

Barrels of Fun: Christo Erects a Brilliantly Colored Pyramid as Tall as Egypt's Sphinx in London's Hyde Park

The "Mastaba" will float on the Serpentine Lake in Hyde Park until the end of September.



Artist Christo unveils his first UK outdoor work, a 20m high installation on Serpentine Lake, with accompanying exhibition at at The Serpentine Gallery on June 18, 2018 in London, England. Photo by Tim P. Whitby/Tim P. Whitby/Getty Images for Serpentine Galleries.

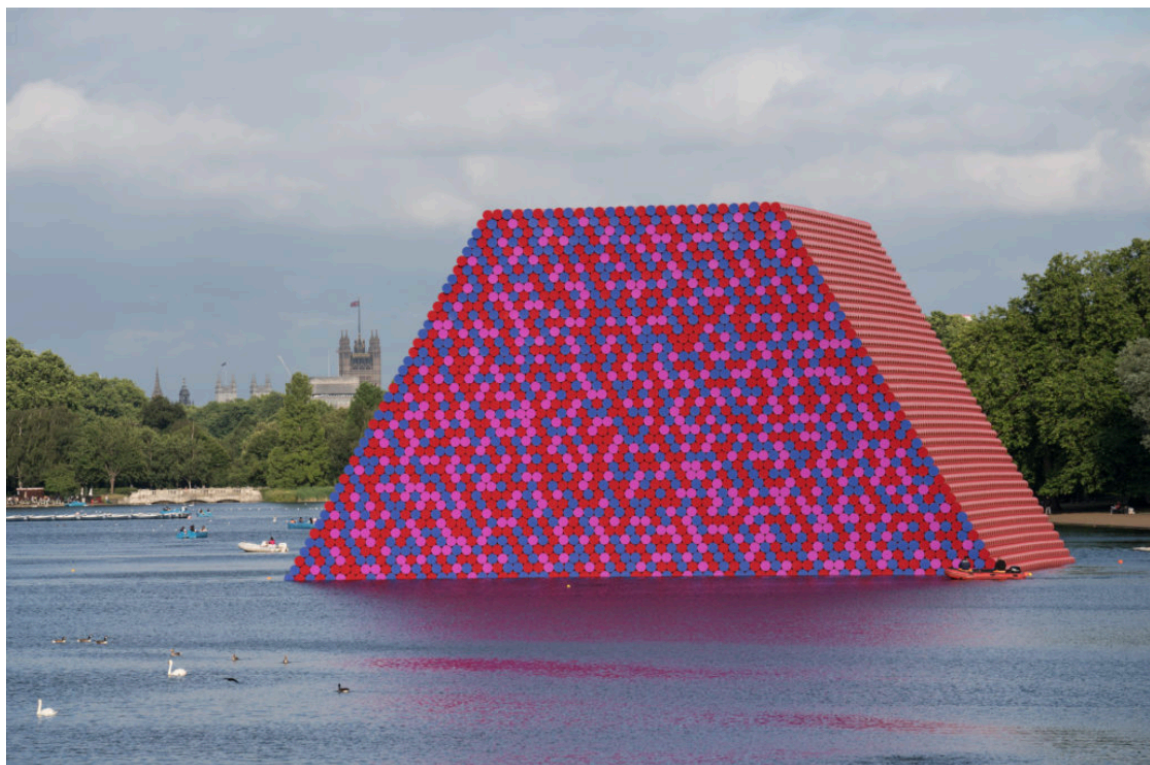
The artist Christo is known for making the impossible possible. In 2016, he allowed hundreds of thousands of people to walk on water when he erected floating piers in the middle of Italy's Lake Iseo. In 1983, he and his wife Jeanne-Claude surrounded 11 islands in Miami's Biscayne Bay with floating fabric the color of Pepto Bismol.

This summer, another urban body of water will be transformed by the artist. He and his team have built an enormous structure made from 7,506 stacked barrels. The work, which officially launched on Monday, floats in the middle of Hyde Park's Serpentine Lake in London.

The 65-foot-tall, 600-ton trapezoidal barrel structure is called a mastaba, after the Arabic word for a bench, and its shape is based on the form of stone benches that originated in Mesopotamia. Although it is as tall as the Sphinx in Egypt, it is in fact a smaller test run for a larger work—eight times as tall—that the artist has been working to erect in Abu Dhabi since 1977. It took around two and a half months to construct.

Organized with the Serpentine Galleries, which are located in the depths of the royal park, *The London Mastaba* is Christo's first major outdoor public work in the UK. The red, blue, and mauve colors of its many barrels reflect in the water, creating a dappled mosaic on its surface, which the Bulgarian artist likens to "an abstract painting."

As with all of Christo's projects, including those he developed with his longtime collaborator and wife Jeanne-Claude, who died in 2009, there is no fixed meaning ascribed to the mastaba. "Any interpretation is legitimate, critical or positive," Christo said at the inauguration. "All [interpretations] make you think. This is why we're human; to think."



Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *The London Mastaba*, Serpentine Lake, Hyde Park (2016-18). Photo by Wolfgang Volz © 2018 Christo.

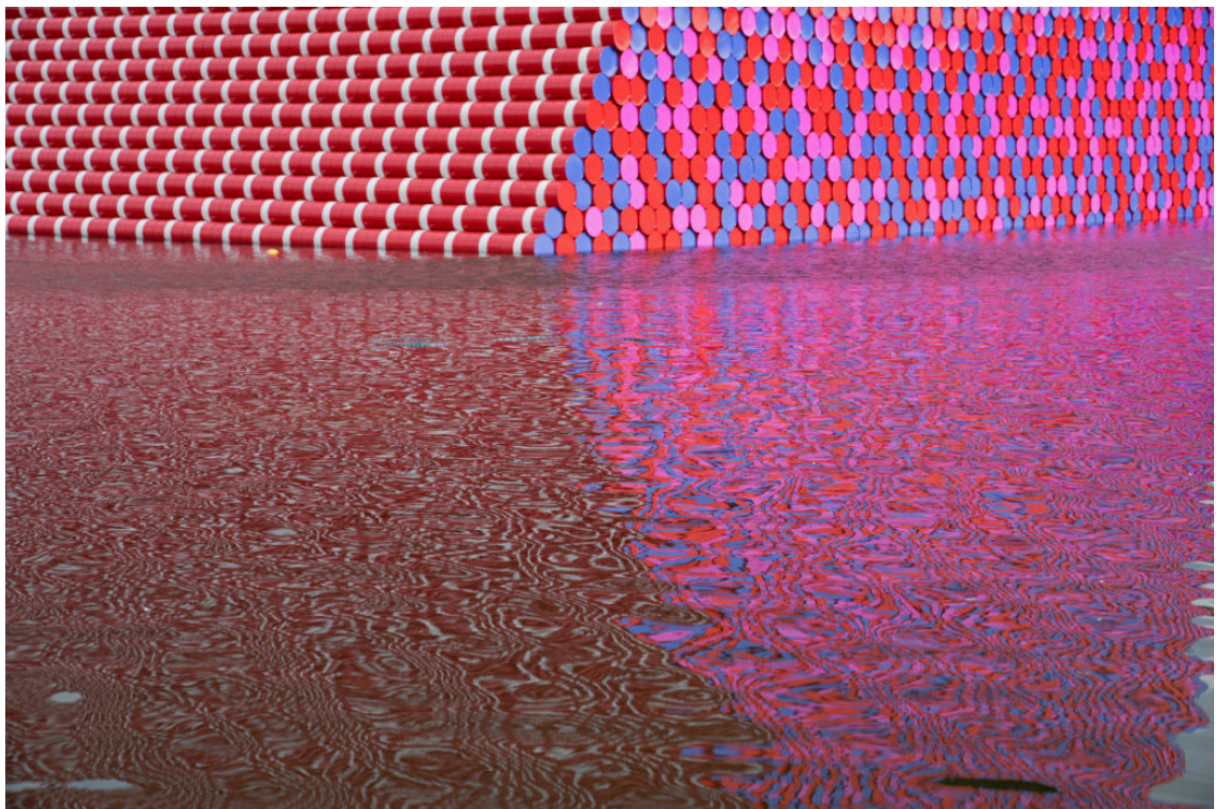
The Serpentine Galleries's artistic director Hans Ulrich Obrist first had the idea to collaborate with Christo after seeing his *Floating Piers* project in 2016. "It is our dream come true to have Christo with us," Obrist said at the launch.

He and Serpentine Galleries CEO Yana Peel were both present to christen the work's debut, as was the galleries' chairman (and former New York mayor) Michael Bloomberg, who helped Christo realize another work in a major urban park: his legendary *Gates* installation in Central Park in 2005.

The inauguration of *The London Mastaba* coincides with an exhibition at the Serpentine devoted to Christo and Jeanne-Claude and their 60-year history of working with barrels. Titled "Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Barrels and the Mastaba (1958–2018)," the exhibition features sculpture, historic photographs of installations, and preparatory sketches.

It passes from early wrapped works through important interventions such as the legendary 1961–62 *Wall of Barrels – The Iron Curtain*, which the couple erected for a few short hours in Paris in response to the building of the Berlin Wall. It also incorporates unrealized proposals for barrel projects in the Suez Canal and Lake Michigan, both conceived in 1967.

The exhibition will come to a close September 9, shortly before the dismantling of the mastaba on September 23.



Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *The London Mastaba*, Serpentine Lake, Hyde Park (2016–18). Photo by Wolfgang Volz © 2018 Christo.

Christo, who grew up in Stalinist Bulgaria, notoriously does not accept sponsorship or public funding that might compromise his vision, so *The London Mastaba* was entirely self-funded from the sale of original works of art. It cost an estimated \$4 million, according to the New York Times.

And while the project didn't face nearly as many bureaucratic hurdles as some of Christo's most ambitious projects, which can be held up for decades, it still required careful planning, engineering, and teamwork. It took a year to secure the proper permits, according to the *NYT*, and the materials had to be delivered by more than 70 trucks that were required to drive through the park at just one mile per hour to protect pedestrians.

Meanwhile, Christo and Jeanne-Claude are also the subject of a selling show in the city opening on June 20 at Stern Pissarro Gallery through July 21 and titled "Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A Life of Projects." The show will home in on some of the couple's most famous projects, with highlights including imagery from their famous wrapped buildings, *The Pont Neuf Wrapped* (1985) and the *Wrapped Reichstag (Project for Berlin)* (1995), as well as the more recent 2016 project *Floating Piers (Project for Lake Iseo, Italy)*.

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