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## Janet Echelman: Interconnectedness

Leda Cempellin

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# Janet Echelman

## Interconnectedness

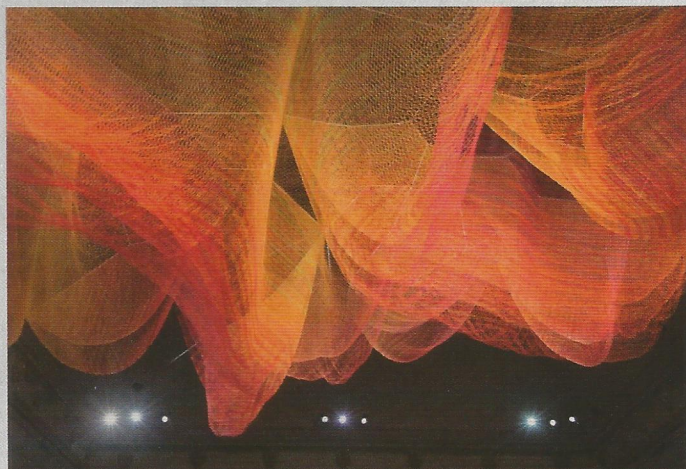
interview by **Leda Cempellin\***

You are well known in the art world; your talks and guest lectures have been defined as mesmerizing, thought-provoking, inspiring, impactful, energetic, and passionate. All of this, despite having all seven applications to art schools turned down in the past, as you explained in your TED talk. How did you manage to build self-confidence through challenges? My works at that time when I applied to art school were still unformed. It took ten more years before I found my voice as a sculptor, and another ten years before I figured out how to build my sculpture at the scale of buildings. I never studied sculpture, engineering or architecture, so I may seem like an unlikely person to be doing what I'm doing - creating monumental, billowing forms in cities around the world. I didn't let the rejections from art school stop me. I went off on my own to become an artist. When I started making art, my biggest challenge was learning to hear my inner voice and finding a way to notice and pay attention to my own ideas. I began writing and drawing with my non-dominant hand, which gave me access to my more fledgling, vulnerable ideas that were being overpowered by my more conscious, skilled hand. Once I began to pay attention to these new ideas, the biggest hurdle was to learn how to respect them, to invest the attention and work needed to develop them. If you start with yourself and make sure that you fully believe that what you're doing will create positive change in the world, then you can go out and share your vision with genuine belief. Can you give us an insight on your collaborative practice? I see art, architecture, and landscape as interwoven elements that we can design in a way that improves our cities. Collaboration has always been central to my work. Together with colleagues in my studio and an external team of aeronautical and mechanical engineers, lighting designers, computer scientists, architects, industrial and hand-craft fabricators, and landscape architects, I am able to create a unified experience much greater than each entity can do alone. I want to use my art to bring this kind of experience to people around the world - to create a soft counterpoint to the hard-edged buildings and offer moments of pause in our busy lives. Often my sculptures are situated in built environments, but sometimes we have the opportunity to work with landscape architects to create a site-specific experience. In Santa Monica, I collaborated with OLIN landscape architects to shape the earth beneath the sculpture to echo the billowing form above. Over 150,000 people participated in sculpting the topographic form as they walked through the mounds of sand, inviting viewers to consider their own body and scale in comparison to the greater landscape.

Last February I saw a beautiful and structurally and chromatically complex piece of yours temporarily installed at the Renwick Gallery in DC. Given that most of your work is outdoors, how is the piece different when it engages an indoor ceiling? My artwork for the Renwick's Grand Salon is actually based off of ideas that I have been engaging with for years, so my starting point was familiar but I had to consider an interior space differently from an outdoor landscape, where the artwork is sited between skyscrapers, pedestrian plazas, and city streets.

\* Associate Professor of Art History at South Dakota State University.

"1.8 (Renwick)" 2015 Installed at the Renwick Gallery at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC from Nov. 2015 - Spring 2017, ph. Brian Stacy, courtesy Studio Echelman



The work's title is 1.8 (One Point Eight), which refers to the length of time measured in microseconds that the earth's day was shortened as a result of a physical event, the 2011 Japanese tsunami. The forms in the sculpture and carpet were inspired by data sets of the tsunami wave heights across the Pacific Ocean. The artwork reminds us of our complex interdependencies with larger cycles of time and matter. Its physical presence is a manifestation of interconnectedness - when any one element in the sculpture moves, every other element is affected. I installed my sculpture beneath the historic cove ceiling, surging through the hundred-foot length Grand Salon. I considered the sculpture's interaction with light and air differently, as I had neither weather nor nature to integrate into the artwork for natural movement. I installed digitally-controlled artificial wind devices into the walls, so that the fibers would subtly dance in the space. A custom-designed 4,000 square-foot textile flooring composed of regenerated nylon fibers, repurposed from discarded fishing nets, echoes the organic topography of the sculpture. It has been particularly exciting for me to see how visitors are using the space - laying down on the floor, gazing at sculpture above - for ten minutes, or even an hour! People are engaged with the space in different ways from my outdoor work and I am thrilled with the results. Would you tell us something about the projects you are currently working on? We're excited about the upcoming premiere of my new permanent work for the Sunset Strip in West Hollywood in collaboration with SOM. *Dreamcatcher* will be tensioned between two hotel towers on multiple floors. We have been working with the engineers to solve how to install this as its form is unlike any of my previous sculptures. In mid-August we will install a permanent artwork in Greensboro, NC that is inspired by local railroad maps, textile mills, and the organic form of native seedpods. Just announced was the Smithsonian American Art Museum's acquisition of my 1.8 Renwick artwork for their permanent collection, and it will be on view until 2017.

The artist's website: [www.echelman.com](http://www.echelman.com)

Our gratitude to Janet Echelman, Adele Ruppert and Melissa Henry at Studio Echelman.