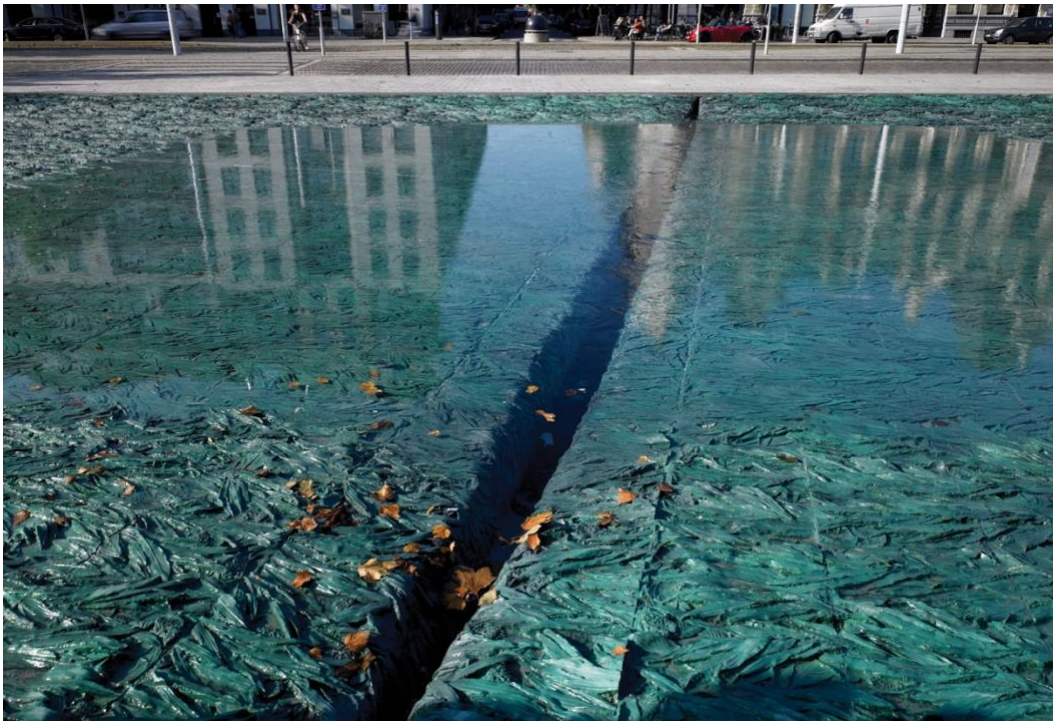


# sculpture

## *Place as Threshold: A Conversation with Cristina Iglesias*

by Jan Garden Castro (October 1, 2018)



*Deep Fountain*, 1997–2006. Polychrome concrete, resin, and water, 13.72 x 32.88 meters.  
Detail of work at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Leopold de Waepplaats, Antwerp.  
Photo: Kristien Daem, © Cristina Iglesias and VEGAP

Fluidity is the key to Cristina Iglesias's work. Her monumental public projects, whether involving the flow of water, the play of shadows, or the ritualized movements of bronze doors, lead viewers into places where architecture morphs into a hybrid of the natural and imaginative worlds. In *Forgotten Streams* (2017), a river flowing through a bronze bed creates a plaza as it emerges from its course "beneath" the Bloomberg Center in London. *Tres Aguas* (2014) in Toledo, Spain, charts a two-hour pilgrimage to three symbolic locations, each one building on the next through time and memory. And at Centro Botín, in Santander, Spain, the multi-part *From the Underground* (2017) encircles a Renzo Piano building with water. Iglesias says that being an artist is an obsession you cannot escape; her works make that voyage of discovery available to everyone.



Installation view of "Entwined," 2017. Photo: Cathy Carver

**Jan Garden Castro:** Your work connects to literature, culture, and history, but also to the environment. In "Entwined," your recent exhibition at Marian Goodman Gallery, vegetal forms climbed the walls and supported underground waterways. Do you intend your work to remind viewers of culture or nature?

**Cristina Iglesias:** I believe that all of those issues can be connected. I work to connect viewers not only to ideas, but also to their own memories. There is a consciousness, of course, about the history of sculpture, of landscape, of painting—here we are talking about composition and color apart from my fantasy about what could grow underneath the floor we stand on. The abstract masses on the walls are like stains of humidity, but the details take us to other worlds. All these ideas ask: What is the planet in our lives? What are we doing here, and what do we have to take care of? Art can stimulate our senses and change how we perceive things. To create public places to think is a good reason to make sculpture.

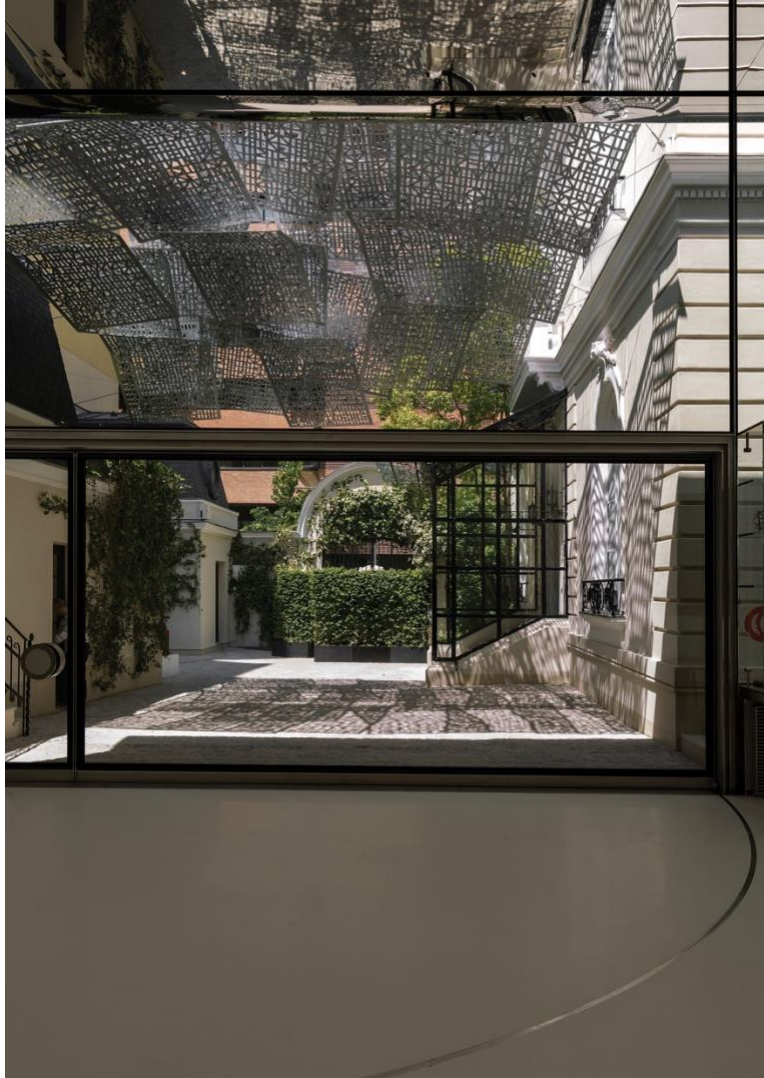
**JGC:** *The Ionosphere (A Place of Silent Storms)* (2017) for the Norman Foster Foundation courtyard in Madrid creates a contemplative space through ever-changing shadows.

**CI:** It creates a place to be between the buildings. In the summer, the sun is very strong, so the patterns change all the time. It is a way, again, of connecting places but also a place to be. The original idea was to create a place of shadows. I usually weld thin cables of metal, but here we explored carbon fiber, which is strong and light, but too flexible—we had to find different ways of working so that the wind wouldn't take it away. I worked with a structural engineer to create a catenary between three buildings in order to hang it. I often collaborate with people from different fields. It enriches the thinking and possibilities.

**JGC:** You sometimes embed favorite texts in your work. Could you discuss the text that you used in *The Ionosphere*? Does each sculpture have a story that goes with it?

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**CI:** My pieces have stories, with beginnings and ends, that describe imaginary places. In reality, the ionosphere is a magnetic field located 1,000 kilometers from the earth; in a sci-fi story by Arthur C. Clarke, a physician makes a lift to go to that dream-like place. I like the idea of magnetic fields that connect with your imagination—the place that attracts ideas. In *The Ionosphere*, the welded carbon fiber threads are letters that can be read.



*The Ionosphere (A Place of Silent Storms)*, 2017. Carbon fiber, cables, and shadow, view of work at the Norman Foster Foundation, Madrid. Photo: Louis Asin, © VEGAP

**JGC:** Did you consider becoming a scientist when you were younger?

**CI:** I studied chemical engineering for two years. I share an artist's attitude and a scientist's attitude—the idea of investigation and playing with different materials. Maybe my concern with nature has to do with that, too.



**JGC: What was your process for *Forgotten Streams*?**

**CI:** It is connected to earlier pieces in Toledo (*Tres Aguas*) and in Antwerp (*Deep Fountain*). There is the water and the construction of a place that takes into account the underground space below our feet, how water can reveal what is underneath and work with time. At that precise site in London, there are Roman ruins where the Walbrook River once flowed.

The piece forms a place for people to gather; it connects the east and west sides in an illusory way. The invented layers of vegetation and streaming waters appear to go under the building and re-emerge on the other side. I create sequences: the water appears to run like a river down a slope; at times, it rushes through the fictional vegetation via many little holes. These pieces are built to trigger perception by studying how the water moves. These water spaces always under our feet are also a metaphor for memory and life. One side has a 27-meter-long trapezoid with another part that creates a plaza. Long pieces of gray Italian granite provide seating and stop people from falling into the water. It is a gathering place, a place to think, and, at the same time, a barrier to aggression—my first conversations with Norman Foster and Michael Bloomberg were about protecting the building. Instead of building a wall, I used water to create distance with depth. The three large parts took between two and three years to make.

**JGC: What is your fabrication process?**

**CI:** For most pieces, I work with a foundry in the Basque country. The team is an extension of my studio. I do a lot of work with wax and compose with different elements. Sometimes I combine lost-wax and sand-casting methods. I work with fragments that I construct and then weld different parts together. For *Forgotten Streams*, I constructed a unique composition of many layers and illusory depths. My way of working is like drawing, adding other elements on top; you can never repeat it.



*Forgotten Streams*, 2017. Bronze, hydraulic mechanism, and water, view of work at Bloomberg London. Photo: Thierry Bal

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**JGC: How do your doors for the Prado create perspectival thresholds for visitors, and why are thresholds important?**

**CI:** They have six elements—the actual doors, the threshold (secondary doors), and two wall elements. Four of them move with a program. Starting at 10 in the morning, they take a new position every two hours until closing at eight in the evening. In the end, it is a sculpture, and it creates places in itself that are accessible to the passersby—to stay, come back, and look again. I like the idea that the doors recall time. And at the same time, they are the doors to the Temple of Painting, an idea recalling, of course, the classics—doors in the history of art, the doors to Paradise, entrances to cities, and the idea of a garden (Madrid's botanical gardens are nearby). The doors look like fictional vegetation. I like the idea of fictional nature at the entrance to a museum.

The threshold is an idea behind much of my work. Sometimes it's a passage from one place to another, a corridor. But a threshold is a wider concept than a door. It can be related to mental thresholds, to the idea of making connections in your brain, in your dreams. It could be hell.

**JGC: It's notable that you stay away from the figurative.**

**CI:** This is important. The doors, in the end, are not a story-telling surface. They construct a space in themselves that you may traverse to arrive at the other side. Or you can stay in them. I give much importance to the movement and the different positions they take. I play, too, with the idea of the fantastic.



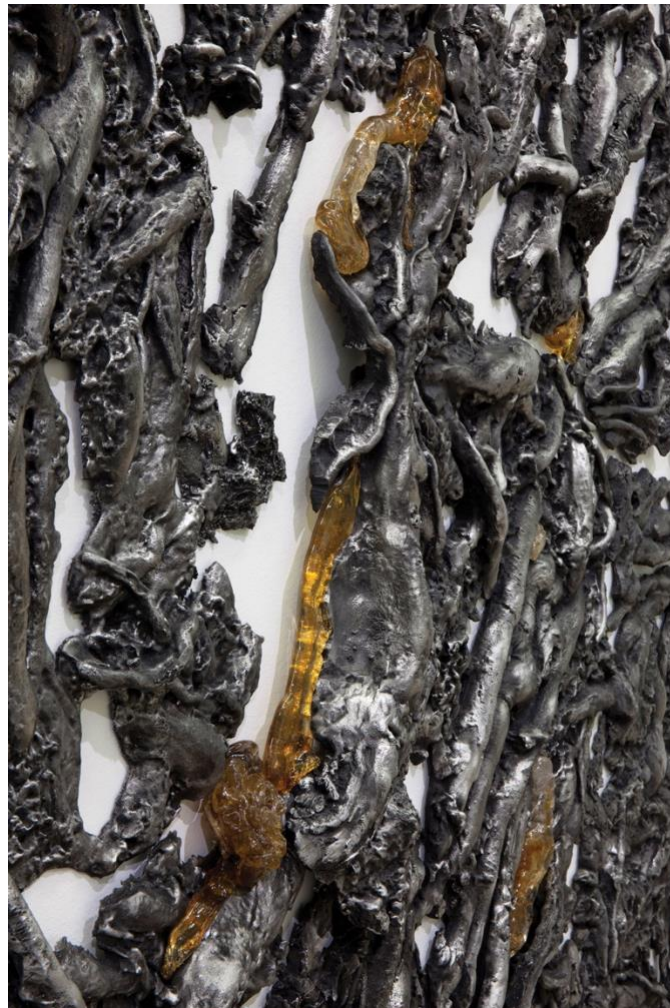
*Door—Threshold, 2006–07. Bronze and hydraulic mechanism, 6 x 8.8 x 3.5 meters.*  
Work at the Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid. Photo: Attilio Maranzano, © Cristina Iglesias and VEGAP

**JGC:** Is it meant to conjure a jungle or forest?

**CI:** It has more to do with that. The in-between is also a metaphor: you can get lost. With *Deep Fountain*, it is a bit the same. The threshold is the element of depth—the infinity of the ground you are standing on.

**JGC:** *Deep Fountain* (1997–2006), which reflects the façade of Antwerp’s Royal Museum, transforms its surroundings.

**CI:** It’s 40 meters long—a threshold before entering the museum. You can sit on the staircases and observe its cycle. I developed a water concept related to contemplation: how it affects your emotions, and how your emotions affect what you see. One woman said to me, “It’s as if it has always been here.” That has to do with the horizontal and the fact that it changes, that it’s slow.



*Entwined Growth III* (detail), 2017. Cast aluminum patinated and poly-carbonated with pigment, 90.75 x 151.5 x 2.75 in. Photo: Cathy Carver



**JGC: What other materials have you used?**

**CI:** I have worked with glass, concrete, and tapestries. I've used cast stainless steel with patinas, and I've done resins with bronze powder, which gets a lot of detail and light into the impression. I think of the patina as a color; each piece is different, affected by nature over time. In the "Entwined" works, I used aluminum because it has a silver light, like water in poetry; it's also lighter in weight, and I can move the fragments around. I like the idea that it can be shiny and black and talk in the language of sculpture—close to the idea of drawing but different—not just a line on the wall but a drawing that can become volumetric or dissolve. I also used a very resistant transparent polycarbonate resin, which is stronger and harder than glass.

**JGC: Does the amber color of the resin symbolize memory popping up from the past?**

**CI:** Yes, and also from nature. The amber captures elements of life as it runs down a tree or roots. Then it forms lichens or flowers, which, in my memory, is a connection with humidity that, again, creates life. That's why I call these pieces *Entwined Growth*.

**JGC: You shared an interest in architecture with your late husband Juan Muñoz, but your investigations have produced different results.**

**CI:** I look at architecture as pieces in space and use architectural devices to talk about something else. More than working with architecture, I would say that I work with space and for space. I create places to be in.

In my first architectural collaboration, I worked with Paul Robbrecht and Hilde Daem on a series of cupolas for the headquarters of Katoen Natie in Antwerp (1992–93). The idea was to bring light inside a group of 19th-century buildings. My sculpture works with movement, and the idea of light going around, toward, and through the building. I designed six alabaster cupolas in different shades of blue, with ironwork to bring the light through the buildings. The color rotation worked as you walked under them, and at night they became lanterns. I did *Deep Fountain* with the same architects.



*Tres Aguas*, 2014. Stainless steel, hydraulic mechanism, and water, 25 x 7.5 meters.  
View of work at Plaza del Ayuntamiento, Toledo. Photo: Attilio Maranzano, © VEGAP

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**JGC:** *Tres Aguas* encourages viewers to consider the city's historic role as a place of religious tolerance until the expulsion of Jews and Moors from Spain in 1492. What do the three locations offer?

**CI:** For three centuries, Jews, Muslims, and Catholics lived together, sharing the baths and other spaces. They used water for hygienic purposes and rituals, but it is also a metaphor for communication. I created three places so you would have to walk from one to the other. The memory of the previous one is important when you see the next. Walking is part of the piece: it builds up a story in your head about the idea of stratification—all the cultures that have lived there, the time that has passed, and the geological strata of the mountain, the rocks, and the water zones under the ground. Toledo is a natural fortress because of the river that flows around the mountain.



*Tres Aguas*, 2014. Stainless steel, hydraulic mechanism, and water, 970 x 580 cm.  
View of work at the Torre del Agua, Toledo Photo: Attilio Maranzano, © VEGAP

**JGC:** How long does the journey take?

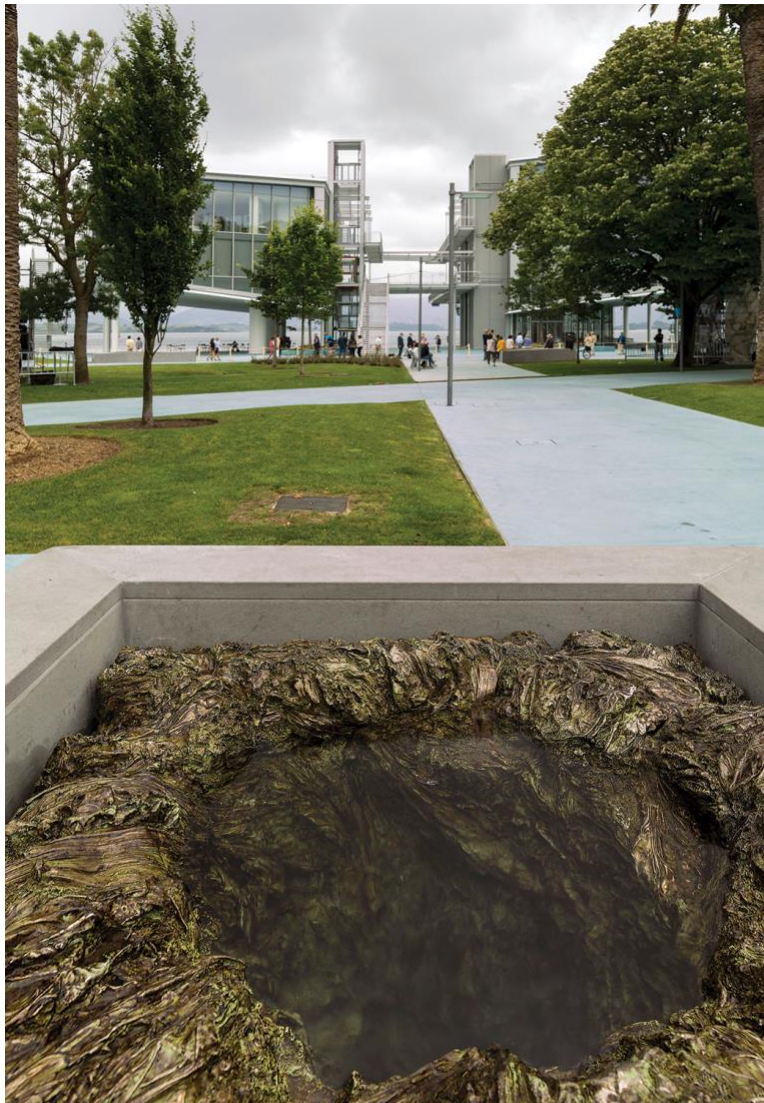
**CI:** Two hours. The tower down near the river creates a place of contemplation and reflection. The windows are covered with alabaster, so the light is more subtle; you can concentrate on an inward experience. It is a restoration and transformation of a badly damaged tower into another thing, a new world. The deep bronze basin has bas-reliefs of invented abstract vegetation with mud; sound reverberates as it is filling. When the basin is full, you look down and see the whole tower reflected upside down.



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After the tower, you can take two or three different paths—through the Jewish quarter or a longer route along the Tagus River toward the cathedral, the historic main square. The tower forms a triangle of power with the cathedral (it was a mosque before) and the town hall. I had to be careful cutting into the slope of the plaza, because it, like the other two locations, is an archaeological site. Here, my sculpture is a cast stainless steel reflecting river that appears and disappears.

The third piece is in the Convent of Santa Clara. You enter from the street, so you don't disturb the nuns. You go up some steps and arrive at a white room and sit in a place of enclosure and rest. In the middle of the floor, a basin recalls what you have seen in the tower and in the plaza. The sound in each place is important, too. You connect the three places, mentally and also at an illusionistic level. *Tres Aguas* took five years to conceive with Artangel.



*From the Underground*, 2017. Stainless steel, pietra serena, mechanics, and water, view of work at the Centro de Arte Botin, Santander. Photo: Luis Asin, © VEGAP

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**JGC: Could you talk about your connection to the Basque region and the issues at play in relation to Spain, world politics, and the arts?**

**CI:** National identity is related to the languages one uses. I grew up in a country where, apart from seeing Goya at the Prado, I could see works by the sculptor Eduardo Chillida. Since I was a child, the abstract language of sculpture has been quite natural, just as things you have always seen are natural in your language and you start thinking in those terms, too. I approach forms or methods of construction in the same way. The *Jalousies* (c. 1996) are related to the Arab influence on architecture in our country (and the excess of sun). Those tools are part of my vocabulary. At the same time, I have lived in London, and we are talking in New York. I am aware of art history and of the work of artists I like. All that forms and informs our language.

Being Basque and a woman, I love the sea and I'm interested in the protection of the sea and the coasts. I have a big feeling for Europe. I'm not interested in isolation, but in our collective memory of history, music, and the arts and in a collective way of behaving toward the future.



*Forgotten Streams*, 2017. Bronze, hydraulic mechanism, and water, view of work at Bloomberg London. Photo: Thierry Bal

**JGC: What do you have coming up?**

**CI:** This month, I'm returning to the Centro Botín for an exhibition. Some of the works will relate to what I've done outside. I'm also doing a big project in San Sebastián, in the Basque country. There is an abandoned lighthouse on an island in the bay. I'm doing an interior restoration—like the tower in Toledo—and digging underground. You will have to take a boat to get there.

*Cristina Iglesias's exhibition "Interspaces" is on view at the Centro Botín from October 6, 2018 through February 24, 2019.*