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Lucy Orta's piece *Clouds:Meteros* was installed at St Pancras railway station in London earlier this year. Courtesy Lucy Orta

Lucy Orta brings her message to Abu Dhabi's TEDxWWF: One Planet Living

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In the past few months Lucy Orta's public art has been catapulted into the public eye. In April, *Clouds:Meteros* was installed in St Pancras International station in London and a series of river nymphs were unveiled in and around the French city of Marseille. Although they are quite different, Orta describes them as branches from the same trunk; an exploration into the subject of water through contemporary art that she and her husband Jorge have been working on for many years. This week, Orta is in Abu Dhabi for TEDxWWF One Planet Living, where she will speak about her practice, recount her personal history and let her pieces of art convey the environmental message.

On bottles

The beautiful and nebulous cloud sculptures hanging in the lofty reaches of the London station are a long way from the dusty outskirts of Cairo, where the idea was born. After a visit to the Zabbaleen, a community of people living on an enormous rubbish dump outside the Egyptian capital, the Ortas were inspired to use the plastic bottle as a symbol to represent the transition of water from a global resource to an economic commodity.

"We saw mountains of plastic bottles and that made us think of sculpture," she says. "This thought developed into the cloud series."

Using many recycled plastic bottles, Orta and her husband embarked on a series of conceptual works depicting clouds in many forms and colours. "We are interested in many issues, the resource itself and how it gets distributed. Using the plastic water bottle,

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all these issues come into play."

On clouds

"We chose clouds because they are a thermodynamic machine for recycling water," says Orta. "They are a meteorological phenomenon but at the same time they represent the discourse we are trying to create. The piece in St Pancras is a manifestation of that idea."

By describing the process of creating this piece as well as the thinking behind it, Orta hopes to plant some seeds of questioning in the audience. "First and foremost, our art has to be poetic. You might see a cloud and not realise we are opening the subject of water, it is a question of interpretation. It is the prefix that allows people to centre onto the subject matter."

On the environment

Although Orta graduated in fashion and knitwear, she has been working on art with an environmental message since she met her Argentinian husband in France in the 1990s. They have travelled to Antarctica, where they created a series of flat-pack survival kits, and they collaborated with the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) on a project called Pandamonium, where they made "body extensions" from plastic bottles as a way of talking about the contradictions surrounding the water issue.

"There is a contradiction because on the one hand it is a global resource necessary for survival but on the other, it is an excess and a commodity. Water is actually easy to purify and distribute but it is not because it is in the hands of so few."

The event

Orta will join a group of speakers from a variety of backgrounds for the TEDxWWF event. Also presenting will be Andy Ridley, the executive director and co-founder of Earth Hour, Ginger Krieg Dosier, the inventor of the Bio-Brick, and Majid Al-Qassimi, an Emirati veterinarian and advocate who works with the Abu Dhabi Environment Agency to protect endemic species. "The theme stems from our overall vision to create a world where we can all live in harmony with nature within the limits of our one planet," a WWF representative said in a statement.

- TEDxWWF: One Planet Living takes place on Tuesday from 9am to 5.30pm at the Sofitel Abu Dhabi. To apply for a ticket, visit www.tedxwwf.com

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