

Artist Statement

Knowledge about and reverence for water has never been as important as it is today. Irland's art beautifully weaves in the critical threads of conservation and education, along with her reverence for water and its role in life. Her work has set her apart as one of the liquid realm's most eloquent biographers.

Dahr Jamail, Author

My artwork focuses on international water issues, especially rivers, waterborne diseases, and water scarcity. I collaborate with scholars from diverse disciplines: building rainwater harvesting systems, connecting communities and fostering dialogue along the entire length of rivers, filming and producing water documentaries, and creating waterborne disease projects around the world. My working process most often occurs out in the field along rivers and creeks. These projects are not about the commercial “art” world or abstract theorizing while sitting indoors; rather, they are about connecting diverse, multi-generational communities directly to their local waterways.

My art often involves facilitating and fostering collaborations – with rivers and with each other. We are water. Our bodies house streams: lymph, bile, sweat, blood, mucus, urine. Water enters, circulates, leaves, forming individualized hydrologic cycles. Water has always fed my soul, whether floating weightless in a natural lake while looking at the clouds, sitting on a rock beside an ever-changing stream, wading barefoot in a cold creek, or hiking to the source of a river. Absorbing water's presence, especially in wild regions, prepares me to come back to the city and carry on with my urban tasks.

We cannot survive without clean water to drink and yet it is often polluted beyond measure, with toxins, medical waste, and waterborne diseases. After being diagnosed with *Giardia lamblia* upon returning from a Fulbright research project in Indonesia, I searched through parasitology atlases at the University of New Mexico medical library. I then began to make a series of scrolls exploring waterborne diseases around the world whose transmission occurs when people drink contaminated water, or submerge themselves in water for bathing, swimming, or ceremonial purposes. Scrolls completed while in India were made using sari silk, partially because water can be strained through this fabric to reduce the number of organisms that cause infections. When invited to Walkerton, Ontario, Canada, I printed images of *Escherichia coli* and *Campylobacter jejuni* onto local hospital bed sheets. These two deadly pathogens had gotten into the city's drinking water supply, killing seven residents and infecting dozens of others. I also had a grant with the Chair of the Biology Department at the University of New Mexico to produce a video documentary about schistosomiasis (also known as bilharzia) in Ethiopia, Egypt, and Nepal. The scrolls, which often utilize hand-woven material bought at local markets, roll up to fit into their own carrying cases with shoulder straps.

Water embodies complexity. Whether in its gaseous, frozen, or fluid state it is marvellously mysterious. A quiet stream can provide a serene contemplative setting and yet that very same creek can flood and wipe out an entire village. The wrath and destruction of raging water is almost incomprehensible. Here in the high desert climate of New Mexico where I live, instead of too much water, we are suffering a severe drought. This continuously reminds me of my grandparent's farm in east Texas where the windmill often did not raise any water from the well and there was barely enough moisture for the garden.

Water meanders in and out of every discipline, so we can never have too many poets, hydrologists, urban planners, biologists, lawyers, writers, physicians, NGOs, or geologists working to amplify and aid water's voice. One of the things that sustains me is that most of my projects happen within the context of a local community – and it is the people with whom I work who keep me going. I see so much good work being done for regional waterways, even though the task is often daunting and overwhelmingly difficult.

Water Library (University of New Mexico Press, 2007) describes projects I have created over three decades in Africa, Canada, Europe, South America, Southeast Asia, and the United States. *Reading the River: The Ecological Activist Art of Basia Irland* (Museum De Domijnen, 2017) documents my water-related art projects and picks up where *Water Library* left off in 2007. The book was produced in conjunction with a 2015-2016 retrospective exhibition in the Netherlands and includes an extensive interview with the exhibition curator, Roel Arkensteijn.

I have written on-line essays for National Geographic about international rivers, written in the first person from the perspective of the water. This continuing collection of essays is titled *What Rivers Know*. Locations have included waterways in Cambodia, Thailand, Singapore, Japan, Ethiopia, Mexico, Nepal, the Netherlands, India, and across the United States and Canada.

An ongoing series of international projects is *A Gathering of Waters*, which establishes working relationships between people, and connects diverse cultures along the entire length of rivers emphasizing that we all live downstream. The focus of *A Gathering of Waters* is on process – collaborative and locally based actions encompassing an ethic of inclusion that focuses on important scientific and artistic outcomes along rivers. Art and cultural critic, Lucy Lippard, writes: “Irland takes the journey herself, swimming upstream against the currents of a society not yet convinced that our comforts are worth sacrificing for our resources. *A Gathering of Waters* is a major model for eco-art.” The sculptures accompanying these projects include *Backpack/Repositories* that contain River Vessel Canteens, Logbooks, watershed maps, clay samples, stream data, video documentaries, art objects, and photographs.

Ice Receding/Books Reseeding, another continuing global series, emphasizes the necessity of communal effort, scientific knowledge, and artistic expression to address complex issues of climate disruption and watershed restoration by releasing seed-laden, ephemeral ice sculptures into streams. River water is frozen, carved into the form of a book (some weighing as much as 300 pounds), embedded with an “ecological language” or “riparian text” consisting of local native seeds, and placed back into the stream. The

seeds are released as the ice melts in the current. I work with stream ecologists, biologists, and botanists to ascertain the best seeds for each specific riparian zone.

These projects help restore the necessary arteries of our land and remind local communities that in this radically interconnected world, it becomes our collective responsibility to compassionately take care of each other and our environment so we ensure that the next generations will have enough clean water to survive and thrive.