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Fictions in the Natural World:

A Conversation with Cristina Iglesias

by Jan Garden Castro

Landscape and Memory,
2022.
Bronze, stainless steel, and
electrical pump, 5 works,
detail of installation.

PAISHI GILL, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND
MADISON SQUARE PARK CONSERVANCY

cristina iglesias

THIS PAGE:
Landscape and Memory,
2022.
Bronze, stainless steel, and electrical pump, 5 works, detail of installation.

OPPOSITE,
FROM TOP:
Wet Labyrinth (with Spontaneous Landscape),
2020–22.
Black slate, bronze powder with resin, stainless steel, mineral draining floor, closed water circuit mechanism, water, and landscape, 18.8 x 10 x 3.8 meters.

Portón-Pasaje,
2006–07.
Bronze and hydraulic mechanism, 6 x 8.8 x 3.5 meters.



Cristina Iglesias's large-scale sculptures and installations expose the roots of the natural world and connect them to concepts that influence our perception of it, including memory, cultural narratives, and time. Her ambitious outdoor public artworks, whether involving mazes, the flow of water (both above and below ground), or tapestry-like gardens, intermesh old and new histories of rural and urban sites, leading viewers into places where art and architecture morph into a hybrid of nature and imagination. Her most recent projects include *Wet Labyrinth (with Spontaneous Landscape)* (2020–22), a temporary work for the Royal Academy's Annenberg Courtyard in London, and *Hondalea (Marine Abyss)* (2021), a permanent, site-specific sculpture that transforms the lighthouse on the island of Santa Clara in the Bay of Donostia-

San Sebastián, Spain. This vertiginous sculptural environment (a gift from the artist to her native city) sinks deep into the bedrock, incorporating the distinctive geology of the Basque coast and the rough waters surrounding Santa Clara.

Landscape and Memory, Iglesias's current installation of five bronze pools at Madison Square Park in Manhattan, retraces Cedar Creek, which once ran through the area and into the Hudson. This understated work adapts the geological and historical approach of installations such as *Tres Aguas* (2014), which reimagine the flow of the River Tagus in a pre-1492 Toledo where Moors, Christians, and Jews lived in harmony, bringing the same sensitivity and unique vision of public space to an American context.

Jan Garden Castro: *Landscape and Memory, your installation at Madison Square Park, takes a deep dive into substrata, exploring what's hidden beneath the surface of the earth and, maybe, under our human flesh. What inspired you to go in this direction?*
Cristina Iglesias: I've been very interested in the underground for a long time. The title comes from Simon Schama's book *Landscape and Memory*, which I've read many times. It offers one of many points of inspiration about the history of landscape, how nature and culture overlap, how rivers flow as roads—like blood flows in our veins. He discusses mechanisms used during the Baroque period to create the idea of flow, and what art can bring to viewers to complete their gaze. The gaze can finish the piece.

I am also conscious that strata show the time of the earth. We construct both the landscape that is there and what we remember. We need to be conscious of what is under our feet. I wanted to learn the real history of the underground rivers of Manhattan, which once flowed to the Hudson River. This has so much to do with communication. I'm also talking about illusions of continuity and fluidity. We construct this idea of the old river as a region under our feet. Some parts mirror the flow and appear to be connected to the next fragment.

JGC: *Your installations pay homage to a range of unidentifiable, possibly extinct symbols of the natural world. Tangled roots seem to have a*



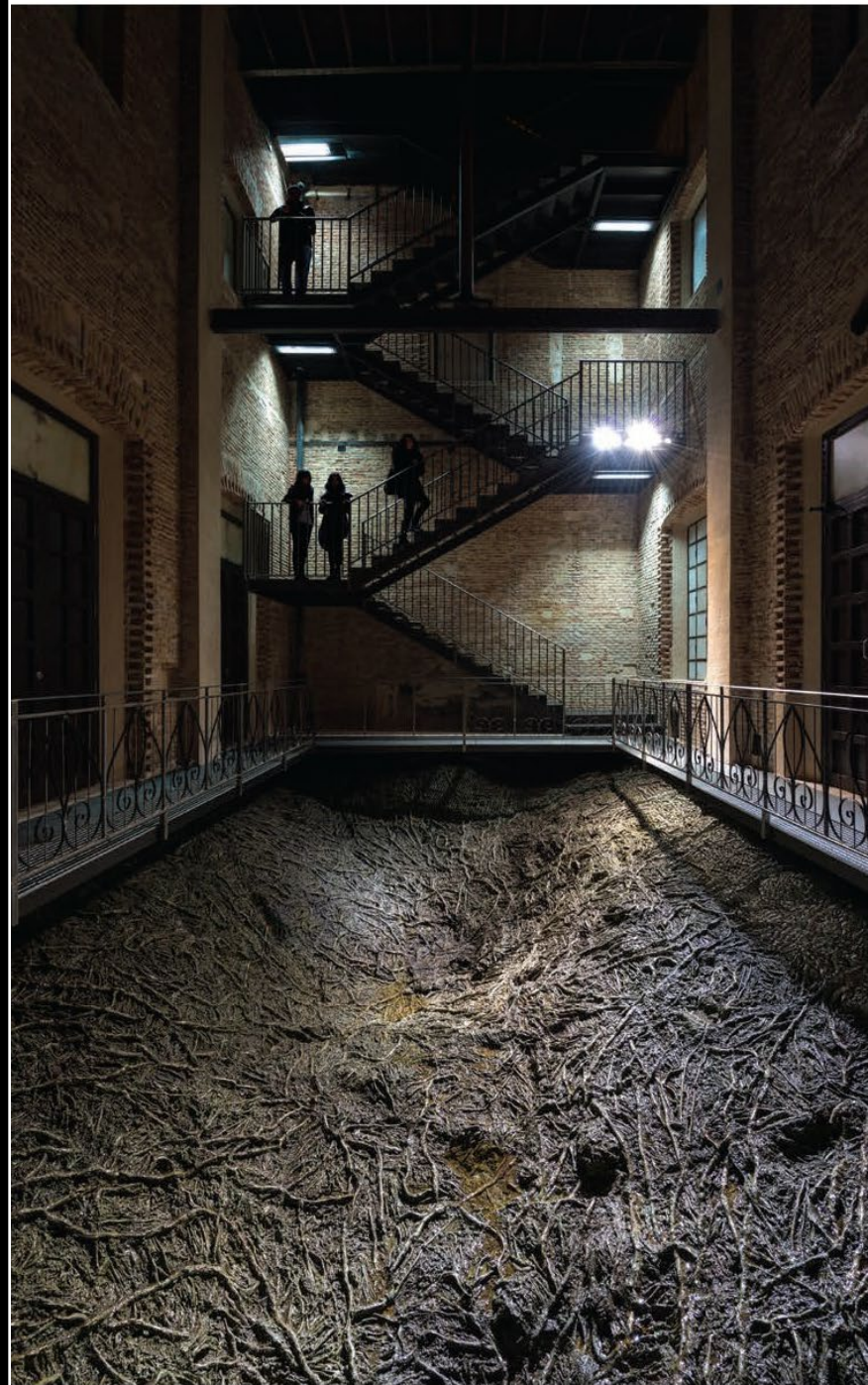
THIS PAGE: RASHMI GILL, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MADISON SQUARE PARK CONSERVANCY / OPPOSITE, TOP: © ROYAL ACADEMY OF ARTS, LONDON / DAVID PARRY / OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: ATTILIO MARINZANO

special significance. Do you use any specific plants and species, or is everything metaphorical?

CI: The plant forms are distorted. Sometimes they look like growing organisms or fungi or muddy matter at the bottom of a riverbed. Tree roots are a metaphor—intertwined, they connect one tree with another. I am more interested in the idea of growth than in a definition of plants. I have always been interested in botany and geology—stratified rocks. So, the work is expressive of those elements: a sedimentary, topological map of a river.

JGC: *You consulted Egbert L. Viele's 1865 "Sanitary and Topological Map of the City and Island of New York," also called the "water map," at the New York Public Library. Does it represent other sources that you studied? Do the buried Cedar and Minetta streams that used to run through the Madison Square*





Park area also stand in for other underground watercourses that have been erased?

CI: Yes and yes, that is in my vocabulary. I loved learning the history of the geography. Those rivers used to be under or close to the park, and, for me, this represents when Manhattan was a natural landscape, before construction above and below us. The water's life comes out during moments of pressure. That is also part of life. The construction of strata is a consciousness of growth in our minds. Different strata form an illusion of depth that helps us to think of the underworld.

JGC: That reminds me of Dante's *Inferno*. Are there other literary or philosophical references that you had in your mind and that influenced your thinking?

CI: There are so many. There is Dante, and, for example, D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson's *On Growth and Form* from the beginning of the 20th century. The idea of related forms and metamorphosis interests me, as do the undefined, yet imagined ages of things.

JGC: Could you discuss your design and fabrication process, much of which happens in Spain?

CI: After the first idea related to the context of this site, I started doing sketches, drawings, and studies, some from maps and some from reading about the possible phreatic zones—subsurface, fluid-filled zones of soil or rock—in Manhattan. Then I did more abstract sketches, watercolors, and improvised models, thinking about how I could physically realize the piece to create the perception I wanted to give to the viewer. After this part of my process, I work with my team on renderings, sometimes three-dimensional imprints of real materials such as rocks. Then, I work one-to-one in the foundry, composing the whole in a way that didn't exist before.

JGC: Do you use CAD or 3D modeling?

CI: I work with wax and clay; then, my team does the 3D modeling. With those elements, I construct the whole, working directly with the people in the foundry. This is different from what artists normally do in the foundry. It's like drawing. You keep adding and erasing—it's more like painting, but always a unique composition. The five pieces of bronze at Madison Square Park are totally different from each other, done real size to real size. After this, they are installed.

THIS PAGE: ATTILIO MARAZZANO / OPPOSITE: A. CALIZ, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK/PARIS

JGC: You're concerned about your carbon footprint. What do you do to offset shipping?

CI: I pay for the footprint. I do that every time I take a flight. My son, Diego Muñoz Iglesias, is a mechanical and environmental engineer, and he does the calculations for me. We have to do everything we can. A compensation exists—to pay for that footprint to be used in the right way somewhere else. If I could have, I would have done the piece in New York City.

JGC: What were the considerations on site? Did you work with landscape consultants?

CI: I work with hydraulic engineers in each city where I install my work. Here, I wanted to make it easy to move rather than something permanent. We worked with the guardians of the park and Tom Reidy (Madison Square Park Conservancy's Deputy Director of Finance and Special Projects). There are no trees near the inset panels, which go 60 centimeters down. We were conscious of using the best ecological practices so that nothing was harmed. Each piece has an inner circle of water, which is a circuit so no water is lost. We wanted to give the perception that there is humidity down there and that the river goes all the way through. You may sit, lie down, and listen to the running water, or put your hands in it.

JGC: No fencing?

CI: No. I won't tell you all the tricks, but it works. Grass goes to the edges. It gives the impression that the water flow goes underground and is bigger than what you see. There are broken reflections in the water. In every fragment, a stainless steel part makes the stream look longer, as though it goes toward the next fragment.

JGC: This is a free public space. Is that important to you?

CI: Very much. I recently published a book called *Liquid Sculpture*, which shows my works in the public realm. A square or a park is a gathering place. I'm creating another reason to go and meet others. It's important to construct places to share our experiences. In this case, there is a schedule of other events in the park. The Kitchen is bringing a performance artist, and there are fantastic concerts and programs during the length of the installation, so my piece is being used as a ground for others to express their voices.



OPPOSITE: *Tres Aguas*, 2014. Patinated cast stainless steel, hydraulic mechanism, and water, view of permanent installation at the Torre del Agua, Toledo.
THIS PAGE: Cristina Iglesias

“We construct both the landscape that is there and what we remember. We need to be conscious of what is under our feet...I'm also talking about illusions of continuity and fluidity. We construct this idea of the old river as a region under our feet.”

“The construction of strata is a consciousness of growth in our minds. Different strata form an illusion of depth that helps us to think of the underworld.”

Hondalea (Marine Abyss), 2021. All the material involved in the architecture of the lighthouse, bronze, hydraulic mechanism, and water, installation view.

54 sculpture ■ 41/6



cristina iglesias

november/december ■ sculpture 55



Inner Landscape
(The Lithosphere,
The Roots, The Water),
2020.
Bronze, water, and
hydraulic mechanism,
1.1 x 15 x 10.6 meters.

JGC: What factors in your personal life have made you such a philosophical thinker in your work? Your parents? Your education? Being a woman? Being a mother?

CI: I am what you say. My father was a scientist, and I was always attracted to those disciplines. When I think of the piece at the bottom of the sea, *Estancias Sumergidas* (*Submerged Chambers*, 2010, near the island of Espíritu Santo in the bay of the Sea of Cortez, Baja California), it is a lab to study growth. Philosophy, a study of the thinking of what we are, and poetry have always been inspiring for me. Drawing is a way to think.

Everything that has happened in my life—being a woman, being a mother—is another stratum in my formation. My voice is the voice of a woman. When I did my first piece with water, *Deep Fountain* in Antwerp, they asked me to work with jets going up into the sky, and I had to defend my idea that going deep would be spectacular. That may be one reason why I'm so connected to the underground, which I always loved when I was studying chemical engineering,



Installation view at
Gagosian, London, 2022.

CRISTINA IGLESIAS

GAGOSIAN



cristina iglesias

OPPOSITE, TOP: THOMAS DUBROCK / OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: PRUDENCE CUMING ASSOCIATES. © CRISTINA IGLESIAS. COURTESY GAGOSIAN / THIS PAGE © LUIS ASIN FOR CRISTINA IGLESIAS STUDIO, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GAGOSIAN

Growth I,
2019.
Cast aluminum and solid
glass with pigments,
297 x 294 x 310 cm.

geology, and biology. I was always attracted to caves. In literature, I am attracted to science fiction because I construct fictions in the natural world.

JGC: Many of your major outdoor bronze installations have been in European cities with long histories, including Madrid, London, Toledo, Cologne, and Santander, Spain. Do you think that New Yorkers, and Americans in general, have the same kind of collective memory as European viewers?

CI: There are two sides to that question. On one hand, we are all living everywhere; I'm not only talking about traveling, but also about moving—sometimes even if we don't want to, like the people coming out of Ukraine. When we move, we carry memories.

Besides the study of other cultures, we can create new memories in our heads by reading a book and thinking we have lived those things even if the book is dense and we have to interpret it in our own way. The United States, like Europe, Asia, and Latin America, has incredible constructions, nature, and memories.

Of course, we come to a point where we construct too much. I hope we reach a point of knowing how to construct better and how to make cities of the future that also incorporate memories of the past. Our world is so interconnected. We can recuperate. We should follow some rules and construct in more sustainable ways.

JGC: Your commissions often cite philosophical works. What other disciplines do you draw on?

CI: I have also been inspired by ancient architecture and by cinema. Film editing has affected me, for example, in relation to the construction of journeys—like taking a boat to go to a lighthouse on an island in a city, as I did for *Hondalea (Marine Abyss)* (2021), on the island of Santa Clara in the Bay of Donostia-San Sebastián. In *La Noche* (1961), Antonioni works with very few elements, and the gesture and how he edits are very important. His *L'Avventura* (1960) and Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) have been inspirations. I've also been inspired by Nancy Holt, Robert Smithson, and Walter De Maria. And I'm reading *The Cantos* of Ezra Pound again.

JGC: What would be your dream commission in the United States?

CI: A dream commission would be close to the sea, also vertical with ideas of growth. I'm thinking of stained glass windows in churches and things related to façades. I just did a hanging piece with straw for a private collector; I do not always work with bronze. It's great to have opportunities to develop new ideas that open doors and minds. ■

Cristina Iglesias's site-specific installation in Madison Square Park, Landscape and Memory, is on view through December 4, 2022.

Estancias Sumergidas, 2010. Stainless steel rods and concrete, *Estancia I*: 265 x 747 x 398 cm.; *Estancia II*: 265 x 738 x 380 cm. Archipiélago Espíritu Santo, Baja California Sur, Mexico.



Deep Fountain, 1997–2006. Polychrome concrete, resin, and water, 0.6 x 13.72 x 32.88 meters. View of permanent installation at Leopold de Waelplaats, Antwerp. iglesias studio.

OPPOSITE: CRISTINA IGLESIAS STUDIO / THIS PAGE: PRISTEN DAER