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# Cloud control

Studio Orta are the inaugural artists for the new installation space at St Pancras station in London, bringing travellers a thoughtful piece of heaven

PHOTOGRAPHY: JONATHAN DEVILLIERS  
WRITER: AMY SERAFIN

When Lucy Orta serves you a glass of water in her Paris kitchen, you can be certain it will be tap water from a glass jug, not a plastic bottle of Evian. Water is a major preoccupation for Lucy and Jorge Orta, a couple both in life and in work. It's also the source of their new installation at St Pancras International railway station in London. Entitled *Cloud-Meteors*, it is the inaugural winner of a new international art prize, called Terrace Wires, that will see a major artwork suspended from the roof of the Victorian landmark. Each project will be on display for six months and there will be a new commission every year.

The Ortas' project consists of two immense cumulus clouds, 8m and 6m across, with seven human sculptures perched on top. Dressed in contemporary clothing – jeans, Dr Martens – and slightly larger than life, they adopt poses like characters in a Renaissance fresco.

Some balance on suitcases or backpacks, and one peeks over the cloud's edge at the travellers underneath. In Renaissance art, clouds often served as gathering spots, hovering between earth and the heavens. Creating environments where people come together (like a train station) is a theme the artists hold dear. As Lucy explains: 'This idea of an *agora*, a meeting place, is the metaphor we're investigating.'

*Cloud-Meteors* was selected by a panel of judges put together and chaired by Nicola Shaw, CEO of HS1 Ltd, the >>



**HIGH KICKS**  
Artist Lucy Orta with one of the figures from her and her husband Jorge's *Cloud-Meteors* installation. This figure was modelled by their 13-year-old daughter



**ON CLOUD NINE**  
Left, Orta Studio's Cloud series, initiated in 2011, is produced in a Liverpool workshop, machine-sculpted then cast in resin  
Photography: Jamie McGregor-Smith  
Above, the inspirational first drawing for the Cloud-Meteoros installation at St Pancras

private company that owns St Pancras. It included potter Edmund De Waal, broadcaster Evan Davies, Wallpaper\* editorial director Richard Cook, and Nigel Carrington, rector at University of the Arts, London. Professor Chris Wainwright, head of Camberwell, Chelsea and Wimbledon art colleges, devised a shortlist and consulted on all the artists. After noting the popularity of the Olympic rings at the station, Shaw decided to commission an ongoing series of temporary art installations for the 48 million people who pass through the station each year.

She says the jury was enchanted by the Ortas' treatment of this Victorian-era train shed. 'It's a huge space with enormous amounts of light coming through the glass, and they understood the importance of using it well. They saw the connection between the inside and the outside, the connection to the sky.'

The St Pancras installation references the Ortas' Clouds series, which they started in 2011 after visiting Egypt's Zabaleen community, people who make their living by collecting and recycling rubbish and who live among the trash. The artists hot-glued empty plastic water bottles together then covered them with resin. The lumpy, cloud-like formations represented water as well as the waste product of its consumption. However, plastic bottles were too small for the St Pancras project, so for this installation they drew the clouds – 'fluffy, like a child's drawing', says Lucy – then had a workshop in Liverpool sculpt them by machine and cast them in resin.

A majority of what the Ortas produce is hand assembled, often using found

materials such as shopping carts and first aid boxes, mixed with other media including photography and video. Some objects, like their silkscreened life jackets, are crafted completely by hand. The St Pancras work is more industrial than most, and only their second experience using 3D scanning and milling.

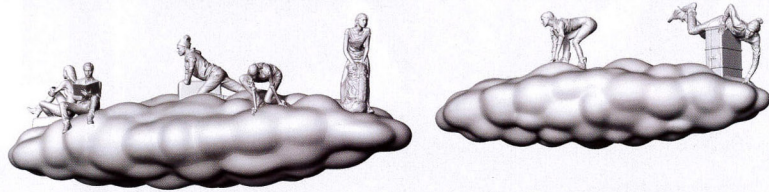
Their first is called *Spirits of the Huveaune*, five aluminium sculptures currently being installed along the Huveaune river that runs through Marseille. The sculptures represent legendary women (the Ligurian princess Gypsis, Mary Magdalene) and might be the best-dressed sculptures in France. The Ortas' stylist clothed the human models in ready-to-wear Celine.

Lucy Orta actually comes from the world of fashion, though she has art and activism in her blood. She was born in 1966 to a social-worker mother in Sutton Coldfield, England. A great aunt on her father's side was Emmy Bridgewater, an accomplished artist and part of the British surrealist movement. She recalls: 'As a child I was always doing something with my hands – sewing, embroidery, woodworking, pottery. There was no doubt I would become an artist.' Nonetheless she studied fashion and started her career as a freelance knitwear designer, which is how she ended up in Paris more than 20 years ago.

Jorge Orta was born in 1953 in Rosario, Argentina, where he trained as an architect and an artist, then created avant-garde art exploring the limits of political expression under the dictatorship. In 1984 he moved to Paris with a scholarship to study at the Sorbonne. Seven years later a friend of Lucy's invited her to an exhibition of the Argentine's work in a gallery near the Bastille, where she fell for a painting of two figures embracing. She met the artist and, as she recalls with a smile, acquired the painting 'through other means'.

The two started working together right away, though they didn't formalise their

**'St Pancras is full of light and the Ortas saw the connection with the sky'**



partnership until 2005. 'The art world in the 1990s was about individual egos,' says Lucy. 'It was difficult to work as a couple.'

Today the Studio Orta is a team of some 15 people (plus many local subcontractors) with a collective approach to pooling ideas and fabricating works. Often their projects involve entire communities as participants. Working in series, they attack several themes simultaneously, over the course of years. They have a studio in Paris and a couple more ateliers on a 20-hectare piece of land an hour's drive east of the city, in a former paper mill complex where the Ortas are building art-production facilities, residences and a sculpture park.

Their artwork has always been motivated by social or environmental concerns. In the tradition of Joseph Beuys, they believe art can help effect change. It was soon after meeting Jorge, around the time of the first Gulf War, that Lucy started designing *Refuge Wear*, ambulatory survival sacs and aluminum-coated tents

that transformed into ponchos. 'I was taking clothing into a new realm, looking at it as an architectural response and at the same time a protective habitat, a second skin,' she says. Galleries and museums exhibited the pieces, though few in the fashion world understood the point. Ultimately she left the fashion business, and dedicated herself to art. 'But,' she emphasises, 'not art for art's sake. Art can give people an understanding of issues and incite them to become more active.'

The couple's first environmentally themed project came about when the Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa invited them to create an installation for the 2005 Venice Biennale. At the time, Lucy was managing a programme in sustainable design at the Eindhoven Design Academy, where she heard the American environmental scientist Jeremy Rifkin tell the students they should tackle the subject of dwindling resources. Inspired, she came home and discussed it with

#### IN GOOD SHAPE

Top, the statues on the cloud are painstakingly produced by 3D scanning, milling and polishing by a company based in Orléans

Photography: Jonathan de Villiers  
Above, Lucy Orta's final sketches of the two clouds, with modern-day cupids taking the shape of travellers

Jorge, who suggested they use the Venice show as an opportunity to work with water. So they created the *OrtaWater Pumpstation*, a machine that purified water from the Canal Grande—a comment on water scarcity and those who control the supply. Angela Vettesse, president of the Foundation, recalls drinking the water and finding the taste horrible, though the experience was both entertaining and profound. 'It's not often you find an artist who knows how to make a joyful shape out of real problems,' she says.

In 2009 the Ortas travelled to the Amazon where they photographed insects and flowers, then printed drawings of the specimens on porcelain casts of dinosaur bones, symbolising both life and extinction. Simultaneously, they explored the themes of migration and borders with a series called *Antarctica*, handstitching tents out of flags from around the world and installing a temporary camp on the ice-covered continent. They've also created *Antarctica World Passports* in an >>

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attempt to amend Article 13 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights so people can move freely across borders.

One sunny day in February, Lucy Orta drove out of Paris to visit a supplier and check on the progress of the figures for *Cloud-Meteors*. (Jorge was in Argentina, preparing an autobiographical documentary.) The supplier, Créaform, was founded in 2001, and originally did 3D scanning and milling for industrial purposes such as auto parts, but now specialises in art. As Lucy walked in the door, she noticed a polyurethane head. It belonged to Emily, one of the figures for *Cloud-Meteors*, and the Ortas' 13-year-old daughter, tall and pretty enough to have a place on the cloud alongside the professional models, whose bodies had been recorded by Créaform technicians



with 3D scanners months earlier. The atelier then used the scans to programme the milling machines.

Now, drill bits of various sizes were moving back and forth over polyurethane blocks, sculpting mechanically what artists used to do in marble by hand. One machine was shaping an arm, while another meticulously carved the tread on the sole of a work boot. As Lucy explains: 'Renaissance sculpting was fantastic in its detail. We're replicating it using different techniques.' From here, the moulds would travel to England to be cast in resin, then attached to the clouds and suspended in St Pancras, to gaze down serenely at the multitudes below. ★ *Cloud-Meteors* will be installed at St Pancras on 18 April. [www.studio-orta.com](http://www.studio-orta.com), [www.highspeedc.com](http://www.highspeedc.com)

**MILLING ABOUT**  
Left, the scanned body parts are produced individually in polyurethane and assembled later  
Photography: Jonathan de Villiers  
Below, a digital rendering of the first instalment of the *Terrace Wires* series at St Pancras station