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**COLOR MAESTRO:** Large-scale artist Christopher Janney creates 'urban musical instruments' in public sites around the country.  
JOANNE CICCARELLO/THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

## One man's vision of sound

### Public-space artist Christopher Janney wants you to hear colors in the most unexpected places.

*By Teresa Méndez | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor*

**LEXINGTON, MASS.** - His days begin with a disarmingly ordinary routine: He rises early to see his daughter off to high school, then takes a dip in the hot tub, followed by a round on the elliptical machine, and finally some time training with the Bowflex. There is nothing dramatically artistic about Christopher Janney's person. No black clothes. No brooding. He seems unencumbered, buoyant even.

When asked to define what he does, he replies: "I try not to." When pressed, Janney slyly offers, "That's the beautiful thing about art. It tries to defy categorization."

Janney's life, a study in contrasts, is indeed difficult to categorize. A trained architect who is also a jazz musician, he launched his art career from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge – a school where, in his words, "there are no 'artists.'" He creates enormous public art projects, high-tech pieces that incorporate complex sound and light elements, out of his home here, in a town steeped in Revolutionary War history.

While you may not have heard of him, chances are, if you've passed through a major American airport, you have, at some point, experienced a Christopher Janney creation.

Since his professional art career began in the late '70s, he's been wildly prolific. This year alone will see a colored glass canopy completed at the Broward County Library in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., the dedication of two nine-story interactive sound and light towers in a parking garage at Boston's Logan Airport, as well as designs in England and a tour of an earlier project through music festivals in the United States and Europe.

This year also marks the release of the first book about Janney, published by Sideshow Media. "Architecture of the Air: The Sound and Light Environments of Christopher Janney" is organized around three types of projects: "urban musical instruments"; "physical music," including the iconic 1999 "HeartBeat: mb," where Janney made it possible for Russian ballet dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov to dance to the rhythm of his own heart; and "performance architecture," which features Janney's Lexington home, a place the Mad Hatter might have imagined with its undulating whimsical shapes and bold hues of blues and pinks.

It was here that Janney's wife and one-time publicist, Terrell Lamb, co-hosted the book's launch last month. Janney, dressed in a gray suit and turtleneck with silver wire-rimmed glasses and a velvety scarf, looked every bit the honored guest. The family's dog, a prettily marked Australian shepherd, wandered among the other guests. Downstairs, in Janney's recording studio just visible through a rose-colored window, his daughter, Lilli, worked on a video assignment for class. (His son was away at boarding school.)

At 7 p.m., Ms. Lamb quieted the humming crowd milling about the spacious living room with its translucent spiraling closet and enormous leather sofa – both Janney designs – to introduce her husband: "This is a guy who wants you to hear color and see sound," she said.

The workshop where Janney creates his auditory and visual art is situated inside a converted greenhouse in the backyard – the bones of its former purpose still visible in the form of skylights that have been obscured with blankets. It's a tidy space of expansive work surfaces, impressive computers, squares of colored glass, and a piano. Notes, models, and photos from current projects are plastered on a wall.

On one table a white speaker mutely huffs away. Janney calls it his "breathing speaker" – you see it throbbing, but it emits no sound. He likes to bring it to the first day of class – he's currently a visiting professor at the Pratt Institute in New York – to get students thinking about sight and sound in new ways.

For an interview here in the studio a week after the book party, Janney wears red warm-up pants, a navy turtleneck under a deep purple fleece vest, and zip-up snow boots.

As an artist, he says that he's constantly on the lookout for "a way to enhance the design" of whatever he's working with. Whether it's a building or a performance, he's searching for an idea that will "raise it above just being decoration." And with his signature pieces, he has certainly achieved that.

The first, "Soundstair," an urban musical instrument, was conceived while Janney was still earning a master's degree in environmental art at MIT.

Installed on staircases, such as the ones in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Spanish Steps in Rome, it toured the US and Europe between 1979 and 1998. Electronic sensors connected to a synthesizer and speakers enabled anyone to make music by walking, bounding, or dancing on the steps.

Permanent "Soundstair" installations have surprised and delighted visitors to the science museums in Boston and St. Paul, Minn., the South Carolina Aquarium, and several art museums. (It's also daughter Lilli's favorite piece. She says that when it was in their house their cats would set off the musical stairs.)

"Reach: New York," another urban musical instrument, uses technology similar to "Soundstair." By waving a hand in front of suspended horizontal columns of green aluminum tubing, a passerby triggers flutes, marimbas, and noises recorded in the Florida Everglades and Brazilian rain forest – exotic sounds at odds with the subway environment in which it hangs. Each year, an estimated 23 million people pass through Manhattan's 34th Street/Herald Square stop, where "Reach" is installed.

Janney says public transportation is an especially good setting for public art. "There are a lot of people milling around waiting – it's a captive audience," he says with a laugh.

And then there's "Turn Up the Heat," the Miami Heat basketball team's scoreboard at the American Airlines Arena. Completed in 2000, it's a particularly unexpected commission for an artist.

Inspired by the sea anemones Janney saw while scuba diving off Florida, LED screens are suspended from 96 tentacles that reach out from a spherical center. When the team scores, fans are rewarded with an explosion of sound and color.

Janney's work is immediately recognizable, and while visitors to Boston's Museum of Science, the New York subway, and the Miami Heat's arena have all experienced his designs, most are probably unaware of the man behind them.

Carol Bankerd, Janney's art teacher when he was an undergraduate at Princeton and a collaborator on his book, says this anonymous recognition might actually be the best sort.

"For an artist, that may be the highest compliment," she says. "Not that someone lacks name recognition but that the things one does are associated with life in New York or being a kid on a stairway. I would say the finest measure of permeability is that his work reaches parts of the society without that kind of name recognition."



**ART HOME:** The rear of Janney's 1920s farmhouse reveals the artist's love of improvisation and creating encounters with the unexpected.