

Wild Water Art

by Basia Irland

Wilderness has always fed my soul and informed my artwork. Camping beside a stream, cooking over a fire (there is nothing like the taste of campfire coffee at dawn), and viewing the star-filled night sky while away from the ambient light of the city, fill me with joy and reverence.

My art focuses on the environment, especially regional and international water issues. I have created projects connecting communities along the entire length of rivers in Canada, England, Colorado, and Washington State, but the one closest to my heart is A Gathering of Waters; Rio Grande, Source to Sea, which took five years to complete. Hundreds of participants were invited to put a small amount of river water into the Canteen, write in the Logbook, and pass these downstream to another person. Connections were made that have been lasting, and groups are still working together. In order to participate in this project, you had to physically be at the river and interact with someone else downstream, thereby forming a kind of human river that brought awareness to the plight of this stream that is always asked to give more than it has. The Backpack/Repository for this project was constructed from old recycled floorboards from a demolished Albuquerque church. It contains water samples, hydrology reports, a river-clay Canteen, a Logbook, photographs of the river, and maps.

From 1985 to 2007 I taught in the Department of Art and Art History at the



University of New Mexico, where I established an art and ecology curriculum, which provides an opportunity for students to get out into the field and to learn firsthand about wilderness regions. For many summers I also taught at the D. H. Lawrence Ranch near Questa, where we explored the Valle Vidal, camped at the Wild Rivers Recreation Area, and rafted the Rio Grande.

Trekking into wilderness areas sometimes means contracting waterborne diseases like giardia (as I know all too well), which is prevalent here in New

Mexico. I began creating scrolls, upon which are enlarged images of pathogens, which kill a child somewhere in the world every eight seconds. The dark, destructive side of water is as fascinating and rich in history as its more sanguine side. If we had trained a microscope on the same bucolic lakes and serene streams portrayed in historic paintings, we would have discovered a rich soup of living organisms, most of which are harmless to humans, but some of which kill. The scrolls, which roll up to fit into their own carrying cases with shoulder straps, are made from handwoven fabric bought at local markets from specific communities in Ethiopia, Egypt, Nepal, or India.

Living in the arid high desert, I have created sculptural rain-harvesting systems for spaces on the UNM campus, the Pueblo of Isleta, and the Albuquerque Museum. When the museum asked me to make a fountain for them, I refused because I did not want to use the already depleted ground or aquifer water. Then I reconsidered and inquired if I could place a stock tank on the roof of the building, which now funnels rain into a set of three cast-bronze hands. Desert Fountain only works when it has rained, thereby demonstrating visibly the increasingly dry ecosystem where we live.

My working process most often occurs out in the field, especially along rivers, creeks,

and streams. For over twenty years I have created carved wooden books coated with earth and a "text" from specific sites. The "words" are salmon bones found along the Salmon River in Oregon, or fool's gold and rust picked up at the Molybdenum mine in Questa, or crocodile cranium shards left behind by hunters at Lago Enriqueillo in the Dominican Republic. Each of these books speaks of abuse to the land and its inhabitants.

A recent project series, receding/reseeding, emphasizes the necessity of communal effort and scientific knowledge to deal with the complex issues of climate disruption and watershed restoration by releasing seed-laden ephemeral ice book sculptures into rivers. (See the 2010 Wild Guide for my article about an ice book launch at the Rio Grande after a hike into the gorge.) The closed books have seed patterns on the covers, while the open books have rows of seeds forming a "riparian text." I work with stream ecologists, biologists, and botanists to ascertain the best seeds for each specific riparian zone. When the plants regenerate and grow along the bank, they help sequester carbon, hold the banks in place, and provide shelter for riverside creatures.

Basia's book is Water Library, University of New Mexico Press, 2007, and her Web site is basiairland.com.

