

HUFFPOST

*Cristina Iglesias:
I'm interested in building places*

by Elena Cué (July 7, 2017)



CRISTINA IGLESIAS. BLOOMBERG CENTER, LONDON. PHOTOGRAPH: LÓPEZ DE ZUBIRIA

All is fluid in the work of Cristina Iglesias (San Sebastian, 1956). Where water flows like a wellspring of ideas, her sculptures are freed from the obligation of being static. Plant elements penetrating her labyrinths, wells, springs and walls with an intimacy that is part organic, part inorganic devour us and seduce us. Fragments of text and words in different languages form the structure of her enigmatic lattices, masking the border between fantasy and reality. Lattices submerged under the Sea of Cortez or casting shadows in the courtyard of the Norman Foster Foundation. Her walls of vegetation, rooted in the gates of the Prado Museum or planted in Inhotim, in the middle of the Amazon forest, are just some of the examples that make up the world of Cristina Iglesias.

The artist has recently launched a new show at the Konrad Fisher Gallery in Berlin, as well as “From Underground”, four wells and a pond in the recently-inaugurated Botín Center in Santander, designed by Pritzker-winning architect Renzo Piano, which is to be the permanent home of the five works.

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Can you tell us what this intervention is about?

In my initial conversations with Renzo and his team, I suggested building something that would somehow appear in different places between the city and the sea. In other words, in the gardens around the building. The triangular wells occupy the four corners of the formal gardens, and the pond is underneath the building, at the foot of the staircase. The water moves at varying intensity within the wells, forming an imaginary connection to the pond, from where the water appears to rush towards the sea. They are like openings into the earth, revealing a subsoil of sand and seaweed, a layer of seawater that could be lying there under the ground.



BOTÍN CENTER, SANTANDER. PHOTOGRAPH: LUIS ASIN

The next day, the Konrad Fisher Gallery in Berlin opened its doors with an exhibition dedicated to you. What kind of works have you on show there?

At the same time that I was presenting a series of more monumental works, I wanted to connect with the more intimate reasons that concern me now and that, in some way, are smaller, closer to the way I think and do things. Gallery shows can at times be more dramatic or experimental than other situations. Sometimes it is interesting to be able to compare larger projects, where debates and reflections to a certain extent obey specific factors, to understand the role that sculpture can play nowadays. And also to set up and show works that exist on a more experimental plane, even studio works, that also have their own identity. This work discusses what goes on underground, underneath the streets we walk on. Like other pieces, it is a fiction, but one which alludes to an underlying reality.

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What is that reality?

I like to think about life and how plants and other life forms, even insignificant little ones like lichens, fungi and algae, are so very responsive to weather, water and the lack of water, and how they form layers that can connect us to the rest of the universe. In 2015 I built an installation at the Marian Goodman Gallery in London. It was called Phreatic Zone and it also dealt with this subject, to a certain extent.

At the same time that you are showing in Berlin, you are also installing another work at the Bloomberg building in London...

That work is very important for me, particularly as it raises a very interesting reflection on the role of sculpture in the city, in the public space. The building needed certain barriers and after speaking with Norman Foster, I constructed a series of spaces surrounding part of the building. In this way, as well as forming a wall, they also create a space where people can sit and watch the underground flows and changes. They also contain the memory of a Roman temple and a tributary of the Thames, at the same time forming an illusory connection between the east and west sides of the building.



HISTORIA NATURAL Y MORAL DE LAS INDIAS (SANTA FE I AND II), 2013
INSTALLATION CASA FRANÇA-BRASIL - PHOTO: SERGIO ARAUJO

You know London well, having studied there at the Chelsea School of Art in the 80s. As a native of San Sebastian, which has had the greatest influence on your art, traditional Basque sculpture or the new British sculpture movement, which arose while you were living in London?

I think that my way of growing there was as an immigrant who liked to be an immigrant and who liked to perceive the communication gap that separated me from the others. I was privileged for many reasons, but I could feel the difference at the same time. Not just being a woman, but also not being either British or American or German. But I liked to feel foreign. At the time, there were other European currents springing up, which I found more appealing and to which I felt closer. British sculpture was taking off at the time, and so was the Düsseldorf Akademie. I made a lot of German and Belgian friends

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at exhibitions that were very important at the time. Sharing those moments brought us very close together as artists. At the same time, art theorists and curators were conversing with artists who used languages and practices that were more familiar, but, at times, curiously hard to define. On the other hand, my training was quite eclectic and that also contributed to building my neural networks and how I feel about things.

What factors in your early training led to your family producing five siblings who are artists?

We have always been very close and always liked to share books, music, conversation. As one of my brothers says, it may have been a virus that infected us all. My parents were always very open to us doing what we wanted and they helped to create an environment that brought us into close contact with culture. My father is from the industrial science world. And then of course there needs to be a dash of daring. You have to dare to take that step. And that never ends.

Plant walls, labyrinths, caves, imaginary places... Sculpture and architecture overlap. How much of your work is about volume occupying a space and how much is about building spaces?

When you make a space, whether it is permeable or otherwise, at the same time you are occupying another space. I am very interested in the malleability of space, and also in building spaces; landscape, also, is fascinating. That distant gaze that encompasses volumes, colors... But also nature in all its power. The capacity of forests to create spatial and psychological feelings. Water running down a slope or spilling over, with all that it implies and with all its capacity to suggest meanings. Losing oneself, if only for a moment, inside a given construction.



CRISTINA IGLESIAS, VEGETATION ROOM, 2012, BRUMADINHO, MINAS GERAIS, BRASIL.
PHOTO: CRISTINA IGLESIAS

Literature and language are important elements in your work. What does science fiction have as a literary genre that makes it particularly interesting to you?

The idea of using a narrative language that creates spaces, building a network that simultaneously conceals and reveals both the text and ourselves... that, to me, is a way of creating meaning. The texts that I use always describe fantasy places, drawn from the imagination, although they are also at times tremendously credible. I have used 19th-century French authors such as Huysmans and Roussel, some Arab poets and also science fiction, including Ballard and Arthur C. Clarke, for hanging pieces... There is just one exception, two hanging pieces that refer to the Cave of Montesinos from Don Quixote. Another fantasy dream place.

You recreate these illusory places from your imagination and they, like spaces of transit, lead us towards other imaginary places. What is behind this rejection of reality in your work?

I think that, as I was saying, art has this capacity to transport us to a reflection or an imaginary, sometimes abstract place, which has more to do with feelings than with a place that can actually be described.

In this regard, you were part of a group exhibition in the Reina Sofía Museum about Raymond Roussel, the poet and novelist. How has Roussel influenced you?

In his own time, and afterwards, Roussel has always been an artist's writer. His imagination and freedom of thought and the way he interacts with the world are very inspiring. I think "Impressions of Africa" and "Locus Solus" have as much to do with ideas and ways of simultaneously speaking and erasing the trail that I find them interesting and inspiring. Using extracts from his works to build lattices, spaces where those who enter can lose themselves, or which cannot be entered, seemed like the right thing to do.



THRESHOLD-ENTRANCE, 2006-2007. MUSEO NACIONAL DEL PRADO, MADRID.
PHOTO: ATTILIO MANZANO

Water is present in much of your work. Which part of its extensive symbolism are you making use of?

I have been using water for many years now, incorporating it into many of my works. I use it as a material that marks time, that changes, that makes a sound even within its silence, and that makes the places I build active. I am currently working on new pieces that I will be presenting in New York in a few months' time, using other liquids, ones that solidify.

Your work oozes sensuality, mystery, watching without being seen, light and shadow... What do you say?

Light, shadows, looking... these are all subjects that can be dealt with in all the artistic disciplines and that offer huge possibilities for playing around with and problem-solving. The rest of it is either semi-conscious or rather a consequence of the search for a way of transmitting meaning.

Your work always contains a retrospective gaze. How important is the past for you?

Working with memory is inevitable. Mine is often very intertwined and it always helps me to find a thread. But there is also history, and not just the history of art. We cannot eliminate those things that make an impression on our memory. It's part of everything else. In this regard, my documentaries about my own work help me to connect ideas. Sometimes they are like little islets that I nudge closer to each other in order to express myself.

Along what channels would you like your life to flow over the coming years? What is your dream, if you don't mind me asking?

I would like to be close to my family and my friends, my colleagues and my correspondents. And to continue to have projects, even if only small ones, but ones that make it worth my while to be engaged with them. Being able to combine my work in the studio with my work in the public sphere, building things for the world in which I live.