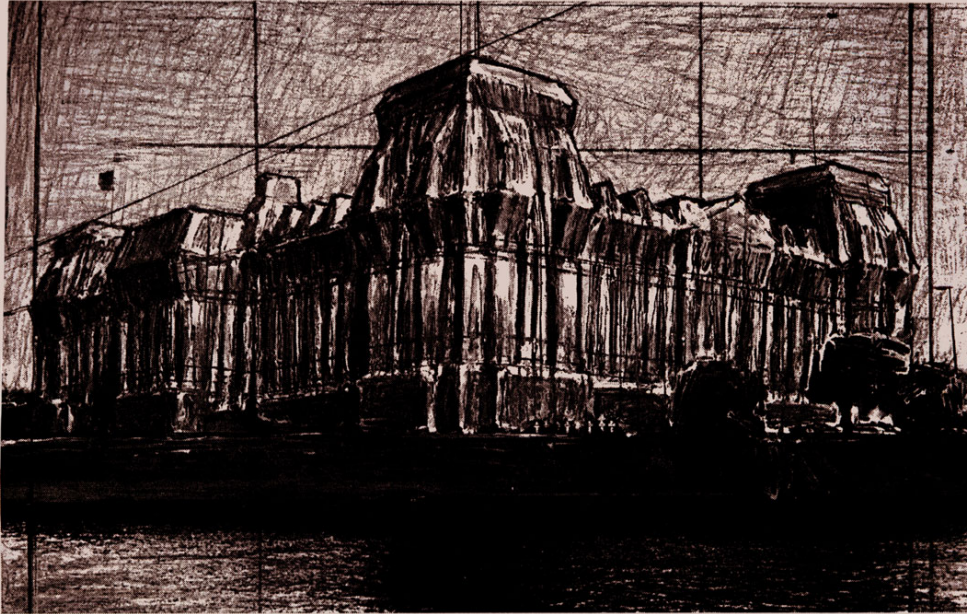


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ARTS



One of Christo's impressions of his proposal for wrapping the Reichstag in Berlin, now scheduled for late June

The art of wrapping up

William Packer discusses conceptualist Christo's latest projects

Conceptual art, in which the form is secondary to the informing idea, may seem affectingly abstruse to many people. A more generally acceptable variation upon that theme, perhaps, is that of the working drawing or proposal for a physical project as yet unrealised. It is in this sense that sculptors and architects, unsuccessful ones especially, are conceptual artists all the time.

Christo, the Bulgarian-born sculptor, working with his French wife Jeanne-Claude, clearly has the happy knack of persuading civic and political authorities to join him in bringing even the most grandiose of his schemes about. Those who remember his Running Fence of 1976, for example, 18 feet high and nearly 25 miles long through southern California, or his wrapping up of the Pont Neuf in Paris ten years ago, will know what I mean.

His proposal to wrap up the Reichstag was first mooted in 1972, when the Berlin Wall was as sure as, well, Barings Bank, so he is nothing if not persistent. Lately the German parliament debated its permission, and now the project is at last to go ahead, with the grand unveiling – which is not the word I want: the tying of the bow, perhaps – scheduled for late June.

The working model is impressive, but

the large working drawings are the more dynamic, giving the truer sense of scale and something of the energy and ambition of the undertaking. Having seen the Pont Neuf as a parcel, one has every confidence that the Reichstag will serve, if anything, even more spectacularly.

We are well used to seeing famous buildings screened in the course of cleaning or restoration. But there is a difference between such partial and purposeful occasions and the true Christo, the whole purpose of which is to wrap up, simplify and obscure. For the parcel is a magical, mysterious device, that can fire at once the infant imagination, and the most sophisticated. What is inside, with all those lumps and bumps? And even if we know full well, we can hardly wait to see again.

It is the old paradox of celebrating by taking away, of becoming more aware of the reality by hiding it, if only for a moment. For those fortunate enough to see the Reichstag when it is wrapped up, its physical, objective presence will be unimaginably the more palpable when the wraps come off.

But wrapping is not the only way. As with the Running Fence all those years ago, a temporary physical intervention or interruption in the landscape may serve just as well to sharpen our particular awareness and experience of what is

already there. Two such projects are as yet unconfirmed. One is for an avenue of rectangular yellow gates or arches, 15 feet high with yellow sheets billowing from the crossbars, that would thread its endless way through the trees and spaces of Central Park.

The other is for an extended canopy of canvas sheets strung across the narrow valley of a youthful river – the drawings offer a number of rivers in western America as possibilities. The effect would be neither to impede nor obscure the stream, for the canopy would be high enough and broken, but rather to articulate and objectify its course as it hurries down. We shall see.

Jenny Okun from California is an artist whose medium until now has been photography, and whose work still remains founded in photographic imagery. Her immediate interest is in architectural detail, and in particular the interior structures of roofs, windows and surface reflections to be found in modern high-tech buildings.

Her formal interest, however, is rather less direct, for she then repeatedly overlays this primary material, building it up into a spatial image of almost Piranesian complexity, yet unspiced and abstracted. But there is nothing of that master's

doom-laden theatricality, her images ever as cool and elegant in conception as in expression.

She continues in part to work directly with the photographic print, but latterly she has also been developing her imagery in both graphic and sculptural terms. She takes the photographic image and reduces it to simple linear structure, drawn directly upon the wall. She reduces it to flat tone and colour, which abstracted image is then realised as a computer-generated print, using the latest Iris water-jet print technology. Simplest of all, she takes an element of the linear image as silhouette for multiple sculpture, cut from inch-thick plastic, to which she adds colour and further selective detail.

The sense is of an accomplished artist at a critical transitional moment in her career, responding creatively to new formal and technical opportunities. The interplay between photography, drawing and print, particularly in relation to this new Iris technology, with its extraordinary refinement of effect, is intriguing.

Christo & Jeanne-Claude: three works in progress, Annely Juda Fine Art, 23 Dering Street W1, until April 29. Jenny Okun: Architectonics; Rebecca Hossack Gallery Fitzrovia, 35 Windmill Street W1, until April 1.