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In this file photo French-born artist JR poses for pictures prior to the opening of his exhibition 'JR: Chronicles' at the Brooklyn Museum in New York City. — AFP photos



These file photos show a view of 'The Chronicles of New York City' at the 'JR: Chronicles' exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in New York City.

## BROOKLYN MUSEUM DEBUTS IMMERSIVE RETROSPECTIVE OF FRENCH ARTIST JR

An urban artist whose snapshots of anonymous individuals have made him a global celebrity, French photographer JR presents a retrospective of his grand vision on Friday in New York, his first major show in North America. The selection of his pieces spanning two decades, by no means encompasses the entirety of his vast oeuvre—but it offers an invaluable insight into his unique perspective on the impermanent, transitory nature of existence.

"From the beginning, as someone who works in the ephemeral, outside, I've always tried to document in order to preserve a trace," JR told AFP ahead of the launch of "JR: Chronicles," on display at the Brooklyn Museum for the next seven months. The exhibition shows

cases some of his black-and-white photographs alongside color images of the photos in-situ, being enjoyed by the public on the streets.

"These traces, gradually, have become sometimes more interesting than the outdoor projects because they show how people have reacted to the installations," JR said. "It gives the temperature of a place, almost like a sociological study of different contexts in which I can install these works." An enigmatic master of spectacle whose work delights Instagram, JR demonstrates in his retrospective that he is an artist with genuine depth beneath the shiny surfaces.

From photos plastered on walls around Paris to an enormous fresco representing more than 1,000 New

Yorkers, "all of these projects are linked to each other," said the artist, sporting his signature hat and black sunglasses. "The best thing about my street art is that it encourages people to meet," added the 36-year-old, who has been working at his craft for 20 years.

Since the beginning of his career, when he photographed youths in the tough Parisian suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois, JR has been inclined to remain in the shadows, allowing his subjects the limelight that many artists crave for themselves. In projects such as "Women are Heroes," "The Wrinkles of the City" and "Inside Out," he showcases "the invisible"—often giving voice to the voiceless, and shining a light on those who walk through life largely unnoticed.

### Sociological study

"I've been living in New York for nine years and presenting my work for the first time like this is an incredible blessing," he said. The show, which bears a similarity to a recent exhibit at Paris's Maison Europeenne de la Photographie, belies the wider public's perception of JR's oeuvre. In addition to photography it features videos, montages and animations, and visitors can download a smartphone app with video explanations of his projects.

"We decided to create an exhibition that focuses very specifically on his collaborations with communities and picturing communities," said Drew Sawyer, who curated the show with Sharon Matt Atkins. "By focusing on his community collaborations, it really gets that point across."

JR's flirtation with different media has made it possible to take his street art—he recently showed a giant photo of a child looking over a wall at the US-Mexican border—into museums and galleries. From Rio to the Louvre, JR thinks big, with concepts that take considerable preparation.

Though he's far from his days as a teenage graffiti artist, the multimedia boundary-pusher says the way he works "hasn't really changed." JR has already started to work on other projects, including one in an American prison that came together just a few days ago. He says a frenetic workflow, made possible by efficient printmaking techniques and relying on a small team, is the reason he has been so prolific for so long. "It permits me to continue to work like I'm 16 years old," he said. "To decide on a whim to go work on one street or another."—AFP



## Art to the rescue: Old US police, fire boxes get breath of life

Decades after they helped save lives in the US capital, police and fire department call boxes still stand on city corners, relics of a time when firefighters used horse-drawn wagons and cops walked the beat. Now, more than 40 years since they were last used as a fire alert and police communication system, the cast iron curiosities in downtown Washington are coming back to life as street art. To honor prominent women from Washington's history, local artist Charles Bergen is jazzing up eight call boxes in the city's bustling heart.

Downtown property owners wanted their streets "to be more interesting, to be more active," said Ellen Jones, deputy executive director of the DowntownDC Business Improvement District (BID). "We think public art is one way to do that," Jones told AFP. They also really like the

idea of turning eyesores "into an asset through art." The city call boxes are designated historic, said Jones—"so you can't take them out" of the ground even though some have started to fall apart, missing doors and panels.

The refurbishment is jointly funded by BID and Washington's Commission on the Arts and Humanities. Art on Call, a city-funded restoration effort that ended in 2009, identified 1,100 abandoned boxes in Washington and restored 145 to reflect the identity of various neighborhoods. The boxes were first installed in the 19th century and contained a lever that citizens could pull in the event of a fire. It sent a telegraph signal with the box number to firefighters, who then knew where to respond.

Police boxes were slightly different, allowing an officer patrolling on foot to call his precinct house. "A rule of the job was never to call twice from the same box, for that told the sergeant that the beat was not being walked," says a plaque on one of the Art on Call boxes. Police radios and the city's 911 system made call boxes obsolete by the 1970s, but for an artist they remain a unique canvas. "You can't move these call boxes," Bergen, 56, tells AFP, so "you get the opportunity as an artist to put artwork in some great locations."—AFP



This combination of pictures in Washington, DC, shows old call boxes filled with art as part of the Sheridan-Kalorama Call Box Restoration Project (first row, left to right) by artists Peter Waddell, Cecilia Beaux, Peter Waddell and Peter Waddell, (second row) by artists Peter Waddell, Peter Waddell, Michael Knud Ross and Michael Knud Ross, (third row) by artists Charles Codman, Michael Knud Ross, Peter Waddell and Supon Phornirunlit. — AFP

## Textiles get their moment in the art world spotlight

From weaving to embroidery, the world of textiles—often largely ignored at Western contemporary art showcases—is taking centre stage this weekend at the "Frieze London" art fair. The prestigious annual showcase, held this year in Regents Park from Thursday to Sunday, has organized a new section called "Woven" devoted entirely to textile fibers. It features eight solo artists of different generations from a host of countries, including Brazil, the Philippines, China, India and Madagascar, who tackle perhaps surprisingly topical themes.

"(Weaving) had always been a central part of artistic practice everywhere in the world," curator Cosmin Costinas told AFP, explaining the exhibition's name. "But indeed it was marginalized because it was associated with women," he added, noting "eurocentric" perspectives that the craft was largely non-Western had also fueled its sidelining.

For Cosmin, it was a chance to celebrate textile arts while weaving issues like Britain's "unsolved colonial legacy", with other contemporary matters such as sexism and ethnocentrism. "There was a strong intention to do something that responds to the current moment, the current mess the UK finds itself," he said, referring to the political turmoil engulfing Britain over Brexit.

### It's been changing

"Woven" brings together artists like Mrinalini Mukherjee (1949-2015), an Indian sculptor who used dyed and woven hemp, and Pacita Abad (1946-2004), an American-Filipino artist renowned for merging traditional textiles with contemporary painting. Abad's "Trapunto" canvases, festooned with sequins, shells and swatches of precious textiles, among other things, take on a three dimensional quality.

"For many people it was considered craft versus art," said Amrita Jhaveri, owner of the Jhaveri Contemporary gallery in Mumbai, which presents the weavings of Monika Correa at the Frieze. "But it's been changing for some time now. "The art world is looking outside the kind of formal art practice to other areas for instance ceramics, or textiles," she added. Their increasing recognition on the international art stage has also coincided with ongoing reinvention.

Chitra Ganesh, a 44-year-old Indian-American visual artist, noted "a larger conceptual approach to bringing together disparate iconographies, histories, looking for way to connect the very old and the very new." Her feminist works are full of mythological connotations while incorporating "mass produced materials" such as industrial bags of potatoes, fur falls and animal skins.

### A form of protest

Angela Su, a Hong Kong artist known for her scientific drawings and performance works, showcases a series of works inspired by the months of pro-democracy protests sweeping her home city and former British colony. The



Chinese artist Ai Weiwei poses with his artworks at the Lisson Gallery in London as part of the Frieze Art week.



Filipino artist Cian Dayrit poses with his artworks at the Frieze Art Fair.



People view artworks at Frieze Art Fair in London.

central painting depicts a brain to evoke "the schizophrenic identity of Hong Kong". "We don't know if we're Chinese or Hong Kong or British, we're this mix of everything," Su said. The artists was also eager to show that sewing could be modern and "a form of protest" as well as a traditional craft. One of her pieces exhibits lips sewn together with hair to show "the suppression of freedom of speech". —AFP