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SECTION

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ARTS

& Culture

WATER WORKS

Sculpture reflects importance to desert community

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For The Journal

Life without water is impossible. Interdisciplinary artist and University of New Mexico art professor Basia Irland has dedicated her career to water issues, ideas, symbolism and conservation.

The recent installation of Irland's mixed-media sculpture, "Desert Fountain," at the Albuquerque Museum focuses viewer attention on the importance of water to our desert community.

"I believe that everything is connected and that water reveals the interrelationships that surround us," Irland said. "Since I was a child, I've always been fascinated with water in every possible way.

"Water is an element that we can't live without. Our internal body system is completely dependent on water. My interest includes the symbolic, metaphoric, magical, literal, political, social, biological, botanical and ecological nature of water."

Like a desert arroyo, the sculpture functions only after a rain or snowstorm. A holding tank on the museum roof captures water, which splashes down through bronze hands and eventually to the Rio Grande.

Museum art curator Ellen Landis said she is excited to have a work by Irland in the museum's permanent collection. She explained that Irland has mainly worked with organic materials that are not long lasting. The bronze "Desert Fountain" will last indefinitely.

"We're very pleased with Irland's piece. It's interesting that when functioning after a rain storm *and* when not filled with water (the sculpture) makes a poignant comment about the importance of water to our desert community," Landis said.

Museum director James Moore explained that the museum acquired the Irland sculpture with approximately \$8,000 from General Obligation Bond funds.

"When you consider the large bronze casting, the complexity of the installation and the caliber of the artist, we felt that the price was very reasonable," Moore said.

Irland grew up in Boulder, Colo., where her father taught mathematics at the University of Colorado. She became accustomed to the interdisciplinary nature of a college-based community.

"In my pursuit of comprehending the ramifications of water as an art form I have used the university environment to explore physics, hydrology, art history, geology, geography, mathematics, astronomy and other disciplines," Irland said. "The museum piece is a part of an entire body of work dedicated to water as a substance. I designed 'Desert Fountain' using my own hands as models to draw attention to our responsibility to pass clean water from one generation to the next."

A museum handout explains how the sculpture works:

A 50-gallon holding tank mounted above "Desert Fountain" fills with rain water or snowmelt from the museum's roof drainage system. The tank allows the fountain to function for about 30 hours when filled.

Water flows from the holding tank into the first pair of three sets of hands and forearms protruding from the cast bronze sculpture.

From there it flows into a second pair of hands which have a symbolic river etched into the forearms. A third pair of hands, embellished with an ancient astronomical drawing of the moon's influence on ocean tides, catch the flow, which falls to the brick patio.

The patio drains into a small storm drain, which eventually flows into the Rio Grande.

Irland has etched the outline of the water

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LIQUID BRONZE
Naturally gathered water flows between sets of bronze hands in "Desert Fountain," a sculpture by Basia Irland.

COURTESY OF MARY ZAREMBA



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"DESERT FOUNTAIN" is a new sculpture by Basia Irland that has been installed at the Albuquerque Museum.



LAYING THE PATIO
Basia Irland etches a path along the path water takes when it flows through her sculpture, "Desert Fountain."

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into the brick patio so that during dry periods visitors may visualize the path taken by the fountain's water.

The artist relentlessly pursues water issues.

Irland has received a grant from the President's Council on Sustainability to complete a video on "The Gathering of Waters," which is a

complex long-term project dedicated to raising awareness of issues surrounding the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo watershed. The ongoing project has involved artists, government agencies, private water users, farmers, ranchers, Native American leaders and ordinary people who benefit from the 1,800-mile-long river system.

She also is hard at work on a novel with water as its central theme.