
Cristina Iglesias: how a sculptor won the Royal Academy Architecture Prize

This year's award has gone to an artist who thinks big, and whose work is unsettling and mysterious in nature



Iglesias at work © Lopez de Zubiria

Edwin Heathcote MARCH 13 2020

Anyone who walks past the £1bn Bloomberg HQ in the City of London, designed by Foster + Partners, will notice a pair of pools outside the building.

The cast-bronze foliage that creates the riverbed of “Forgotten Streams” at first appears to be some kind of primeval sludge, as if the surface of the city has been stripped away and its viscera exposed. It is covered with trickling water that drains and fills the pools, hinting at the subterranean river, the Walbrook, which once made this area a Roman dock, and at the layered archaeology beneath: a brooding excavation into the city’s subconscious.

“Forgotten Streams” is the work of Spanish installation artist and sculptor Cristina Iglesias, who will receive the Royal Academy’s Architecture Prize next week. As I sit down to talk with Iglesias in a chilly room in the Royal Academy, I can’t help noticing that the high-tech steel-and-glass table between us is another work by Foster. The artist seems almost predestined to work in the world of

sense of the surreal.

Here she is, winning an award for architecture. How comfortable, I wonder, is she with that?

“I always tell myself that what I do is sculpture,” she replies. “Some people talk about it as installation, but I also use the expression ‘constructor’ because there’s something physical about construction that always attracted me. Things like [the Roman church] San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane by Borromini or the staircase in Michelangelo’s [Laurentian] Library — these things go beyond the functionality of architecture.”



‘Forgotten Streams’ in London © Nigel Young

She didn’t start in art. “I had,” she says, searching for the words, “you could say, eclectic formative years. My father was a scientist but all of us five siblings ended up in the arts.” (Her brother Alberto is a composer who frequently works with Pedro Almodóvar.) She kicked off with two years studying chemical engineering and then “landed in London, at the Chelsea School of Art”.

It was there she met her husband, the late, and great, Juan Muñoz, who died in 2001 aged only 48. To what extent did she and Muñoz influence each other’s art?

“Well, we lived together, so maybe it was like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg,” she says with a slightly wistful laugh. “We shared a library, we shared friends and discussions around the dinner table. But we were aware we couldn’t share a language.”

gallery. Among her first urban interventions, and the first work with water, was a collaboration with Flemish architects Paul Robbrecht and Hilde Daem in Antwerp's Leopold de Waelplaats, "Deep Fountain". In a slightly dreary and over-formal square, Iglesias rendered a huge carpet of organic mulch in bronze patinated to a coppery green.

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When you first encounter "Deep Fountain", it might appear as a reflecting pool slowly draining into a deep, black gash at its centre. It's slightly ominous; your first reaction is to wonder where that hole leads, how deep does it go. Or you might come across the green textured rug slowly filling with water, becoming something else.

"I wanted it to be a place for people to meet to stay and talk," Iglesias says. "But also a work which introduces the theme of time, the rhythm of the water and the sequence, creating a time for looking."

In its disruption of the seemingly solid urban fabric, Iglesias's work is unsettling, mysterious, even sexual in nature. "I'm always working with the underground," she says, "between fiction and nature and with the memory of life below the city."

The artist also describes it as "a connection to the fantastic world between reality and fiction, abstract and open to interpretation . . . a space between the city and the temple."

If none of this seems quite enough to justify a prize for architecture, perhaps the doors of Madrid's Prado might convince. Iglesias worked with architect Rafael Moneo on the museum's comprehensive 2007 renovation to create giant dark bronze gates with the texture of a strange, fibrous woody substrate, in stark contrast to Moneo's crisp, clean lines.



Her gates for the Prado © Alamy

“I wanted to look at the idea of passage,” she says. “I tried to understand what the building needed from me, and the architect allowed me to do it.”

The doors create in their own depth a threshold for the museum — tantalising, a little uncertain. “It could be paradise or it could be hell,” Iglesias has said, in an allusion to Rodin’s intricately modelled *Gates of Hell*. Imposing and slightly intimidating, the huge doors form “an idea of the imaginary and the in-between”, she says.

Iglesias appears busier than ever. This year she is completing two major projects, one urban work outside the Museum of Fine Art in Houston (a collaboration with the architect Steven Holl), and another in her home town of San Sebastián.

“There is a lighthouse in the bay which has been empty and is now being restored,” she says. “You need to take a boat to get there, and I’m trying to say ‘Look — this is a public space, it is yours!’ I’ve always been very interested in landscape and in sculpture as landscape, something you need to move around to understand, something that makes you pause and look. It makes you share time and space with others.”

If any artist might receive an award for architecture, Iglesias is probably that artist. Her work is always intricately embedded in the context, in the surface, the building, the consciousness of the city itself.

It’s also rare for an artist to create so much work and at such a scale for the public realm. I ask how she finds working with architects. “It’s not always easy,” she says, with the sly hint of a conspiratorial wink, “and it’s also difficult for me as an artist to work in their world because of the regulations and civic

And to receive an award intended for architecture? “Of course I’m very honoured. It’s the Royal Academy! But I’m also happy because it’s about the spaces in between buildings, the public realm as a gathering place. I’m interested in the fluidity of space and place in the city, a seat to rest or have a sandwich, to sit with strangers. I hope it encourages a kind of citizenship.”

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