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palette of abq's art and artists

CREATIVES



Basia Irland, **Eco-Artist**

For Irland, art meets science in the spirit of water

Albuquerque artist Basia Irland grew up along Colorado's Boulder Creek, where, as a child, she toted home bulging sandwich bags of water for her first scientific tests under the microscope. Since then, Irland has revered water's artistry and its science: a smooth river pebble, a quiet pond reflecting stars, the smell of sage after a desert monsoon. Irland's own performance and 3-D art pieces in tribute to water have spanned 30 years, dozens of rivers, and five continents.

As an eco-artist, Irland's work goes beyond aesthetics in its attention to environmentalism. Like the contemporary styles of land art and earthworks, eco-art uses natural materials and is often created outside, beyond walled studios. But eco-art is unique in its stewardship to the earth and its union with science. Eco-art's focus is on sustainability and ecological awareness.

By these missives, Irland's work is artistic, scientific, and activist. She is a unique example of an artist who has collaborated with musicians, biologists, economists, architects, and civil engineers. For 23 years as a professor at UNM (she retired this spring), Irland taught art and art history students. In addition to being both a teacher and student of water's properties, she is an artist who considers herself a scientist. Irland enjoys the fluidity of her work, flowing along the tributaries of sculpture and biology, theater and public health.

"Water doesn't know borders. Water doesn't know boundaries. Water flows, and I go where it leads me," says Irland of her interdisciplinary approach.

Her sculptures offer ecological lessons—why beaver logs are useful to rivers, the cultural significance of boats, the public health crises of polluted water. As in those early days of the sandwich bags, Irland's projects display scientific principals, often toward an activist end. Her films and instructional performance pieces have taken her to the Nile, where she taped a documentary, *Bilharzia Blues*, which warned locals against contracting the parasite







schistosomiasis. This year, Irland continues her study of schistosomiasis, this time in elephants in Nepal's Terai region. Artists and activists have performed incarnations of her *Gathering of Waters* film project along all 1,875 miles of the Rio Grande and also in rivers in Canada and England, bringing awareness

through public art acts to the plights of living waterways.

It might seem ironic that a water scientist and artist would live where her prime ingredient is scarce—the desert—but Irland attributes greater significance to her work given that deficiency.

When the Albuquerque Museum asked her to create a fountain, she designed a piece that captures rainwater in a 50-gallon steel tank on the roof and sends drops flowing onto cast bronze arms on the sculpture below. The fountain only runs when it rains, the sculpture quietly remarking on our arid climate's absence of water. Its dry hands, however, always lie open to the possibility and blessing of water from desert skies above.

Ways of "saving" water have influenced other projects: artful repositories and backpacks store specimens, reeds, rocks, oars, and cloth scrolls soaked with river pollution or water organisms. When Irland moved to New Mexico in 1985, she began carving wooden books coated with sand and inscribed with pebbles and lichen. Later, "River Books" was born when she dragged discarded library books from the Rio Grande near Taos, exposed their rotten covers and wet guts to open air, and wrapped them in beeswax, cord, and wire.



Now Irland has an archive of her own art projects in the new book, *Water Library* (UNM Press, 2007), which is a holistic tribute to water in nine interconnected "volumes," with preludes written by artists and critics, interviews with Irland, and details and images from her projects.

Irland's work celebrates the ubiquitous life force of water. Recurring motifs in her work—the book, the scroll, the map, the chart—symbolize the human attempt to plot and locate water, and ourselves, in the cosmos. Irland's practice is to answer (and pose) questions, as any scientist would—how a piece of art is political, how an artist dissolves into her work, how water feels coursing through our bodies and souls.

Irland's "Waterborne Disease Scrolls" will be on display through July 31 at the Robert Wood Johnson Center (1909 Las Lomas NE, on the UNM campus).

—By Amanda Sutton 