



THIS PAGE Threshold-
Entrance, Iglesias's cast-bronze
doorway at the Prado Museum,
Madrid, 2006-07

Cristina Iglesias's public realm
installations are at once acutely place-
sensitive and somehow unearthly. These
vegetal formations – in bronze, steel or
cement, and often in flowing water –
are, the artist says, 'fictions that bring
nature to the constructed world'

By Jay Merrick

The shape of water

BELOW *Tres Aguas*, Toledo, 2014. The water becomes a mirror reflecting the town hall



"It's an extraordinary challenge to create a piece in a city where you can share time with friends, or be anonymous"

WHAT IS SIGNIFICANT to us - physically, emotionally, memorially, psychically - as we walk through a town, a city or countryside? Do we prefer to look at a hand-held, higher image of Venice's Piazza San Marco as we walk through Piazza San Marco? How many architects talk at sincere length about designing buildings that respond sensitively to what's around them, and then deliver blockhead architecture? How many public artworks are, as the acerbic American designer James Wines put it, merely arbitrary 'turds in the plaza'?

Wherever we are, we are immersed in fons, sounds, smells, movement, people, thoughts, hopes, fears, the elements. The work of Cristina Iglesias, the Spanish artist who was recently awarded the 2020 Royal Academy Architecture Prize, meets the chaos of the phenomena by creating concentrations of specific manifestations of light, surface, depth, movement and shadow in her water-based, hanging, and room-like installations. They are beautifully strange, or vice versa, and acutely place-sensitive.

Iglesias initially studied chemical science, but was always drawn to literature and art. Eventually, she studied sculpture at the Chelsea College of Art, while remaining immersed in the ideas of writers as diverse as Jorge Luis Borges and philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. No surprise, then, that her hanging, cage-like pavilions and canopies are subtly scripted with quotes from science fiction novels such as Arthur C Clarke's *The Fountains of Paradise* and Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris*.

I was attracted to physics and geology and science, investigating that idea of studying something without knowing where it will end,' she explained, a few hours before receiving the RA prize from Norman Foster. 'But I didn't see where I could really dig in. Maybe I was scared. But the abstraction of science was easier to understand. My first move to art was because I wanted to find a way to construct my own language - for example, by creating illusion.'

The prize was awarded for her public realm installations, of which the most notable are fusions of sculpture and moving or tidal water. 'It's an extraordinary challenge to create a piece in a city that can be a gathering space where you can share time with friends, or be anonymous. How do you change a place with meaning? I find that extraordinarily attractive for the issues I deal with.' These issues, such as the way we experience time in particular places, our perceptions of movement and perspective, and her creation of 'thresholds to another world', can influence our behaviour and imagination. ▶

BELOW Iglesias in her studio - she sculpts her water installation surfaces by hand



The Guardian's art critic, Adrian Searle, knows Iglesias's work (and that of her late husband, Juan Muñoz) particularly well. 'She's a singular figure and was always much more interested in spaces than objects,' he tells me. 'Her work is always a subtle disruption rather than a grand gesture, a sea rich far a sense of magic. Rather than looking at her work, you are enveloped by it.' He adds that those who have influenced her have been wide-ranging, including the architect Alvaro Siza and artists such as Thomas Schütte.

Iglesias's description of the huge multi-hinged, vegetally cast bronze doors that she installed at the Prado Museum in Madrid gives an idea of her approach. 'The doors are in a part of the city that is so dry,' she explains. 'They are something that moves but doesn't belong to the world. The poetic perception distinguishes what is functional and what is another state of being. You don't expect something different to happen here. I didn't want it to be just a door.'

The visionary portrait painted by William Blake for the frontispiece of his last epic poem, Milton, springs to mind. 'It's the threshold to a temple of the museum on

one side, and the botanical gardens on the other,' says Iglesias. The elements of the doors move every two hours, between 10am and 8pm, so if you're passing or entering or leaving, it's always different. 'It's that relation with what you don't expect, a different discovery of places. People look more carefully and give time to it, and to the lines of movement. You're passing by something and maybe coming back to it to see if something repeats, or not.'

To which we might attach a remark by the celebrated philosopher of poetics and science, Gaston Bachard: 'How concrete everything becomes in the world of the spirit when an object, a mere door, can give images of hesitation, temptation, desire, security, welcome and respect.'

Iglesias speaks of 'the comfort of a space that you don't control', as if uncertainty was an emotional virtue. States of strangeness, disturbance and expectancy also matter greatly to her. 'I'm very interested in making you move in a different way, or turn your shoulders. One can construct something that affects this, or even goes away from being yourself.' Speaking of construction, Iglesias sculpts her water installation surfaces by hand, typically in a lost-wax process. She farms a series of different vegetal fragments which are then welded together randomly to hazy any sense of pattern. 'I never make a maquette,' she says. 'It's approximate.'

It's intriguing that she seeks to evoke feelings of solitude or intimacy in which individual passers-by commune with the installations. There is another layer to this - 'the anonymity of the piece outdoors, which accepts the risk of not being seen. The diathym of what happens around it has nothing to do with it.' We might wonder if a public artwork can radiate solitude, while attracting penumbras of human solitudes.

States of solitude are regularly mentioned by her. We also encounter these conditions in her hanging pavilions, screens and outdoor installations. In the case of the pavilions, 'these are pieces where you have shadows and intentional physical presence. You are hidden and walking (through them) but your feet are exposed. You don't see the texts easily. It's dreamlike. It's a place and a journey. It's time. The slowness of looking in a place with no apparent function.'

Her room installations, which have appeared in places including Barcelona, Madrid and Polto, take the form of

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BELOW The bronze surface of
Forgotten Strains, Bloomberg
headquarters, London, 2017



ABOVE Drawing for Threshold-
Entrance. The elements of the
doors move every two hours

RIGHT Corridor Suspension
Landscape, wrought iron braid,
cables and shadow, with text
from JG Ballard's The Crystal
World, Reina Sofia Museum,
Madrid, 2006



BELOW Growth 1, cast aluminum and solid glass with pigments, Centro Botín, Santander, 2018



Her water installations invariably suggest the presence of much greater occult depths just beyond your sight and reach

sizeable, highly polished metal cuboids with internal, vegetally sculpted fissures or corridors. From inside, you get a restricted view of the sky or nearby buildings and trees, and the key effect is of confinement, of being alone - yet another of the physical paradoxes that Iglesias seeks to create.

But her most compelling - one might also say eerie - works involve water passing over the incredibly complex and counterfactually soft-looking compactions of vegetal surfaces sculpted onto polychromed cement, bronze or stainless steel - 'fictions that bring nature to the constructed world', as she puts it.

That, of course, is far too simple because there is something deeply primal in our reactions to tableaux like *Desde lo Subterráneo* at the Centro Botín in Santander, or *Forgotten Streams* outside the Bloomberg headquarters in London, and, most spectacularly, *Deep Fountain* in front of Antwerp's Royal Museum of Fine Art. Their surfaces and the reflections on the always moving water are not unlike the branching, electrochemical dendrites of brain nerve cells.

With their complex sculpted surfaces and bristles of light and murk, her water installations invariably suggest the presence of much greater occult depths just beyond your sight and reach. A line from J.G. Ballard's novel *The Drowned World* seems to resonate: Just as psychoanalysis reconstructs the original traumatic situation in order to release the repressed material, so we are now being plunged back into the archaic psychic past, uncovering the ancient taboos and drives that have been dormant for epochs.'

And this, from Borges' *Labyrinths*, which connects Ballard's atavistic neural obsessions with Iglesias's are: 'Music, states of happiness, mythology, faces belaboured by time, certain twilights and certain places try to tell us something, or have said something we should have missed, or are about to say something; this imminence of a revelation which does not occur is, perhaps, the aesthetic phenomenon.'

It's ultimately the almost-but-not-quite - surreal, archaic and memorial qualities of Iglesias's installations that generate their earthly-cum-unearthly gravities, most obviously in the water installations. Encountering them, it's impossible to know if you're witnessing a metaphorical past, an environmentally degraded present or the shimmering, lusciously mulched onset of new fertilities. These ambiguities in her work continue to produce uniquely haunting spaces in which a highly distinct here and now seems also to be a mysterious elsewhere. ♦