later that afternoon, my mood was favorably altered when I met the two engineers who had been intimately involved with Echelman's project from the outset. They invited my two colleagues and myself to their office in order to prepare us for what we would be seeing later that evening. After dinner, we were driven to the site where the elliptical form, with nets blowing in the off-shore breeze, could be seen from nearly a mile away.

***She Changes*, 2005. Tenara® PTFE architectural fiber, 50 x 150 x 150 meters.**



To enhance viewing of the piece at night, the Portuguese landscape architect had installed a lighting system below ground level inside a crater-like turf that subtly accentuates the swaying, billowing effect of the huge nets. On arrival at the site, we parked and got out of the car. Undulating magically in the salt air overlooking the Atlantic, the piece is enormous in scale, a real spectacle, with a 20-ton, steel-rimmed circle suspended by cables connecting to three diagonally placed poles that extend anywhere from 25 to 50 meters in height. The poles are like the masts of a huge ship, sited in three locations

This page and opposite: *She Changes*, 2005. Tenara® PTFE architectural fiber, 50 x 150 x 150 meters.

across the road from the elliptical rotunda where *She Changes* is situated. At a cost of a million and a quarter Euros (roughly \$1.66 million), this is probably the most expensive sculpture ever placed in this area of Portugal. But to label it merely a spectacle misses the point. Great spectacles—as opposed to trivial ones (based on the repetition of mindless effects)—do not dull the senses. Rather they enliven them. As I circumambulated Echelman's sculpture, the work projected a quality of sensory

involvement as the netting moved in the wind in relation to the system of static supports. At the same time, I felt my own cognitive and spatial relationship to the work's physical scale.

Echelman spent three years in getting her sculpture realized. Although she depended on a team of architects, engineers, designers, and fabricators, which she scrupulously coordinated, the final result more than reveals the effort. The engineers whom she consulted testified as to Echelman's tenacious ability to see

Janet Echelman Discusses *She Changes*

by Lilly Wei

Lily Wei: *She Changes* is a departure for Porto, where most public artworks are traditional monuments or mid-sized, Constructivist-like sculptures. Your work is a much more abstract, more ephemeral image, made out of seemingly ephemeral materials—although they are not—and huge. How did it get approved, and were you surprised?

Janet Echelman: I was invited for a site visit in 2001, when they asked me to create a symbol for the city that would be visible from at least a kilometer in all directions, one that wouldn't block any views of the ocean and could survive high winds and salt air—which was challenging. In 2002, I

the parts in relation to the whole, in other words, to keep the project moving on a steady course toward completion. In such a project, nothing can be left to chance. *She Changes* is as much about precision as any algebraic equation. It is as precise as singing an aria by Handel or cooking a bowl of shrimp perciatelli. Although Echelman depended on architects and engineers to give her concept a physical structure, she also had to rely on many others, including those with expertise in the design and fabrication of the nearly one ton of synthetic netting—an architectural fiber called Tenara (developed by W.L. Gore and Associates). For the net design, Echelman went to Paris, where she elicited the services of Peter Heppel and Associates, which developed the complex software for the piece. The program for the design was then sent electronically to Everson, Washington, where the net was fabricated, largely by hand, and then shipped, after months of intense work, in large parcels back to Porto.

She Changes prompts multiple associations, both in terms in Echelman's earlier works as they relate to its morphology and in terms of its context. One can readily make a connection with the fishing nets that have played a historical role in the economy and life of this region for centuries. One may also envision sea creatures from the tide pools, as one of my colleagues pointed out. Yet there is another aspect of the work that can also be recognized—and that is the sensuality of the piece as it exists in a pure form without cynicism and without domination in relation to this remarkable seaside vista. For this, Echelman must be given credit. Analyzing the sculpture, one begins to understand the depth of her vision and the care that went into the decisions

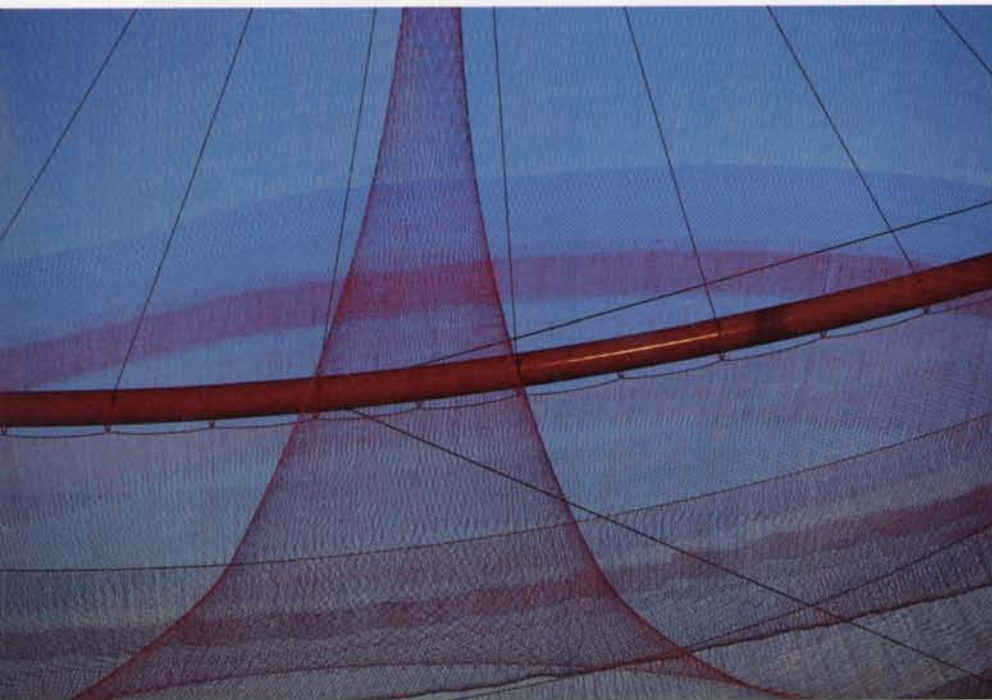


presented my proposal to the Polis committee and the mayors of Matosinhos and Porto; happily, they approved it immediately. They even relaxed some of their technical requirements. For example, at first they wanted the entire piece, including the poles, inside the traffic island. I wanted it suspended so that drivers in their cars would be inside the sculpture, not merely looking at it as a discrete object. Originally, I was recommended to the board by Manuel Sola Morales, who redesigned Barcelona's waterfront in the late '80s and had been brought to Porto to

redesign its waterfront. I was told later that it was a miracle that they had approved an American artist. I overheard this: "It would have been much easier if she had been European or at least Moroccan."

LW: *When did you first start using nets?*

JE: It was during a trip to India in 1997 as a Fulbright Senior Lecturer in Painting. I had shipped paints, but as the deadline for my show approached and my paints didn't, I realized I had a problem. In the meantime, every afternoon I would walk to the



Top and details: *She Changes*, 2005. Tenara® PTFE architectural fiber, 50 x 150 x 150 meters.

that make *She Changes* an extraordinary work.

Probably the closest antecedent is Echelman's *Target Swooping Down*, which she made for the ARCO fair in Madrid in 2001. *Target* was assembled in a courtyard, virtually filling the space. The same configuration of a central cone was used, but the relatively enclosed context could not provide *Target* with the constant air currents necessary to keep it in motion. What proves so satisfying in *She Changes* is the precise engineering of the structure, the monumental scale, and the perpetual kinetic and visual aspects of the piece. Even so, in *Target*, one begins to see Echelman's direction as an artist. Also, it was through the occasion of the ARCO installation that a politically involved patron from Porto began to envision how such a sculpture might function in her hometown in a seaside environment. This happened at a time when the money for contemporary art was more fluid than it appears to be with the current government.

beach for a swim and watch the fishermen, fascinated by the way they folded their lengths of net into large volumes. It suddenly dawned on me that this was a different way to approach volume, and I was re-born as a sculptor.

LW: *I think of She Changes as the not-Serra, not-monument monument. Do you consider it a feminist work?*

JE: Yes. But these days I'm more focused on letting the work grow visually in the physical world, in relationship to architecture and the infrastructure.

LW: *What does the title signify?*

JE: I like my titles to set up a personal relationship with the viewer. In the past, I've used dialogue, as in *You appear calm and collected*. Here, I wanted to create the sense that the work was personified, so that its relationship with the viewer becomes more like that between two people. I also wanted to highlight the flux in the sculpture's physical being, which changes at almost every moment, and to open up the possibility of projecting an emotional state onto those changes. A working title was



Left: *Road Side Shrine II*, 2002. Vinyl-coated polyethylene mesh, dimensions variable. View of work as installed at Piers 88 and 90 of the West Side Highway, New York. Right: *Target Swooping Down*, 2001. Hand-knitted nylon, 45 x 135 ft. diameter.



new ideas rather than becoming an emblematic “logo” after the success of what she has achieved in Porto (as has been suggested by Frank Gehry’s detractors after the success of the Guggenheim Bilbao).

Yet it would be absurd to speculate on where an artist of Echelman’s ambition and talent is going at such an early stage of her career. She has done a major piece in a place that has not until recently been thought of as an important cultural center. On the other hand, artists like Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer went even farther from established centers when they decided to work in the desert. What Echelman has going for her is the stamina to hold poetry at the helm of the ship even when the storm winds blow. *She Changes* gives a strong indication of a bold new direction for sculpture.

Robert C. Morgan was recently awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to pursue research on contemporary Asian art.

One should also point to two other works from the preceding year (2000) in a similar trajectory as *Target*, each encompassing different aspects of what would eventually find synthesis in Porto. One, *Gravity’s Angel*, was a fabric piece installed in the Florence Lynch Gallery; the components of the other, an outdoor work titled *Roadside Shrine*, *Cone Ridge*, were installed like inverted Minimalist cones beneath the I-45 underpass in Houston, Texas. Both works were completed a year after her residency at Art/Omi in upstate New York, where she began to evolve her interest in fabric pieces related to exterior spaces.

While Echelman has managed to pursue her own course over the preceding five years, her interpersonal talents have to be taken into account as contributing to the artfulness within her art. Not embracing political ideas in any direct sense may ultimately prove to her advantage. Like artists in South American or Eastern European countries in recent decades, Echelman has a knack for the poetic metaphor. She also has the rigor and commitment to make her poetic visions into a public reality. The mental acuity to keep these polarities in focus is largely responsible for the success of *She Changes*. It is to be hoped that her work will continue to evolve

“she changes her mind with the wind,” but in the end, I wanted a more open reading.

LW: *Would you discuss the iconography of the image?*

JE: I began with the history of the site, a centuries-old fishing village that became an industrial zone in the last few decades. There are references to smokestacks and their red-and-white-striped patterns, the angled masts and cables of Portuguese ships, the patterns and forms of fishing nets and Portuguese lace. I focused on making the shape of the wind visible. I call it

“wind choreography.” I also refer to a group of ancient life forms that failed around the Pre-Cambrian era, before multi-cellular life developed. Also, I am compelled to keep a hollow core at the center of all my work (read into this as much Buddhism as you like, since I spent most of my 20s in Southeast Asia).

LW: *Would you change anything about this piece?*

JE: Nothing. The moment we hooked up the last shackle and stood back to look, I was in shock. It was so much more beautiful than anything we were able to render.