Figure 1. Christo, *Surrounded Islands (Project for Biscayne Bay, Greater Miami, Florida)*, 1981, collage in two parts, pencil, charcoal, pastel, wax crayon, enamel paint, and aerial photograph. ©Christo, photo: Wolfgang Volz/laif/Redux

Pretty in Pink Polypropylene: Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Surrounded Islands*

TASHIMA THOMAS, Pratt Institute
Art curated by CHRISTOPHER LYNN
and FIDALIS BUEHLER

> "Why do you paint?"
>
> "Because you must find beauty in the most adverse of worlds. Because even in the heart of the most depraved, [it] is the hope of Divine Redemption through Nature, which is Art."
>
> —— Richard Flanagan, *Gould's Book of Fish*

> But the idea of smallness is relative; it depends on what is included and excluded in any calculation of size. Smallness is a state of mind.
>
> —— Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands"

For two weeks in May 1983, artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude's installation of *Surrounded Islands* was on view in Biscayne Bay's spoil islands. In an area near the city of Miami, Florida, eleven islands were draped with 6.5 million square feet of hot pink polypropylene fabric floating around the surface of the islands and extending out into the bay. With a crew of over four hundred people, the fabric was sewn in seventy-nine different patterns to complement the contours of the eleven islands, and at times two of the islands were draped together as one island.

As an independently funded project, Christo and Jeanne-Claude covered the three-point-one million-dollar expense of the installation out of their own pockets. The

couple was able to raise funds from selling sketches and drawings of the proposed plans for *Surrounded Islands*. Christo and Jeanne-Claude obtained permits from at least eight different agencies and collaborated with a team of marine biologists, ornithologists, mammal experts, marine engineers, consulting engineers, and building contractors. Safeguarding the integrity of the landscape and seascape was an essential priority for this project and unfolded in its own theatre of ecocritical performance. Florida, as the northern tip of the Caribbean, is part of an ecological zone drastically affected by human activity, as Elizabeth DeLoughrey notes: "There is probably no other region in the world that has been more radically altered in terms of flora and fauna than the Caribbean."[1] The title, *Surrounded Islands*, accentuates the spatial and temporal conditions of islands as spaces "surrounded" by water and sometimes other islands (*see Figure 1*). This overemphasis is a response to the poetics of archipelagoes and their material and cultural adaptations through island movements.

Figure 2. Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *Surrounded Islands, Greater Miami, Florida,* 1980–83, site-specific installation with polypropylene fabric. Photo: Wolfgang Volz/laif/Redux

The Power of Pink and What Lies Beneath

Surrounded Islands luxuriated in its hot pink dressing that shimmered in the reflected light on the waters of Biscayne Bay. The uniformity of pink fabric applied to multiple Biscayne islands underscores the connectivity and interdependence of island spaces that may have been overlooked for their smallness. Epeli Hau'ofa reminds us that smallness is relative and a state of mind.[2] The artists draw our attention to the smaller islands as an opportunity to consider the spaces between "island and island" and the metamorphosis of archipelagos through creative movement and the audacity of color. These pink polypropylene membranes paint the island's skin like rosy cheeks, creating an extenuating integument of island territory. Robert Sullivan's poem "Ocean Birth" likens the human occupants of islands to residing on the "skin of the ocean."[3] It is the same pink that is culturally branded with the high times of Miami in the 1980s, a period later glorified in the hit series *Miami Vice* (1984–1990), where the rapid play of drug dealers, fast cars, men's Italo-casual fashion, and Miami glamour colored the plot lines. It is the same pink that strikes a kinship with another Miami icon: the flamingo. Although born with grey feathers, a flamingo's plumage turns into a flamboyant family of pinks because of their diet rich in alpha and beta carotenoids found in crustaceans. The islands outfitted in pink skirts remind me of a kind of *couture-pelagic*, but also of the deconstructed canvases of artist Sam Gilliam. Known as the "father of the draped canvas," Gilliam liberated his canvases from stretchers and frames, disarticulating the fabric of canvases to swing in undulating waves of brilliant colors. His *Seahorses* (1975) and *Autumn Surf* (1980) recall the draping of the Biscayne Islands in form, color, and aquatic theme.

Like a pink fondant of sweetness, *Surrounded Islands* create a floating ecstasy of color. In what I refer to as *a chromotopic imagined environment*, *Surrounded Islands* may also be interpreted as an adaptive response to the ecological fragility of our waters. From the Greek *chromato*, meaning color, the seductiveness of a chromotopic imagined environment shrouds the fact that the artists employed marine and land crews to prepare the spaces before the grafting in of the polypropylene. In doing so, the crew removed a garbage patch of over forty tons of refuse, including tires, mattresses, refrigerator doors, kitchen sinks, plastics, and an abandoned boat. Therefore, the process of creating *Surrounded Islands* becomes a materialist critique of the capitalist footprint in island spaces.

As Teresa Shewry reminds us, "[t]he environmental legacies of imperialism and global capitalism are revealed in the ocean, in waters thick with plastic debris, on atolls where radioactive sludge lies buried, in the patterns of marine life that flourishes and that disappears."[4] A similar ecocritical position is taken up by John Hearne in his novel *The Sure Salvation*: "And the refuse itself had discharged a contour of dully iridescent grease which seemed to have been painted onto the sea with one stroke of a broad brush. [This] clinging evidence of their corruption, which the water would not swal–low."[5] Christo and Jeanne-Claude's hot pink polypropylene is a stroke of a broad brush

that not only draws attention to the floating garbage patches destroying the stability of marine environments, but also redraws the boundaries of island spaces by artificially extending the coastline of the Biscayne islands, creating new cartographies.

Excess and Access: Island Spaces

The inventiveness of new cartographies challenges the notion of island spaces as static tabula rasa for empirical expansion. Rather, the artists reconfigure the borders as a reflection of colonialist cartographic practices. Hau'ofa recalls it was continental people, "Europeans and Americans, who drew imaginary lines across the sea, making the colonial boundaries that, for the first time, confined ocean peoples to tiny spaces."[6] Significantly, Christo and Jeanne-Claude's use of polypropylene not only reshapes the coastline of the islands, but also notably prevents access to island resources. The man-made fabric becomes a pink prophylactic preventing the penetration of island spaces. Through material excess, access is denied those intent on despoiling the spoil islands. Instead of island people being fenced in and quarantined as Hau'ofa describes, colonizing forces are fenced out, prohibited from transgressing the pink borders. Archeologists have noted that smaller islands with less robust populations are more ecologically fragile and challenging for colonizing organisms. The metamorphic power of archipelago movement is found in Kamau Brathwaite's theory of tidalectics, which "emphasizes the changing nature of material, cultural and psychological island processes."[7] Through color and materiality, the tidalectics of *Surrounded Islands* create an unexpected adaptation of the seascape and suspend island access, suggesting a chromotopic imagined environment in what ultimately becomes a response to marine conservation and the fragility of ecological systems. It is an example of how "the real force of the Caribbean island archipelago movement is a metamorphosis that emphasizes invention and creation."[8] It can also be understood within a discourse of hopefulness. Shewry defines hope "as an awareness of the openness of the future" and an optimism that "involves attunement to the unexpected."[9] Perhaps *Surrounded Islands* is an installation of the hopefulness of creative metamorphosis through island movements and the unexpected. In place of the adage, "no man is an island," I offer, "no island is an island." In other words, islands are not singular, independent entities unaffected by environmental influences. Rather, islands are constellations of knowledge, mercurial messengers sharing and receiving information. *Surrounded Islands* is a set of constellations glistening in a pink galaxy of hope, as stated in the epigraph, a "hope of Divine Redemption through Nature, which is Art."[10]

Notes

[1] Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 256.

[2] Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," in *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*, eds. Eric Waddell, Vijay Naidu, and Epeli Hau'ofa (Suva, Fiji: Beake House, 1993), 6–7.

[3] Qtd. in DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots*, 17.

[4] Teresa Shewry. *Hope at Sea: Possible Ecologies in Oceanic Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 8.

[5] Qtd. in DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots*, 67.

[6] Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," 7.

[7] Jonathan Pugh, "Island Movements: Thinking with the Archipelago," *Island Studies Journal* 8, no. 1 (2013): 17.

[8] Pugh, "Island Movements," 17.

[9] Shewry, *Hope at Sea*, 178.

[10] Richard Flanagan, *Gould's Book of Fish* (London: Vintage, 2001), 304.

Selected Bibliography

DeLoughrey, Elizabeth M. *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007.

Flanagan, Richard. *Gould's Book of Fish*. London: Vintage, 2001.

Hau'ofa, Epeli. "Our Sea of Islands." In *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*, edited by Eric Waddell, Vijay Naidu, and Epeli Hau'ofa, 2–16. Suva, Fiji: Beake House, 1993.

Pugh, Jonathan. "Island Movements: Thinking with the Archipelago." *Island Studies Journal* 8, no. 1 (2013): 9–24.

Shewry, Teresa. *Hope at Sea: Possible Ecologies in Oceanic Literature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.