

# Ignacio Iturria's Theatre of Life

Patrice Giasson

The Father: *We want to live.*

The Manager: [ironically] *For Eternity?*

The Father: *No, sir, only for a moment . . . in you.*

Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921)<sup>1</sup>

Ignacio Iturria is probably the most theatrical painter one can imagine. In the present exhibition, dedicated to this major Uruguayan artist, the visitor can appreciate more than thirty oil paintings on canvas and cardboard created in the last thirty years of his long career.

In *Hola (Hello)* of 1994, for example, the head of a figure appears at a window. The man appears to wish to speak with us, the viewers. The “hola” that he whispers announces he wants to jump outward and, as in the plays of Pirandello, reminds us that “[w]hen a character is born, he acquires at once such an independence, even of his own author, that he can be imagined by everybody even in many other situations where the author never dreamed of placing him; and so he acquires for himself a meaning which the author never thought of giving him.”<sup>2</sup>



Detail of *Hola (Hello)*, 1994

<sup>1</sup> Trans. Edward Storer (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1922), [www.eldritchpress.org/lp/six.htm](http://www.eldritchpress.org/lp/six.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Opposite page: Ignacio Iturria in his Montevideo studio, May 2016. Photo © Álvaro Figueroa



Ignacio Iturria, detail of *Pinacoteca (Art Gallery)*, 2000.  
Photo © Álvaro Figueroa

Looking at the works included in this exhibition, we understand that Iturria is like a playwright. With his return to Uruguay from Europe in 1985, he began to create paintings that feature surreal universes filled with playful animals and whimsical characters who swiftly acquire their own personalities. These theatrical works became emblematic of Iturria's personal style. In *Torres García* of 1998 and *Pinacoteca (Art Gallery)* of 2000, the characters—just as those in Pirandello's theater—enter and escape the boundaries of the picture frame, defy the orders of the director. They are free!

There is also an archaeological dimension to Iturria's works: his characters seem extracted from the bowels of the earth, like ancient clay figures. This impression is intensified in the paintings on cardboard, which in some cases still hold traces of the paper's corrugation. Porous and earthy, the charming figures appear both volatile and eternal. Like drops of water, they could disappear at any moment. Their fragility is almost palpable, and they appear ephemeral, yet they look at us, observing us, or possibly pausing for us, intriguing us. We see them in all their existential fullness. As in real life, Iturria's characters have their own histories, which we enter. In groups, in grids, or alone, they welcome us to their universe.



Giorgio Morandi (July 20, 1890, Bologna–June 18, 1964, Bologna), *Natura morta (Still Life)*, 1957. Oil on canvas, 11 3/16 x 17 5/16 inches (30 x 44 cm), Private Collection. © 2017 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome

Ignacio Iturria, *Tengo frío en los pies (My Feet Are Cold)*, 1995.  
Photo © Álvaro Figueroa

The materiality of Iturria's sculptural paintings also conveys meaning. The nature of his brushstrokes and the very pigment he uses all seem to carry life. Like a bottle depicted by Giorgio Morandi, Iturria's walls, chairs, and objects are inhabited. They hold the traces of time. They are alive, and we can look at them for hours. In fact, like Morandi, Iturria has also been interested in bottles, but as we can see in *Tengo frío en los pies (My Feet Are Cold)* of 1995, he cannot resist introducing the figure of a man to anthropomorphize the object.

Even the chairs, the emblematic children at old-fashioned school desks—which frequently appear with a pen holder in the corner—the drawers from which faces pop out, appear to be animated with souls. Perhaps this may be explained by Iturria's interest in depicting people, "people whom I see and people whom I imagined."<sup>3</sup>

The lack of sharp contours assures a certain motion to everything Iturria paints. This might recall the sfumato technique used by



<sup>3</sup> Conversation with the artist in his studio, Miami, December 2014.

Leonardo da Vinci, which consisted of painting without precise lines or borders, softening the transition between tones and colors, “in the manner of smoke,” so that subjects would meld themselves more naturally with the atmosphere. But Iturria’s sfumato also concerns objects’ interiors, which breathe and blend with their surroundings. His characters and objects are neither rigid nor encapsulated, but instead open and light. The running faucets that appear here and there, frequently in disproportionate dimensions, also participate in fueling life into the scenes. Iturria’s work plays on this constant opposition of forces, rigidity and movement, the eternal and the ephemeral, which assures the living nature of things.

This again recalls a question from one of Pirandello’s characters, directed to the audience of *Tonight We Improvise*: “Would you say ladies and gentlemen, that there is life where nothing moves, where everything rests in perfect peace? . . . If a work of art survives it is only because we can still free it from the fixity of its form.”<sup>4</sup>

While Iturria’s work is free, open, and playful, it is also guided by a need to organize, to compartmentalize, to place elements in grids. But this is precisely what allows him to simultaneously translate in each piece glimpses of dream, desire, and memory. In several of his grid-like paintings, portraits are juxtaposed or connected to form what appear as genealogical trees.

The elongated, ridged, porous, and sculptural aspects of Iturria’s characters may recall works by Alberto Giacometti. Iturria recently noted a particular appreciation for the earlier artist’s paintings, which he also qualified as sculptural, and suggested that “the elongated figures created by Giacometti—and for that matter by the sixteenth-century Spanish painter El Greco—translated a desire by these artists to intuit the profound essence of people, to translate their soul, to view people at an almost spiritual level.”<sup>5</sup>

### Iturria’s Staging Devices

The playfulness of Iturria’s characters translates the artist’s spirit, still young after nearly fifty years of artistic activity and still capable

<sup>4</sup> Luigi Pirandello, *Tonight We Improvise* (1930), trans. J. Douglas Campbell and Leonard G. Sbrocchi (Ottawa: Canadian Society for Italian Studies, 1987), 37.

<sup>5</sup> Conversation with the artist, Neuberger Museum of Art, SUNY Purchase, May 30, 2017.



Alberto Giacometti (October 10, 1901, Borgonovo, Switzerland–January 11, 1966, Chur, Switzerland), *Diego*, 1953. Oil on canvas, 39 1/2 x 31 3/4 inches (100.5 x 80.5 cm), Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 55.1431. © 2017 Alberto Giacometti Estate/Licensed by VAGA and ARS, New York, NY

of amazement: “I am the adult of this child in me, and what’s wonderful about children is that they can imagine a world underneath a table.”<sup>6</sup> He creates stages that amaze us, he tickles our curiosity, he invites us to see these hidden universes, as if we too become the young and happy spectators of a commedia del l’arte. He awakens in

<sup>6</sup> Conversation with the artist in his studio, Miami, December 2014.



Ignacio Iturria, detail of *Torres García*, 1998.  
Photo © Álvaro Figueroa

us childhood memories long forgotten and helps each of us re-engage with our own past.

In several works, we look into a box with a square in the center that pulls us in like the stage of a marionette theater. Iturria has a special way of dealing with perspective. Sometimes, in particular when he depicts a table, we look down from above. In other cases, the scene is like a fragile set made of scaffolds and ladders, a portable stage that can be opened or closed. The artist plays with our senses, keeping us on a fine line between reality and imagination, in a world where everything is out of scale but where we nevertheless feel at home.

Iturria's several trompe-l'oeil works, such as *Torres García*, are fertile devices to enhance this connection between fiction and reality. Sometimes we are not sure if the artist intended to depict a real or a make-believe desk, whether we are looking at a shadow related to a light source or one inserted for a disorienting effect. Iturria uses trompe-l'oeil as a theatrical instrument that allows the scene to penetrate the world of the viewer, blurring the limits between artistic representation and material reality.



Ignacio Iturria, *Resurrección (Resurrection)*, 2000.  
Photo © Álvaro Figueroa

Shadows and light are fundamental to Iturria's work, intensifying the theatricality of the action in a way similar to their functions on a stage. In *Resurrección (Resurrection)* of 2000, everything has a shadow; the human figures, the horse, the elephant head hanging on the wall, the totem-like wood slab, all have a shadow. But the small boxer has his own light, as if he were an icon. Is he the "resurrected"? In other cases, the painter plays with chiaroscuro, opposing very dark tones to strokes of white paint. This is particularly evident in his most recent paintings, created in 2016 in Santo Domingo, in which the brownish tones present in his early works created in Montevideo depart to make room for inquiries into pure black.

It is important to note that when Iturria works in his studio, he uses simple electric lamps on tripods that he can easily move, in order to achieve the desired effect. But the artist also reminds us of the challenges that appear when a piece leaves the studio: "The artist uses in his studio a specific kind of light. What happens if you use another light when displaying it in a gallery? It is challenging not to know how your work will be shown later, when the light is different. It is the same as when we look at Matisse—one cannot know, or





Ignacio Iturria, detail of *La casa de la casa* (*The House's House*), 1996.  
Photo © Álvaro Figueroa

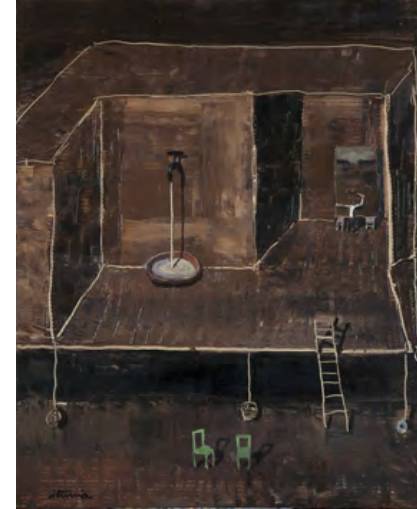
understand totally, the way in which Matisse saw his own work when painting in his studio."<sup>7</sup>

### The Theater within the Theater

In *La casa de la casa* (*The House's House*) of 1996 we find multiplications of the same image within the image—like a Russian nesting doll—a man inside a frame, containing a frame with another man, and so on, until we reach a flat surface featuring a drawing with an elephant followed by another elephant. The elephant, one of the most emblematic characters of Iturria's theater—the others being the horse and the dog—appeals to the idea of memory, as do the artist's tables and drawers, from which images emerge. Nevertheless, through these mirrored realities, Iturria erases any straightforward references. The replication of an object or a scene within itself, what is called in French a *mise en abyme*, is a significant strategy common to both visual art and theater. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for exam-

<sup>7</sup> Conversation with the artist, Neuberger Museum of Art, SUNY Purchase, May 30, 2017.

Ignacio Iturria, *El rincón del pintor* (*The Artist's Nook*), 2005.  
Photo © Álvaro Figueroa



ple, the play within the play sheds light on the murder of the prince's father. In painting, the *mise en abyme* is famously and masterfully explored in Velázquez's *Las Meninas* of 1656, where we find, posed among young members of the royal family, a self-portrait of the painter himself depicted in the act of painting within the painting. Likewise, several works by Iturria feature an artist painting, as in *El rincón del pintor* (*The Artist's Nook*) of 2005, where a painter—a self-reference?—on the second floor of a surreal environment paints a canvas set on an easel.

This piece invites us to enter one of Iturria's dreams. The scale is unreal—the artist looks miniscule next to a gigantic faucet placed high up on the wall and pouring water into a large bowl—the rooms are strangely connected, and instead of stairs a ladder intensifies the precarious composition. As in a dream, everything may suddenly disappear or lead us into another reality, as strange as the previous one, perhaps a reality like the canvas on which the small painter works. The tiny legs and wheels that support the whole structure create the impression of a movable theatrical set and increase the sense of vulnerability.



Ignacio Iturria, *Instalación (Installation)*, 1998.  
Photo © Álvaro Figueroa



Ignacio Iturria, detail of *Cosas mías (My Things)*, 1995.  
Photo © Álvaro Figueroa



Ignacio Iturria, *No hay golero (There Is No Goalie)*, 2012.  
Photo © Antonia Iturria

Repeated viewing of Iturria's works allows us to discern his personal vocabulary of references to, or even direct reproductions of, elements from earlier creations. In *Instalación (Installation)* of 1998, we recognize an adaptation of his emblematic *Hola (Hello)*.

*Cosas mías (My Things)* of 1995 recalls several previous paintings, including *Monstruo de dos cabezas (Two-Headed Monster)* of 1994, with its strange engine that spits out a load of body parts, as well as his now familiar figure from *Hola (Hello)*. We also see new elements that will themselves return in later works, such as the small window-like portraits that reemerge in *Instalación (Installation)* of 1998, and the totem-like wooden slab that reappears in *Resurrección (Resurrection)* of 2000.

In *No hay golero (There Is No Goalie)* of 2012, we recognize among the drawing-book pages, disposed separately in a trompe-l'oeil-manner along the canvas, an image of *La casa de la casa (The House's House)* of 1996 (top row, at center), and a drawing similar to *El espejo (The Mirror)* of 1991 (bottom row, far left). In addition to the pages of his drawing book, the painting also features the artist's own brushes, as if he had suddenly set them on the surface before leaving his studio!



Ignacio Iturria, detail of *Rosario Oriental (Eastern Rosario)*, 1987.  
Photo © Álvaro Figueroa

### The Latent Loneliness Behind the Play

Several of Iturria's works, inhabited by friendly people-animals, are sources of amusement for the viewer, while others hold only traces of humans, as if the rooms had been swiftly abandoned. Behind the joyful scenery, there is also a sense of sadness—in the empty chairs, the empty rooms—that implicitly conveys loneliness.

In *Rosario oriental (Eastern Rosario)* of 1987, for example, the blue light entering from the window and the playful boat represented in the canvas on the wall are counterbalanced by an implicit silence and vacuity. In *El espejo (The Mirror)* of 1991, the viewer may experience a sense of claustrophobia when faced with an enclosed room, containing only a desk and mirror on the far wall, but no chair, no window, no natural light—just the illumination of a ceiling light that may recall an interrogation room. The mirror places us in front of ourselves; we are alone.

When looking at the rich body of works Iturria created in Montevideo in the 1990s, one is struck by the dominance of brownish, earthy tones and the scarcity of vivid colors. Some critics have

insisted that these tones reflect the true colors of the Plata River and the overcast skies of Montevideo. This is consistent with Iturria's ability to re-create the local colors of the places where he works. Profoundly inspired by the light and ambiance of his

surroundings, the artist alters the way he paints to reflect the singularity of each experience. When working in Miami, in 2014, the tones of his painting radically changed, gaining in vividness and featuring powerful pastel colors: "When I arrived here, I was completely impressed with the light and its effect on colors. I began to see everything pastel, the blue pastel sky—it was as if the blue had received a drop of white paint."<sup>8</sup>

This trip to Miami brought him back to his early years spent in Cadaqués, Spain, in the 1970s, when he also experimented with white tones and light colors.

The pieces created during these two stays abroad strongly contrasted with the paintings, much darker in tone, that he would later create in Montevideo. Beyond the influence of the Uruguayan landscape's brownish tones, the works from Montevideo may allude to something deeper, perhaps a local nostalgia present in Uruguay at that time. Like most South American countries in the twentieth century, Uruguay was at one point ruled by a military regime, which remained in power from 1973 to 1984. Iturria has remarked that the violence of the dictatorship was perhaps not as striking as that in Argentina, but the army's oppressive presence nevertheless had a profound and lasting influence on the people's spirit: "The country had fallen into a sort of seriousness. There was no place for jokes,



Objects in the artist's studio, Miami, 2014.  
Photo © Alessandra Russo

<sup>8</sup> Conversation with the artist in his studio, Miami, December 2014.





Ignacio Iturria, *Monstruo de dos cabezas* (Two-Headed Monster), 1994.  
Photo © Álvaro Figueroa

[even] the songs were sad.”<sup>9</sup> But Iturria is not a political pamphleteer, and references to the dark years of Uruguay are not explicit, but rather suggested through the nature of the tones as well as the mood dominating his work. Discussing this aspect during his first visit to the Neuberger Museum in May 2017, Iturria explained that he considered the main focus of art to always be art: “Picasso’s *Guernica* is above all an artwork. When you look at it, the first thing you see is art. Then come the possible allusions to the war, but only after the artistic experience.”<sup>10</sup>

Two works in this exhibition escape this paradigm: *Monstruo de dos cabezas* (Two-Headed Monster) and *Arrinconados* (Cornered), both from 1994, featuring piles of naked dead bodies and body parts. In the first, they are being processed by a mechanical two-headed machine, while in the second they appear in the back corners of what appears to be an empty cell. These pieces, Iturria reminds us, do not refer to the violence of the Uruguayan dictatorship but rather to the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War, when Iturria’s uncle was

<sup>9</sup> Conversation with the artist, Neuberger Museum of Art, SUNY Purchase, May 30, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



Ignacio Iturria, *La luz de los pozos* (The Light from the Wells), 1997.  
Photo © Antonia Iturria

killed. The traumatic family story recalls that his father searched in vain for his teenage brother until he recognized him in a pile of dead bodies thanks to the pajamas he was wearing.<sup>11</sup>

In the sculptural version of *La luz de los pozos* (The Light from the Wells) of 1997, an impression of the reappearance of the dead perhaps comes to mind. The small portraits may recall the lively ancient Egyptian mummy portraits from Fayum that seem to gaze at us from across death, as though they are still alive. The small holes in the table from which Iturria’s card-like portraits emerge may also suggest an open grave. Light pours through these voids to project small luminous squares onto the gallery floor, so that the sculpture suddenly shares the viewer’s existential space, while the mirrors inside the lifted cards uncannily reflect the viewers’ own images as they move around *La luz de los pozos*. In spite of the uneasiness the sculpture evokes, it intrigues and stimulates the viewer’s curiosity.

<sup>11</sup> “There are things that have always been present in me. My father lived through the [Spanish] Civil War and he lived it very tragically. His younger brother, a teenager, was taken away and my father kept searching and searching for him, until one day, he found his brother in a pile of bodies and recognized him by his pajamas.” Ignacio Iturria, interview by Alfredo Torres, *Brecha* (Montevideo), October 7, 1994 (my translation).





Ignacio Iturria, detail of *El universo del pianista* (*The Pianist's Universe*), 1997.  
Photo © Álvaro Figueroa

As in the *commedia del l'arte*, there are two complementary aspects in Iturria's work: the humorous and the nostalgic. These may derive from Iturria's complex persona; while he admits his desire to be surrounded by people—"I would love to live on a kibbutz where everyone interacts and participates"<sup>12</sup>—he is also someone who appreciates solitude.

### The Need for a Subject

Forgive me, my friend, I am devoted to learning; landscapes and trees have nothing to teach me—only the people in the city can do that.

Socrates to Phaedrus

Like Socrates in his time, Iturria assures us that the human subject is what interests him.

He is an observer of society. Wherever he goes, he looks at people with scrutiny and amazement. In June 2017, during a short visit

<sup>12</sup> Conversation with the artist, Neuberger Museum of Art, SUNY Purchase, May 30, 2017.

to New York, where he had not been in years, he was amazed "to see how thin and fast were the people in New York, very different from Miami, where everyone is a bit chubby, perhaps because they always travel in cars, while in New York, everybody walks, or, should we say, runs. The people also look taller because of this."<sup>13</sup> Iturria's recent works from Santo Domingo in fact feature nature, but he became interested in the jungle not because of its flora, but rather because he knew that it contains people, that it is inhabited. He was in search of the stories of these "invisible people," invisible to those who would not see them.<sup>14</sup>

This interest in humanity may explain why Iturria early on introduced figuration in his paintings. He explains that it was when looking at a work by Antoni Tàpies that he decided to include in one of his own works a character from the foreground of a painting by Tàpies. Iturria's discovery of this profound dimension of Tàpies's paintings was the beginning of Iturria's long venture into figurative art.

Iturria's work in the early 1980s contrasted with the important Geometrical Abstraction movement that flourished in South America during the 1940s and 1950s under the umbrella of what is called Concrete Art, but whose influence is still visible today. Concrete artists were primarily interested in the relationships between pure planes, colors, and forms. In Uruguay the master Joaquín Torres-García, who had participated in the late 1920s and 1930s in the European Geometric Abstraction movement in Europe, played an important role in Latin American interest, creating a school that remained open until 1967. Emblematic of Torres-García's European years is *Costruzione geometrica* (*Geometric Construction*) of 1929, a work in dialogue with some of the pieces created by his friend Piet Mondrian during the same period.

In *Torres García* of 1998, Iturria pays tribute to the earlier artist, reproducing his emblematic grid (as in Torres García's *Composition* of 1931), while expanding his inclusion of static figures and symbols. Iturria's lively characters playfully engage with the grid structure. Upon his return from Europe in the mid-1980s, Iturria may have felt that the art scene, which was then witnessing the

<sup>13</sup> Phone conversation with the artist, June 1, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Conversation with the artist, Neuberger Museum of Art, SUNY Purchase, May 30, 2017.



Joaquín Torres-García (July 28, 1874, Montevideo–August 8, 1949, Montevideo). *Costruzione geometrica* (*Geometric Construction*), 1929. Oil on canvas, 21 1/2 x 18 inches (54.5 x 45.7 cm). Private Collection. © Courtesy of the Estate of Joaquín Torres-García

emergence of conceptual art, was in need of new kind of figuration, not necessarily politically oriented but instead capable of translating the stories of people around him.

*La casa de la casa* (*The House's House*) of 1996 in fact has the structure of a Concrete work. The series of concentric squares conveys a sense of depth and offers an optical illusion that creates a sort of infinite, mirror-like effect—a strategy that could also be associated with Op Art, in vogue in South America since the 1960s. In *La casa de la casa*, however, the concentric squares are deprived of the sharp and pristine contours present in traditional Concrete art, and Iturria's sfumato suggests a relation with the natural world. But most importantly, it is the introduction of a character peacefully waiting within several squares, facing the viewer, that encourages a dialogue with us.



Joaquín Torres-García, *Composition*, 1931. Oil on canvas, 36 1/8 x 24 inches (91.7 x 61 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Larry Aldrich, 1956. (281.1956). © Courtesy of the Estate of Joaquín Torres-García. Photo: Thomas Griesel

The kind of dialogue Iturria seeks is also different from that developed by artists affiliated with the ephemeral Neo-Concrete art movement, which emerged in the late 1950s as a response to Concrete art. Neo-Concrete artists were in search of a transcendental and experimental visual language that would smooth the rigidity of pure Concrete art. By reintroducing the human through participation, Neo-Concrete artists expanded exclusively geometric representation to

include the viewer, who was not to remain passive but who would instead be responsible for activating the work. While still using a geometric language, these artists insisted on the need to create pieces that would reach the spectator with sensorial experiences connected to real space and time.

Iturria, who has inherited from the Concrete movement the concept of the grid, the flatness of planes, and a certain geometry—though one that is much more free—decided to literally reintroduce the figure in the representation. Though he eliminated the notion of direct participation proposed by the Neo-Concretists, he nevertheless opened his art to the possibility of different interpretations. Viewers thus participate the moment they interpret one of his works. Even if they cannot alter or manipulate it—as is possible with Lygia Clark's geometric metal structures such as *Bichos de bolso* (*Pocket Creatures*)—they can imagine a variety scenarios. They give to Iturria's characters a personal reading. In his pieces, the unfolding of new possibilities occurs exclusively in the immaterial sphere of imagination.