Disturbing the Arkansas river

Over The River, A Work in Progress

Fondation de l'Hermitage, Lausanne, Switzerland

Until 24 May 2009.

The latest idea of the artists famous for wrapping Paris's Pont Neuf and Berlin's Reichstag in plastic is to cover parts of a 64-kilometre stretch of the Arkansas River in Colorado in aluminium-coated polypropylene. Christo sketched his first preparatory drawing for *Over the River* in 1992, but it won't come into being until the summer of 2012 at the earliest; hence the addendum to the title of this travelling exhibition, showing in Lausanne, Switzerland, until 24 May.

Although Christo does the drawings, he and his wife Jeanne-Claude are full artistic partners in every one of their "gentle disturbances". This is how they refer to their projects, which temporarily alter the relationship between sky and earth. *Over the River* will be in place in Colorado for just two weeks, after which it will be dismantled and recycled. All that will remain will be a few steel anchorage points, buried deep in the rock beneath the artificially raised banks that support the railway on the north side of the river and US Route 50 on the south.

The canopy, consisting of around 900 panels and nearly 84,000 square metres of fabric, will

be broken up in places to make way for bridges, trees, rocks and other aesthetic interruptions. It will be translucent, so that people floating beneath it in rafts, canoes and kayaks can look up and see how the sky is changing. And when the wind blows, the artists say, it will undulate and shimmer "like a second, aerial river".

Christo and Jeanne-Claude chose the Arkansas River in 1996, having spent four years, on and off, reconnoitring in the Rocky Mountains. Full-sized and wind-tunnel tests followed, as well as an assessment of how the project will affect the environment — nothing like it has been done before. How will it withstand the temperatures in excess of 35 °C that are regularly recorded in Colorado in July? How will the mountain fauna respond to this disturbance?

A selection of Christo's preparatory drawings, as well as collages (pictured) of maps, photographs, pencil sketches and mock-up fabric panels, form the substance of the exhibition, along with black-and-white photos of people looking thoughtful on river banks. From these, Jeanne-Claude stands out with her frizzy hair and enormous hat, reminiscent of a beekeeper's.

As impressive as the project itself are the hoops the pair have jumped through to try to get permission to bring it off. This is chronicled

in a film diary that Wolfram Hissen started in 1994. The artists patiently put their case to bureaucrats and local residents who mostly seem to want to understand and to help; yet in an echo of creationists' objections to Charles Darwin's theories, some voice their anger at what they see as a couple of blasphemous egomaniacs bent on improving "God's work".

In the film, Christo explains that, having lived in Bulgaria when it was a Communist state, he has an urge to create art that has no ulterior motive. He and his wife have therefore devoted their lives to championing expensive, time-consuming and ephemeral projects. It may be their last — they are both more than 70 years old — and it may never happen. The locals will have the last word, and Hissen's film leaves you in doubt as to what that word will be. If *Over the River* ever sees the light of day, it will have emerged from its own chrysalis — an even bigger wrapping made entirely of red tape.

■
Laura Spinney is author of the novel *The Quick*.

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Not one to watch

Watchmen

Film directed by Zack Snyder

In UK and US cinemas now.

Owing to complicated, interlocking storylines coupled with a gruesome take on humanity, Alan Moore's comic-book novel *Watchmen* was long considered to be unfilmable. Director Zack Snyder has at last made a film version. But the title should have stayed on the printed page.

Watchmen depicts the rise and fall of superheroes in an alternative 1985 in which the United States won the war in Vietnam, Richard Nixon is in permanent rule, the world is careening towards nuclear war, and a terrible lab accident created Doctor Manhattan, a super-being capable of manipulating the quantum universe.

The depth of character and story development in the 12-issue series, published by DC Comics in 1986–87, transformed the genre. The books were brutal, dystopian and had a deeply pessimistic view of the human condition. *Watchmen*

Quantum morality: Dr Manhattan in *Watchmen*.

grappled with intractable moral issues, many arising from cold-war apocalyptic nightmares. It asked if humanity would destroy itself, if that self-destruction could be prevented, and at what cost — and it questioned the role of science in preservation versus destruction.

Some elements of *Watchmen*'s failure as a film were predestined. It sinks beneath the weight of backstory — necessary for the uninitiated but yawningly dull. The most colossal blunder is the

casting of Matthew Goode as the smartest man in the world, Adrian Veidt, also known as the superhero Ozymandias. Veidt, who propels the story to its awful conclusion, should be magnetic but instead comes across as repulsively foppish. It is impossible to accept him as the executor of the most diabolical practical joke ever.

The end of the film fails, especially in terms of science ethics. In the book, saving the world from nuclear holocaust is accomplished through abhorrent yet inspired acts of technological and artistic creation. The result shocks — a Machiavellian decision with cataclysmic consequences, leaving the reader to dine on a stew of ambiguity. Was this murderous apotheosis of science ultimately required for the preservation of humanity? What is the cost to society of Veidt's salvation plan, or even of modern efforts such as the International Space Station? In the film, the creative act is replaced by one of theft and dissimulation, and the choice for the viewer is stripped of subtlety.

The book and film are summarized by asking "Who watches the Watchmen?" For the film, the answer should be, not many. Buy the book. ■

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