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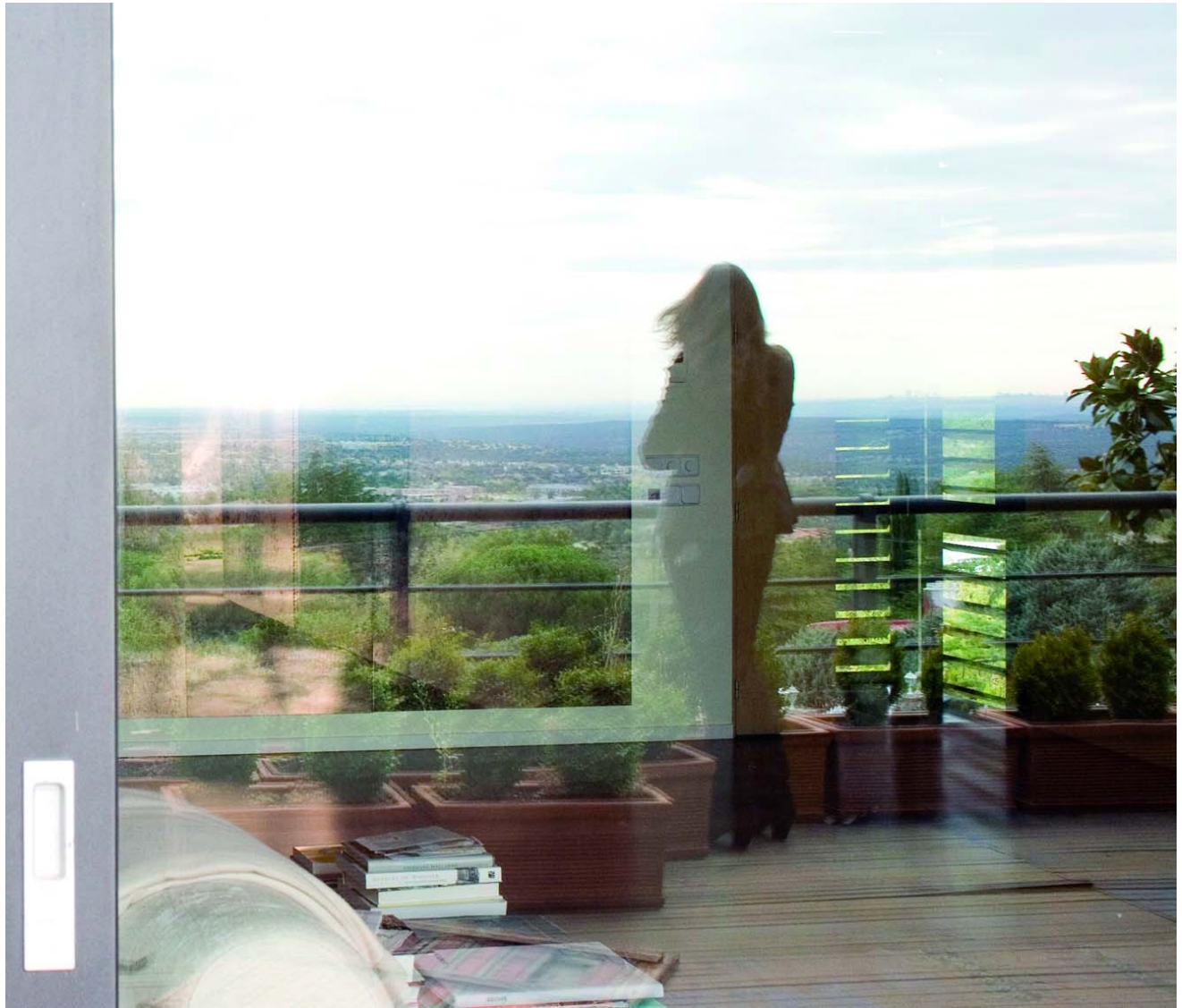
AT HOME WITH

# CRISTINA IGLESIAS

*Cristina Iglesias' sculpture reflects the unique light and darkness of her native Spanish culture. As Art World visits her at home near Madrid, she discusses her bold plans for a work in one of Spain's most magical cities*

INTERVIEW: Ben Luke PHOTOGRAPHY: Chus Anton

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*The living room of Cristina Iglesias' Torreldones home, with a silkscreen on copper in progress; Iglesias is reflected in the window, as she looks across to Madrid from her terrace. Below, Iglesias herself*

**C**ristina Iglesias lives in Torreldones, a small town just outside Madrid surrounded by the mountains of the Sierra de Guadarrama. She settled here more than a quarter of a century ago, when she and her late husband Juan Muñoz returned to Spain after meeting in London. I had always imagined that the balance between elemental qualities and rich historical references in Iglesias' sculpture over that time owed something to the atmosphere of this region, whose natural wonder is allied to a complex history and an almost Grimm-like darkness.

PHOTOS: CHRIS ANDRÉ



Above Torreldones is a watchtower from Spain's medieval Muslim period, and nearby is the Escorial, an enormous and austere Renaissance palace constructed at the behest of the pious king Philip II, which includes the famous, and famously macabre, mausoleum to Spanish Habsburg monarchs. Not far from there is an even more sinister monument, the Valley of the Fallen, a memorial to Spain's Fascist dictator Francisco Franco. It's a landscape teeming with stories and myths.

The half-hour train journey from Madrid to Torreldones begins unpromisingly, but after the high rises and industrial estates of the Spanish

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1 Untitled (Vegetation Room VII) (2000-08), resin, bronze powder and stainless steel, installation view at Galleri Andersson Sandström, Umea, Sweden

2 Untitled (Pasillo Vegetal III) (2005), 38 elements, fiberglass, polyester resin and bronze powder, 280 x 50 x 15cm 3 Toledo Project (2009): left, observatory tower fountain, and right, Iglesias' model  
Opposite: Detail of Double Vegetation Room (2006), resin, polyester, bronze powder and stainless steel, 385 x 600 x 420cm, currently installed in Iglesias' garden

capital's suburbs, the landscape quite suddenly opens up, and we travel across a vast plain bathed in glorious light and head towards the verdant sierra. Iglesias' home and studio complex is a short taxi ride from the small station, in a quiet residential road. As she leads me on a tour around her home, garden and the building site that will be an expanded studio, she tells me that any direct link between the dramatic, atmospheric surrounding landscape and the work she makes here is too neat. "I could do it anywhere, although I love to live here – my brother [composer Alberto Iglesias] lives nearby, and it's the place that I built with Juan," she explains. "They say that there is an energy here. I love the light, it's beautiful – it's very clear, and Madrid can appear so close." She then takes me onto a terrace with spectacular views back across the sunlit forested plain to the Spanish capital, which hovers like an oasis in the distance.

Iglesias has another studio in an industrial facility in Villalba, 12km away, where her larger sculptures are constructed. She makes her more intimate works here at home.

"It's more of a laboratory," Iglesias says, "a studio where I do all my drawings. It's where I work completely alone, and where I start the first bas-reliefs for what I'm doing." We pass other artists' works as we walk around the house – some Thomas Schütte photographs, a print by Ed Ruscha – and we end up in the elegant living room, where the terrace is framed by a pair of heavy brown velvet curtains whose texture recalls one of Iglesias' works made from cast vegetative forms.

Iglesias, who was born in the Basque town of San Sebastián in 1956, speaks quietly but with great intensity, particularly when she is describing several ambitious projects which she is due to bring to fruition in the next two years. She is most excited by a major project she hopes to create in the great Spanish city of Toledo – El Greco's city. She has been exploring the idea for the last three years with Artangel, the British organisation who commission and develop site-

specific contemporary art projects, and, as Artangel's director James Lingwood says, it promises to be "her most ambitious civic project to date".

Iglesias says that she decided on Toledo after considering many other places, having had, as she puts it, "the incredible freedom of thinking of a project that you can do anywhere in the world." She adds: "It came after all those considerations because of all the layers of history that the city has, and also its topographical configuration – the [Tagus] river surrounds more than two-thirds of it. It met my interest in working on a public work which is not just one piece, but creates a walk, using water as a conductor of communication."

Communication is at the heart of what makes Toledo such a unique place – in the 12th century particularly, there was an extraordinary meeting of cultures which led to the translation and dissemination of highly influential ancient and medieval texts. "Toledo has all this stratification of the three cultures that co-existed there – and at one point truly co-existed, they were literally living together – Christians, Jews and Muslims," Iglesias explains. "It gives it an edge which is so pertinent today."

The prospective sites for Iglesias' sculptural interventions in Toledo are loaded with meaning and atmosphere. Among them are a water tower at the former arms factory – a remnant of the death throes of the Spanish Empire in the eighteenth century – and the convent of Saint

Peter Martyr, with its meeting of Baroque Christian and medieval Muslim architecture.

The historic city is the perfect stage for Iglesias' work. Her sculptures frequently call to mind Islamic decorations based on grids and patterns as well as the extraordinary use of light common in Muslim architecture. She also synthesises baroque detailing of vegetal forms and creates mises-en-scène which recall the drama of the art and architecture of that style, even to the extent of including baroque tapestries in many works. Yet Iglesias harnesses these elements along with more modern references to create a distinctly contemporary language. "At one point, I felt that Toledo almost fits too much with my work," she admits. I ask if it is daunting to take on such a loaded city. "It's a challenge to work in a place which is so charged with knowledge, architecture, with so many things," she says, "and try to do something contemporary that constructs a link between my pieces and between signals in the city, and invites you to get lost in this incredible place. But I believe the moments we are creating will be meaningful."

Ever since she emerged onto the art scene in the mid-1980s, Iglesias' work has had the acute balance between intimacy and grandeur that the Toledo project promises. She was part of a generation of artists, many of them London-based, who attempted a radically new engagement with sculpture after Conceptualism and performance had dominated the 70s avant-garde.

"At that time," she explains, "the Lisson Gallery was the meeting point, and I met several artists who later became friends. But I myself didn't want or expect to find an art scene in London – all that was fantastic because the artists had that necessity to create, but for me it was more personal. I was a foreigner and I liked being, and needed to be, a foreigner. I had a studio at college which was a place to work more than anything else. But then of course I met several artists who afterwards I maintained a relationship with – I met Juan Muñoz in London, of course, and I met Tony Cragg and Bill Woodrow."



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Photos: Chris Anton

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1 **Untitled** (1987), concrete, iron, glass and tapestry, 230 x 200 x 196cm 2 **Fugue in six voices (Diptyque VI)** (2007), silkscreen on silk, 250 x 220cm  
3 **Three Suspended Corridors (detail)** (2006), braided wire and steel cables, dimensions variable, installation view: Ludwig Museum, Köln, detail 4 **Untitled (Tilted Hanging Ceiling)** (1997), iron, resin and stone powder, 15 x 915 x 600cm Opposite: **Untitled (Travel Agency)** (2001), wood, resin and bronze powder, 2 bas-reliefs and 10 'jealousies', dimensions variable, detail

The dialogues among these London artists extended into central Europe, where artists like Schütte and Jan Verduyck, for example, were exploring similar concerns. Though they could never be called a group, there was nonetheless a common sensibility. "We all felt part of something, a shared way of thinking or looking at the world," she says. "Each of us was considered an individual and if you look at it now, our voices were not similar. But our work had the common three-dimensional or sculptural aspect, and the use of means and elements that had not been considered before."

Iglesias feels that she was in the right place at the right time. She was following a natural concern with sculpture and its effect on the surrounding space that happened to be shared by similarly ambitious and gifted artists. "I benefited from the point of view that it was what I wanted to do – I was in sculpture because I wanted to work three-dimensionally. And I always had this relationship with architecture because I feel that is my form of expression."

But while there was a clear momentum developing among the artists responsible for the new developments in sculpture, critics took some time to be convinced. As Iglesias explains, there were supportive voices, "anchors that, even for a split second, help you to go on", but many struggled to come to terms with an abundance of imagery and materials which embellished and subverted the order and reduction of Minimalism. "I was accused of using too many different materials at once – it was not minimal enough. But at the same time it had that sense of defining our time or our world. I remember the first time that I used tapestry was in a show in Holland, a show that Rudi Fuchs [then director of Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven] did in 1987 and I was very young. I was given a room in this round fortress, Fort Asperen, and I did a first piece that was two tapestries that were very Dutch, and a glass construction with an arch, and some cement. And it was shocking – I don't know where it came from."

Tapestries continue to feature in Iglesias' work today. Behind us in her living room is one of her large silkscreens on copper which she is in the process of completing. These luminous works begin as models constructed from odd bits of paper, cardboard, tape, and often photographs of earlier works. Iglesias takes photographs of these sculptural sketches, which are then vastly enlarged and transferred onto the copper and also silk, as in works such as *Fugue in six voices* (2007). Iglesias then often draws back into the image. Despite their modest materials, these works, on a deliberately human scale, immediately become illusory spaces that the viewer wants to walk into, an act which is of course denied. As we look at the works, we are reflected in them and become part of an momentary tableau.

"When I make my silkscreens," Iglesias says, "they are on surfaces that emit light, and it has to do with the search for colour, which is very subtle. It's the material itself that has that colour and light. I like the way that the copper pieces seem to suck in the light – you don't need to light them artificially."

The use of light has underscored Iglesias' work across her career, and she attributes this in part to the architectural traditions of her native country. "It's natural in that it is in my culture. We have some unique buildings and devices that work with light that come from our Moorish ancestors," she says. "Light comes into my work in a very natural way. At the beginning to make light visible I used coloured glass or alabaster so

that the light going through it would become a colour in the piece. The alabaster was not coloured but there was a warmth in being underneath it. And the idea of constructing a shelter, that has to do with either denying light, or using light if the shelter is translucent. It is one of the elements that I have always used, because it's so expressive."

Iglesias' work employs light not just as a means of adding a gloss to the work, but as a material in itself. Her recent pavilions, such as 2005's *Untitled (Suspended Pavilion in a Room I)* in Tate's collection, feature large latticed wire screens formed from overlapping, tantalisingly unreadable text. The screens are pierced by artificial light which forms complex geometric shadows across every surface of the room.

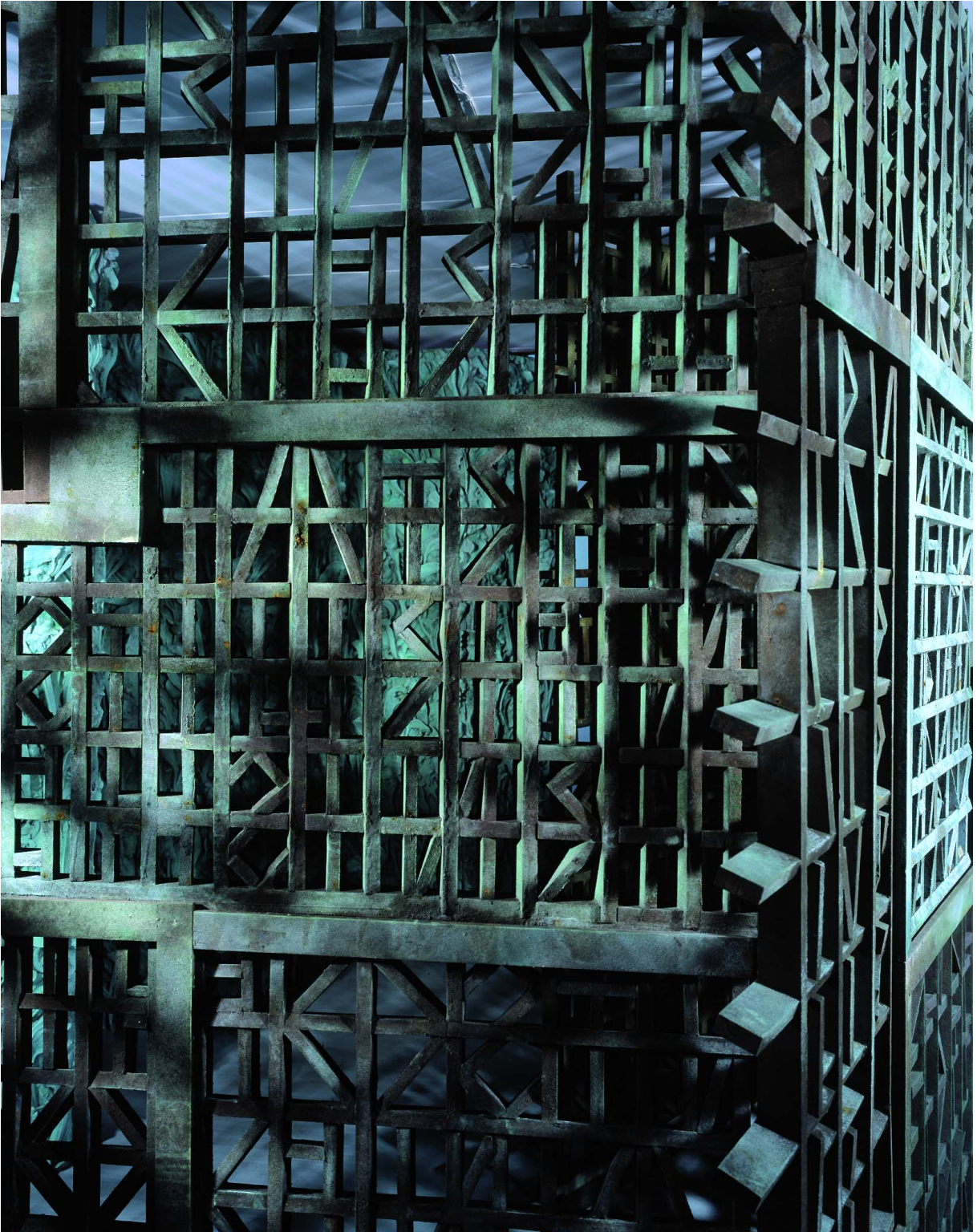
The pavilions are deeply ambiguous spaces. They both enclose you, and suggest the comfort of a retreat, and entrap you, creating a sense of incarceration. Iglesias' work often induces this uncertainty in the viewer. In the first room of her show at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 2003, several of the copper silkscreens surrounded *Untitled (Tilted Hanging Ceiling)*, a vast work from 1997, which featured a rectangular hanging, made of what looked like bronze, like a bed of subsoil or the roof of a cave which had been immaculately cut out and cast. Its surface was densely covered in forms cast from mushrooms. Walking underneath the piece was profoundly disconcerting – the strings which held the piece above the viewer appeared insufficient to hold this apparently weighty mass. And there was a distinctly subterranean feel as one stood beneath it, almost like being buried alive. Iglesias asks the viewer to get lost in the piece, confusing their understanding of space. "When you look up into this other world," she says, "you can get dizzy, and fall."

Actually cast from resin with a convincing bronze-like patina, *Untitled (Tilted Hanging Ceiling)* is one of a huge variety of works in which Iglesias employs repetitive natural forms to create spaces which are triggers for the viewer's



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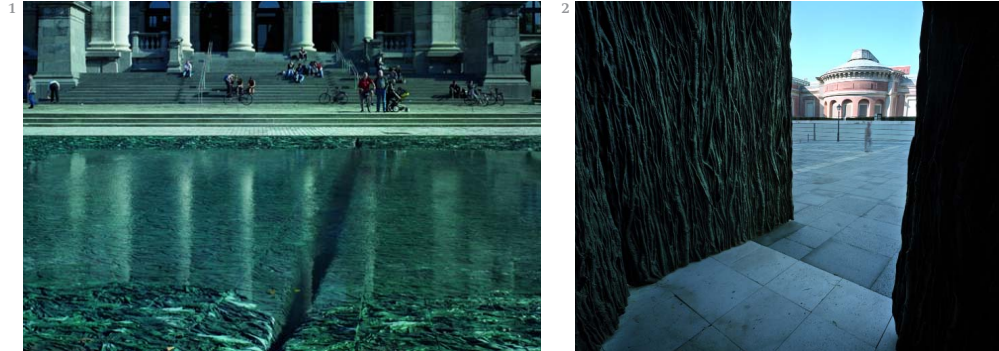


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1 Deep Fountain, Antwerp (1997–2006), modified and polychrome cement, 34 x 14m, installation view at Leopold de Wael Platz, Antwerp

2 Threshold-entrance of the new extension of the Prado Museum (2006–07), bronze, 6 x 8.80 x 1.36m

Opposite: Cristina Iglesias amid the cast forms inside Double Vegetation Room (2006), in her Torreldones garden

imagination. The doors she created for architect Rafael Moneo's extension to Madrid's Prado museum in 2007 are among the most spectacular of these pieces. They are made of six parts, all nine metres high, four of which move at particular times of the day. Standing between the different panels, surrounded by the cast forms of knotted and entangled vegetation, one has the feeling of being underground among endless roots, and at the same time on the brink of entering a darkly enchanted forest. The piece conjures up all sorts of associations: The Prado's great collection has been the foundation – the intricate roots, as it were – of every Spanish artist's work, either as an object of homage or as embodiment of the Spanish artistic canon to react against. And it is, after all, the home of Hieronymus Bosch's masterpiece *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1500–05). Iglesias was only too conscious of the significance of the commission.

"They asked me to create doors, which is one of the most classical elements in sculpture and everyone said, 'Wow!' and mentioned Ghiberti [whose *Gates of Paradise* adorn the Baptistery in Florence]." Iglesias was particularly attracted to the commission because the work would have room to exist in its own right. "I could take them as a symbol," she says. "I didn't have to deal with tickets or create a space that would be useful or functional, and take me too far from the areas that I wanted to work with. I was lucky that it was a door whose presence is important but whose use is very limited, for events such as ceremonial openings. It is at street level, so I thought I could do a door that will also be a public piece, that a passer by can stop and create a space that belongs only to the piece, and be there for a while. It's a great opportunity in that it is a passage which works with this idea of fantasy, of crossing between the street and that incredible world of imagination – it's the threshold in between, a passage that takes you somewhere else."

The Prado doors relate closely to Iglesias' *Vegetation Passages* – interventions into the existing architecture of the gallery, where they

**"I'm interested in the notion of Arcadia and the unknown, a place which is attractive but at the same time you can get lost"**

appear in the wall, and pull you into a narrow, claustrophobic fantasy world – and *Vegetation Rooms* – minimalist cubes with constricted passages which you enter and are immediately surrounded by densely worked natural forms. When we meet, a *Vegetation Room* stands in Iglesias' garden. It's one of a group which have mirrored exteriors which reflect the surrounding landscape, so that this large construction somehow melts into its surroundings. "It disappears," Iglesias says. "I love this idea that it's very solid and yet at the same time it's totally immaterial." There is something magical in this transformation – Iglesias makes her "fictional gardens" more real than the world around them.

"I'm interested in the notion of Arcadia and the unknown, a place which is attractive but at the same time you can get lost there and never come back," she says with a wicked laugh. "It's another notion of space – the imagination as a space. The garden of pleasure is there but, at the same time, it has a dark side."

Iglesias will work with an entirely new kind of territory in an extraordinary project in the public waters of Baja California around the island of Espiritu Santo near La Paz in Mexico, an area which Jacques Cousteau called "the world's aquarium". Iglesias will develop the ideas in her pieces known as *Celosias*, or *Jealousies*, which, like her *Pavilions*, consist of screens in various materials with latticed grids formed by texts, which are arranged to form enclosed spaces. "The idea is an underwater labyrinth, and it will be like different stanzas communicated, because it goes down between six and seven metres to the bottom of the piece, and then three metres up, and then other parts are 12 and others 20 metres below. You will be able to swim over it, and

snorkelling will give you access to part of it, but otherwise you have to dive to see all of it. The idea of the piece is to provoke a coral reef, so it will have its own life."

While working under the sea seems far away from working in a historic city, the piece for Baja California is, like the Toledo piece, an ideal space for Iglesias' sculpture. "All these elements that I play with, like visibility and invisibility, as in the silkscreens or the Prado piece, or the way a detail becomes a whole world when you get close to it and disappears at a distance," she says, "all that happens in the sea because sometimes visibility is not good, but then at other times it's completely clear and everything appears to be closer." This constant flux particularly appeals to Iglesias. "The walls that compose the labyrinth will be like the *Jealousies*, and maybe the text will disappear, covered by coral," she explains. "But then again the currents will open part of it. All this is part of the piece. I have notions of how things will go, and you can partly organise for that, but the possibilities are endless, and that's why, for me, it's fantastic."

In an era when so many overblown, white-elephant artworks blemish cities and landscapes, Iglesias is a rare species – an artist who is able to create successful public sculpture without losing the complex layers which define her work in galleries. *Deep Fountain*, her work for the Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp, is a case in point. The vast tidal pool has an hour-long cycle, slowly filling to reflect the museum's grand neoclassical portico and then emptying to reveal a bed of densely woven casts of leaves. Iglesias is clearly relishing the chance to make similarly ambitious works for Toledo and the Baja California, and seems to thrive on creating such complex public pieces. "The great thing is that once somebody allows you to do one, you can have credit to do more," she says, "and to get other people to believe in your dreams."

Exhibition: Fondazione Arnaldo Pomodoro, Milan, Sep–Mar 2010; [www.fondazionearnaldopomodoro.it](http://www.fondazionearnaldopomodoro.it); Iglesias' projects for Toledo and Baja California are scheduled to open in 2010

Deep Fountain: photos: Kristen Baum; Prado entrance: photo Artfile/Mariano

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Photo: Chris Arton

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