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Aug. 15, 2008

Media Web site: americanart.si.edu/press

Smithsonian American Art Museum Announces Acquisition of Seminal Work by Christo and Jeanne-Claude

Major Exhibition of Work to Tour United States in 2010

The Smithsonian American Art Museum has acquired “Running Fence, Sonoma and Marin Counties, California, 1972-76, A Documentation Exhibition,” the definitive record of the major early work by world-renowned artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude. The most lyrical and spectacular of Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s epic projects was the installation of the “Running Fence” (1972-1976), a white fabric and steel-pole fence, 24 1/2 miles long and 18 feet high, across the properties of 59 ranchers in Sonoma and Marin Counties north of San Francisco. The “Running Fence” existed for only two weeks; it survives today as a memory and through the artwork and documentation by the artists.

The collective archive of artwork and research material includes more than 350 individual items. With this acquisition, the museum has obtained nearly 50 original preparatory works by Christo, including 11 masterful, large-scale drawings—each eight-feet wide—and 35 additional drawings and collages he made in preparation for the final installation. The archive also includes a 68-foot long scale model, more than 240 documentary photographs by Wolfgang Volz in color and black-and-white, a film by the critically acclaimed filmmakers David Maysles, Charlotte Zwerin and Albert Maysles, documents, 324 color slides and one nylon fabric panel and steel pole.

“Running Fence, Sonoma and Marin Counties, California, 1972-76, A Documentation Exhibition” is the first major Christo and Jeanne-Claude complete project archive to be acquired by a museum.

“As the new home for the artwork and documents for the ‘Running Fence,’ the Smithsonian American Art Museum is now the institution of record for this pivotal project,” said Elizabeth Broun, The Margaret and Terry Stent Director at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. “This acquisition measurably strengthens the museum’s commitment to major artists who have made an indelible mark on American art and culture.”

The artists will be at the museum to discuss the project Saturday, Sept. 6, following a screening of the award winning film “Running Fence” (1978), directed by the Maysles who have

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documented six of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's major projects.

The "Running Fence" is considered one of the most important early public art projects, and, when it was installed in 1976, it was the most ambitious work undertaken by Christo and Jeanne-Claude since their 1964 arrival in the United States. When it was unveiled during America's bicentennial, it captured the public's imagination. The sheer beauty of the light and weather playing across the fabric of the fence stood in sharp contrast to the underlying issue of division and limitations that fences generally convey. For Christo and Jeanne-Claude, the fence embodied larger issues of human freedom and constraint. The planning, design, installation and critical response to the "Running Fence" set the tone for each of their subsequent major public projects. None would have been imaginable without it.

From 1972 when the "Running Fence" was first conceived until 1976 when it was completed, Christo and Jeanne-Claude faced seemingly insurmountable challenges. In addition to negotiating land rights with 59 ranchers, Christo and Jeanne-Claude grappled with bureaucratic hurdles at a time when the artists had no fame to pave the way. Christo and Jeanne-Claude convinced ordinary Americans of the transformative power of art.

To celebrate the acquisition, the museum is organizing "Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Remembering the 'Running Fence, Sonoma and Marin Counties, California, 1972-76,' A Documentation Exhibition," which will open April 2, 2010. The exhibition presents an opportunity to re-assess the impact of the "Running Fence" more than 30 years after it was completed. In addition, the exhibition will introduce the "Running Fence" to a new generation that has grown up since its creation. George Gurney, deputy chief curator, and Joanna Marsh, The James Dicke Curator of Contemporary Art, are the exhibition curators. The exhibition will tour nationally following its presentation in Washington, D.C.

This acquisition is part of the museum's ongoing commitment to contemporary art and artists through annual exhibitions, acquisitions, awards and public programs.

Film Screening and Conversation with the Artists

On Saturday, Sept. 6, at 3 p.m., the artists will discuss the project following a screening of the documentary "Running Fence" in the museum's McEvoy Auditorium. Free tickets are required and will be distributed from the museum's information desk in the G Street lobby beginning at 2 p.m. Details and a complete program description are available online at americanart.si.edu.

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Note to editors: Selected high-resolution images for publicity only are available; call (202) 633-8530.